PLS 341
Essay writing tips

Unpack the question:

- scope;
- components.

Identify your sources:

- academic literature;
- grey literature;
- media sources.

Develop your argument:

- determine the scope of your argument: reduce it if needed; do not expand it;
- develop a thesis:
  - clarity and precision are key;
  - you must not only summarize the sources or present arguments on both sides of an issue, but provide a definite—and well-informed and thought-out—assessment of your own;
  - you should state your thesis in the first paragraph (and it is good practice to do it in the first sentence or two) with almost no exceptions;
  - make sure the thesis answers the question;
  - identify the independent and dependent variables and, if relevant, causal mechanisms;
- establish the standard by which you are evaluating the claim;
- (usually) define the key concepts you use;
- develop arguments that support the thesis:
  - consider alternatives, counterfactuals, and objections; defend your argument against them;
  - make sure that your argument is internally coherent, and supported by / based on correct premises;
  - all the arguments must relate directly to and support your thesis;
  - arguments from personal experience are not usually persuasive in themselves; a good argument is one that can be verified either by looking up facts or by testing its logic.
- be careful when you make causal claims:
  - association vs. causation;
  - mechanisms and spuriousness;
- remember that you are engaged in a scholarly conversation:
  - use academic sources:

        - do not overuse direct quotations (in fact, in most cases direct quotations are not necessary; paraphrase others' arguments, cite them, and explain how they relate to your own argument);
        - but, do not simply summarize others' arguments—explain how the passages you cite establish your point;
        - critique arguments which in your assessment are incorrect or inadequate, and state why;
- present <u>evidence</u> that supports your thesis and arguments; pay attention to its limitations;
- explain where the evidence comes from and why you focus on specific cases.

Structure your essay correctly:

- adhere to the <u>basic structure</u>: introduction / thesis statement → main body with arguments → conclusion;
- signpost and use transitions between individual points;
- think about how scholars frame their arguments to both explain specific empirical cases and make broader theoretical contributions:
    - in particular, avoid the "funnel" openers favored by many high school writing teachers:
        - E.g. "Social/political science is about seeking the truth fearlessly. No scholar has done more to advance rational inquiry more than Max Weber. I shall explore Weber's understanding of the state."

Watch out for usage, grammar, and writing style:

- assignments are graded mostly on content but partly on form:
    - grammatical errors are distracting and make the reader suspect you are being sloppy;
    - usage errors can make your meaning hard to figure out;
    - bad writing weakens your points, wastes space, and alienates the reader;
- to improve your writing, read the essays of authors such as James Baldwin, Mary McCarthy, G.K. Chesterton, and George Orwell, and follow all the rules in Strunk and White or a similar book; Deirdre McCloskey's *Economical Writing* is a gem and her advice is relevant for other social science disciplines;
- for grammar and usage questions, consult any good reference book (the *Random House Handbook* is strong, as is the chattier *Woe Is I*), or web resources.

Some examples of bad thesis statements:

- "I will explore the concept of liberty in Georg Hegel's work."
- "Jeffrey Herbst's argument raises many interesting questions."
  (These take no definite position.)
- Jared Diamond's conclusions look crazy to me."
  (This is an impressionistic statement that cannot be supported by evidence.)

Some examples of good paper introductions (from some excellent journal articles by major scholars—you are by no means expected to match the quality of argumentation displayed here)**:**

- Bustikova, Lenka, and Cristina Corduneanu-Huci. 2017. "Patronage, Trust, and State Capacity." *World Politics* 69 (2): 277–326.
  "When do politicians engage in clientelistic exchange with their voters? Direct or mediated patron-client relations built on personal ties preceded the emergence of faceless bureaucracies tasked with ambitious public projects. Yet clientelism, a seemingly ancient way of getting things done in exchange for votes, flourishes even among wealthy democracies in the twenty-first century. We focus on the historical origins of trust in the state and show that they have a lasting impact on patronage. We argue that lack of trust in the state, rather than affluence, greases the wheels of patron-client linkages. Trust, which ultimately reduces clientelism, originates in competence. Where public administration has historically failed to satisfy citizens' needs, entrenched memories of that failure lead to skepticism and deepen the reliance on personalized, clientelistic relationships today."

