

Critical Response Papers

PSCI 2220: Crisis Diplomacy
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Spring 2016

Instructions

You will turn in two critical response papers over the course of the semester. Each paper will be no more than four pages long.¹ You will turn in one paper in each of these windows:

1. January 14 to February 16
2. March 1 to April 5

Each paper will consist of a critical assessment of one of the course readings (required or recommended). Your paper must be turned in within a week of the reading it responds to. For example, if your first response paper addresses a reading from the week of January 26–28, the latest it can be turned in is Thursday, February 4.

Late papers will not be accepted—and thus will receive a grade of zero—unless you have documentation of a medical or family emergency.

A critical response paper makes an argument. It is not a summary—in fact, it should be written under the assumption that the reader is familiar with the work it is responding to. To be “critical” of a work does not mean to be “against” it, but rather to reflect on it in a well-informed, objective way. Your criticisms must be grounded in reason and evidence, not personal taste.

Here are some examples of the kind of argument a critical response paper might make. This is not an exhaustive list; criticism can take many forms.

- For theoretical readings:

¹Page lengths quoted assume a double-spaced document with 12-point text and 1-inch margins. I reserve the right not to read any content past four pages and to reduce your grade for exceeding the page limit.

- Using historical evidence to evaluate the plausibility of one of its assumptions
- Proposing an important factor that the theory neglects and showing how that would change its conclusions
- Characterizing an additional implication of the theory that the author does not discuss
- For historical readings:
 - Pursuing an alternative interpretation of the evidence the paper presents
 - Evaluating how the case fits (or fails to fit) a particular theoretical model
 - Arguing, based on a theoretical model, for how the case would have played out differently if some factor had been different

I will focus on the *clarity* and *quality* of the argument when grading a paper. I recommend George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" (<http://tinyurl.com/orwell46>) as a guide to clear writing.