How (not) to write academic texts

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Note: this is a constantly developing document. This version: August 20, 2025. Please send all questions and comments to peter.luca.versteegen@univie.ac.at

A. General advice

1. Do what papers in international peer-reviewed journals do. This is the highest standard you'll be assessed on, not some For example (based on previous assignments):
    - Don't create a heading for each single paragraph. Published papers don't do this either.
    - Don't refer to other headings as "chapters." Published papers don't do this either.
2. If in doubt, ask me!

B. Substance

1. Whatever you write a paper about, any paper should only make ONE novel claim, argument, or development. If you have several ones or can't clearly specify that one point, that point is not sufficiently developed.
2. Each concept should be introduced early on. You don't need to provide a full section or paragraph on defining a concept. However, expect that many readers won't know even the most fundamental concepts, like "political participation", "radical right", or "polarization." You may introduce a concept on the go, e.g., by starting a paragraph with: "Scholars have long examined how political participation—citizens' electoral and non-electoral engagement in political processes (Reference)—varies by gender. Penguin (2012), for example, have shown...," – and then you continue with the lit review.
3. Don't motivate a research problem based on personal experience. You can personally care about a problem (and, in fact, this often makes a paper more relevant), but the academic motivation should be larger than this. For example, you may care about gender equality, but don't say "This paper examines gender equality because I care about this topic." Instead say, "In this paper, I examine gender equality as there are still systematic inequalities in politics (REFERENCE), educational attainment (REFERENCE), salaries (REFERENCE)". Note that this example sentence is much too vague in what the paper does. The general topic, "gender equality", is motivated based on the reasons, but it's much too vague.

C. Structure

1. There are many ways to structure a paper, here are a few guidelines:
2. In your own paper structure (*not* in the actual text), make yourself a heading for each paragraph. This is a paragraph on "research question", "theoretical argument" or "previous research in favor of X", for example. The first sentence of each paragraph should make clear what a paragraph is about. There should be *one* thought/perspective/problem in one paragraph. The last sentence of a paragraph should read like a short "summary" of the paragraph and transfer to the next one.
3. Likewise, at the end of each section, build a transfer to the next section. This is like a cliff-hanger in TV series.

4. Each section should have at least three paragraphs, otherwise the paragraphs should be integrated into another section.
5. A note on length: most students tend to write too long papers. Journals in political science and related fields often have a maximum length of 9,000 words incl. references. The best journal in our field, the APSR, has long had a word limit of 12,000. Try to stick to these word limits, as more is often not better.

D. Empirics

1. Be sure that you understand, REALLY understand, causality. Too many people think they know the difference but continue to use causal language if evidence is purely correlational. Unless your study (or evidence you're citing) has a proper design, you can't have sentences like "X impacts/causes/changes Y".
2. Relatedly, be critical of whether you think other people's evidence is truly causal.
3. If you're using qualitative methods, remember that you cannot have hypotheses and you cannot test anything. Why not? Qualitative methods provide no formal test, which is necessary to say whether a hypothesis was rejected or not.
4. Be aware that no theory, regardless how strong the evidence is, can ever be supported. Theories can only be rejected. Wonder why? Have a look at Popper's understanding of theory-testing. In short: theories can never be supported because you never know if there's not a piece of evidence that disproves the theory. Hence, theories can only be supported based on the existing evidence.
5. Please don't use qualitative methods because you think they are easier than quantitative methods. If you use them correctly, they require at least as much work and thinking as quantitative methods. It will not be enough to say "I use Mayring's something" and then "themes emerged." I expect you to follow an established method, explain its single steps, and apply open science practices wherever possible.

E. Style

1. Avoid jargon wherever possible. In the past, it was "cool" for academics to use complex language. It's not anymore. You're "cool" if your writing is easily understandable by as many people as possible, regardless of whether they know the topic, are tired, or 15 years old.
2. Likewise, avoid long sentences. Each sentence should have a purpose, not several ones.
3. Likewise, use active language: don't say "it is argued" or "the findings will be presented." YOU do the work, so say "I argue" and "I will then present the findings."
4. Speak with your own voice but do it professionally. For example, say "I argue Miller's (2012) theory needs to be developed as it neglects the gendered habits of voting." Don't say "I don't like Miller's (2012) theory because it neglects the gendered habits of voting." or "I think Miller's (2012) theory is stupid because it is really blind for gender."
5. Say things efficiently. Instead of "I argue that the theory by Miller (2012)...", say "I argue that Miller's (2012) theory...". Instead of "The study by Francis and Miller (2024), which was conducted in the US, with young adults, found something interesting. It was an experiment. ...", say "In an experiment with young US adults, Francis and Miller (2024) showed that more efficient sentences are easier to understand."
6. Relatedly, make sure that single sentences have different functions. Don't say "It was an experiment, and it showed that reading papers is difficult" Here, I put two different functions (a) type of study and b) result) into the same sentence. This is confusing. You may think that,

