

Critical Response Papers

PSCI 221

Spring 2015

Instructions

You will turn in three 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 13 to February 10
2. February 12 to March 17
3. March 19 to April 14

Each paper will consist of a critical assessment of one of the course readings (required or supplemental). 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 27–29, the latest it can be turned in is Thursday, February 5.

Clarification: 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:
 - 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

¹ Page 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.

- 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.