- Saylor, Ryan, and Nicholas C. Wheeler. 2017. "Paying for War and Building States: The Coalitional Politics of Debt Servicing and Tax Institutions." *World Politics* 69 (2): 366–408.
  "[W]hen we analyze episodes of ferocious warfare in and beyond Europe, we find that despite [the claims of the bellicist theory], not all governments built strong tax institutions to deal with wartime debt. We identify a type of political coalition that impeded the creation of strong, diversified tax institutions, even though such institutions help rulers and, by extension, their coalitional allies, to acquire the resources to win wars. our finding is significant because it questions the ubiquity of the main causal mechanism underlying bellicist theory. We find a consistent coalitional pattern to account for why fiscal states sometimes failed to emerge amid circumstances that should have produced them."

- Grzymala-Busse, Anna. 2015. "Weapons of the Meek: How Churches Influence Public Policy." *World Politics* 68 (1): 1–36.
  "[R]eligious influence on policy has been extensive. Curiously, however, this influence varies across countries that are similar in their profiles of religious denominational affiliation, religious participation, and general belief. even more surprisingly, this influence occurs despite extensive popular opposition to church involvement in secular policy-making. how is it, then, that these actors—Christian churches in modern democracies—obtain their preferred policy outcomes?
  To solve this puzzle, I identify the key channels used by churches to wield influence over policy, emphasizing the critical role of direct institutional access to policy-making and the conditions under which churches obtain it from an often-reluctant secular state. This access comprises the ability to propose and vet policy directly through joint church-parliamentary commissions, informal legislative proposals, extensive parliamentary and ministerial consultation, the vetting of state officials, and even control of state sectors such as welfare,

health, and education. Such institutional access is covert, frequently informal, and highly desirable to churches because it maintains influence over time at relatively low cost. yet only some churches—those with moral authority sufficiently high enough to be identified in the public mind as protecting and representing the national interest—can obtain this holy Grail. In short, churches are most influential when they have institutional access to secular policy-making, and only churches with high moral authority can obtain institutional access."

- Ejdemyr, Simon, Eric Kramon, and Amanda Lea Robinson. 2018. "Segregation, Ethnic Favoritism, and the Strategic Targeting of Local Public Goods." *Comparative Political Studies* 51 (9): 1111–43.
  "The expectation that political elites seek to favor their ethnic kin has long been a staple in the study of African politics (Bates, 1983; Joseph, 1987). A number of empirical studies show that coethnics of African political leaders have better health and educational outcomes (Franck & Rainer, 2012), superior infrastructure (Burgess, Jedwab, Miguel, Morjaria, & Padro i Miquel, 2015), and preferential access to foreign aid (Briggs, 2014; Jablonski, 2014). But the existing literature also demonstrates substantial variation in the prevalence of ethnic favoritism. For example, Franck and Rainer (2012) find strong evidence of ethnic favoritism in only six of the 18 African countries that they study, and Kramon and Posner (2013) demonstrate variation in ethnic favoritism both across African countries and across types of distributive goods within countries. These findings thus raise an important puzzle that has yet to be sufficiently addressed: Why is there ethnic favoritism in the distribution of local public goods in some contexts but not others?
  We propose that ethnic group segregation helps account for variation in ethnic favoritism. In particular, we argue that segregation promotes greater overall investments in local public goods and leads to more ethnic favoritism in their distribution. This is because targeting coethnics with local public goods—which are locally nonexcludable but costly to access from distant locations—is difficult unless ethnic groups are sufficiently spatially segregated. Thus, we expect not only greater investments in local public goods in segregated contexts but also greater ethnic favoritism in the distribution of such goods where groups are segregated. This argument should apply to local public goods in contexts where political elites have discretion over distribution of the good, where the good is in demand from the population, and where the provision of the good is attributable to a particular individual leader.
  We test this argument using data on Malawian members of parliament (MPs) and the provision of an important local public good within their electoral districts."