in the sentence from the last bullet point ("In an experiment with young US adults, Francis and Miller (2024) showed that more efficient sentences are easier to understand."), I also had different functions. Yes, but here, I basically summarized an entire study in one sentence, including design (experiment), location (US), sample (young adults), and finding (more efficient sentences are easier to understand). Be aware how you write your sentences and try to find the least confusing way.

7. Relatedly, add information without making a fuss. For example, "Adam and colleagues' (2015) correlational study on the link between regime type and dissemination of misinformation reveals that different types of government need to be differentiated." This sentence mentioned "correlational study" briefly, informing readers about the type of evidence. This would make for a good follow-up study, adding causal evidence.

F. Referencing in text

1. DON'T provide the reference for a claim at the end of the paragraph. Provide it once you made the claim.
2. DON'T add first names to authors. Only second name. I.e., not "Lily Smith (2012) shows..." but "Smith (2012) shows..."
3. NEVER drop the publication year. If you mention an author, ALWAYS cite the year. I.e., "Smith shows..." is wrong.
4. NEVER EVER name the publication of a book or paper. In today's political science, this is not wanted because it distracts from the substance. I.e., "In her paper, Why Fish Swim, Smith (2012) shows..." is wrong.
5. NEVER EVER name the job or location of an author. I.e., "The French professor Foucault (1980) shows..." is wrong. Science cares about *what* is shown or argued, not *who* did it or in what position they did it.
6. Avoid the abbreviation "ibid". While referencing is important, you don't need to repeat a reference as long as it's clear what source you're drawing from. For example, "According to Muzam's (2009) democratization theory, autocracies would democratize faster if ruled by penguins. However, if ruled by goats, the theory predicts that an autocracy would rule particularly slowly." Here, many students put an "(ibid)" at the end of the second sentence. This is not necessary, as it's clear that the sentence is still about Muzam's (2009) theory. Likewise, there's no need to put "Muzam (2009)" at the end of the second sentence.

G. Reference list

1. In line with advice A1, use the term "references" and not "bibliography". Published papers don't do this, so don't do it either.
2. Make sure that ALL references you're citing are in the reference list.
3. Make sure that the list doesn't include ANY references that aren't mentioned in the text.
4. Don't use any generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT) to prepare your reference list. It will make up references and bring you into serious troubles.

H. Process

1. Stop writing when it's going well. That is, try to not end a working day with frustration or an empty page. Try to end it with some sort of flow and excitement. That way, you can restart more easily when you continue.

2. READ what you have written. Several times. Check if you understand your writing, if the topic makes sense to you, and if you enjoy reading it. If not, no problem, you can fine-tune. Critically challenge yourself, wondering if you think this is good. No worries, it does not have to be perfect, but it should make sense to you. Only if it does, it will probably make sense to your readers, too.
3. Start working on your assignments early. I assume you're a busy person, and I understand if other things are sometimes more interesting. But do yourself a favor, start and finish early.
4. Confront challenges. Don't leave the most difficult parts until the end. Do them first and celebrate yourself afterwards. Likewise, don't skip or avoid the things you don't like. For example, if you don't like or think you don't understand quantitative methods, PLEASE (!!!) don't ignore them. Please read up on them, google, ask AI, watch videos, ask classmates and particularly me (or other teachers). There.are.no.stupid.questions. You may get through this assignment without learning how to deal with a figure or method you're struggling with. But in the long run, I promise (!) you that you'll have a more successful career if you try to understand the things you're struggling with. You don't need to become a stats nerd to be successful, but you'll have it much easier on the job market and in life generally if you have basic understanding of causality, experimental designs, regression tables. PLEASE (!!!) ask me if you need help. (ok, I couldn't do more than this manifesto...).