

Course Information: American Politics (Politics 262) – Cornell College

Type: Paper

Professor Craig Allin and Consulting Librarian Mandy Swygart-Hobaugh.

Level: 200

Block Plan Context:

This course offers a survey of the theory and practice of contemporary government and politics in the United States, emphasizing the practical consequences of established institutions and procedures for policy outcomes. Its objective is to provide each student with a sophisticated understanding of why the system produces the kinds of policies that it does.

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Important Features of the Assignment:

- The separate **stages** keep students on-task and focused, provide several intervention points to address problems/issues, highlight the recursive nature of the **research and writing process**, and **discourage plagiarism**.
- The objectives of this assignment are clearly delineated upfront as well as directly complement the overall course objectives, and the **intended audience** and **parameters** of the paper are expressly stated.
- The assignment requires students to access **discipline-appropriate information sources**, to **critically evaluate** the credibility and utility of the information for supporting their argument, and to **properly document sources**.
- The supporting materials provide useful strategies for honing a topic to a **thesis** and organizing a concise, **well-supported argument**.

Description of Assignment:

The description of the assignment as detailed to the students is listed below.

PUBLIC POLICY PAPER ASSIGNMENT

OBJECTIVES: This assignment has three major objectives. The first is to increase your familiarity with an issue of public policy importance and the arguments that surround that issue. The second is to increase your familiarity with relevant sources of information like professional journals and government documents. The third is to help you improve an important intellectual skill: writing a clear and convincing argument supported by reliable evidence. This is a complex and difficult assignment, and I would like each of you to do it well. To that end, I have broken the assignment down into pieces and provided explicit instructions about how you can maximize your success.

ASSIGNMENT: Your job is to write a public policy paper of 1,500 to 2,500 words exclusive of title page, abstract, illustrations, notes, bibliography, appendices, etc. Your paper must deal with a matter of public policy within the Constitutional power of some officer, agency or institution of the United States federal government.

PUBLIC POLICY & POLICY PAPERS: A “policy” is a clear course of action; a “public policy” is a policy adopted by a government. (E.g., it is the policy of the United States to intervene militarily wherever America’s national interests are threatened.) A “public policy paper” is a written document that (1) recommends a public policy and (2) argues for the adoption of that policy. Your public policy paper will be developed through four stages.

Stage I—TOPIC DEVELOPMENT: Send an e-mail attachment addressed to the professor and the Consulting Librarian for the Social Sciences describing your research topic and providing a working bibliography for that topic. Selecting a topic requires only that you identify an area appropriate for inquiry and susceptible to a public policy recommendation. Your working bibliography should be sufficient to demonstrate that you have located and have access to the information that will be necessary to research your topic. In most cases your bibliography should include some mix of scholarly books, articles in scholarly journals, and primary sources such as government documents.

Stage II—THESIS DEVELOPMENT: Send an e-mail attachment stating your **policy recommendation** and setting forth an **outline of the contentions** you intend to make for it. Please note that articulating a good policy recommendation will require you to have already completed much of the research on your chosen topic. The policy recommendation is the paper’s thesis. The outline of contentions previews your paper’s anticipated structure.

Stating a policy recommendation takes you well beyond topic selection: you must determine, with some considerable degree of specificity, what policy ought to be adopted with respect to your topic. For example, “affirmative action” is a topic. “Congress should repeal all minority preferences in federal procurement law” is a policy recommendation. Your policy recommendation must be within the legal power of some officer, agency or institution of the United States federal government.

This is the point at which trouble most often arises, so before you submit your policy recommendation and contentions, examine them carefully using the criteria set forth in **Getting from Topic & Bibliography to Recommendation & Contentions. Before you organize your contentions into an outline, consult **A Good Argument Is a Hierarchy of Contentions**.*

Stage III—POLICY PAPER: Your recommendation and supporting arguments will be presented in a formal paper with appropriate manuscript format, proper citations, etc. Remember, you are being asked to take a position and make a case for it. Papers that take a position and argue a case are very common at all levels in law, business, journalism, and government, and good ones have certain characteristics. They are:

- **Convincing:** They state a conclusion and back that conclusion with reasoned argument. The purpose is to convince the reader, and the better the argument, the higher the probability of success.
- **Well Researched:** They are firmly rooted in careful research. You must have a command of the relevant facts. You must understand your own position and the positions of those with whom you disagree.

- **Concise:** They are not always short, but they must be concise. Policy papers are meant for the eyes of very busy decision makers: the judge, the corporate executive, and the high government official. If you want to convince such a person, do not waste his or her time.
- **Hierarchically Organized:** They organize the arguments to be made into the strongest possible hierarchy of contentions. Refer again to A Good Argument Is a Hierarchy of Contentions.

Stage IV—REWRITE: After receiving a written critique of your policy paper, you will rewrite and resubmit the paper making as many improvements in **substance and presentation** as you can manage. As a practical matter, a conscientious effort to address the technical problems that have been identified in your paper will preserve your grade. More substantive improvements will enhance your grade.

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Getting from Topic & Bibliography to Recommendation & Contentions

Your policy recommendation:

The policy recommendation is the paper’s thesis, and it differs fundamentally from the topic I asked you to submit in Stage I. Selecting a topic requires only that you identify an area appropriate for inquiry and susceptible to a policy recommendation. Stating a policy recommendation takes you an important step further: you must determine, with some considerable degree of specificity, what policy ought to be adopted with respect to your topic. For example, “the Equal Rights Amendment” is a topic. “The Equal Rights Amendment, originally passed by Congress in 1972, should be repassed and ratified by the states” is a thesis.

A public policy recommendation is one kind of thesis. It involves prescription or advocacy with regard to some aspect of public policy. Logically every policy recommendation must be a complete sentence communicating that something ought to be done by some agent of government. Read your policy recommendation carefully. Is it a complete sentence? Does the sentence state that something ought to be done? Is the individual or institution that must act a governmental actor or body? If you can answer all three questions “yes,” you have a public policy recommendation. If the answer to any question is “no,” then you need to write a public policy recommendation before going on to the next step.

Having a policy recommendation is not the same thing as having a good policy recommendation. Good policy recommendations are distinguished primarily by specificity. Read your policy recommendation again. Make sure that what you are proposing is not something vague to the point of meaninglessness, like “reform.” If what you are proposing is specific and unambiguous, then you probably have a good policy proposal.

Your outline of contentions:

The key terms here are “outline” and “contention.” An outline is a series of items written or printed together and arranged in a hierarchy. Your outline will be composed of contentions. In

the sense it is used here, contention means a statement of fact for or against a proposal. Here the proposal in question is your policy proposal. Each contention, therefore, is a statement of fact for (on behalf of) your policy proposal.

Read the first of your contentions. Is it a complete sentence? Is it a statement of fact? Does it assert that something is true? Does the truth asserted strengthen the case for your policy recommendation? You should be able to answer “yes” to each of these questions. All statements of fact have approximately the same form. They don't ask questions. They don't merely identify topics to be covered. They assert a truth. E.g.: “The plan (the policy / the proposal / it) would reduce the rate of illegitimate births.” “The policy would be easily enforced.” “The benefits would outweigh the costs.” “My policy recommendation is consistent with the First Amendment to the Constitution.” “The spotted owls will all die anyway.” “There is no record of wolves eating children in the United States.” “Those already rich will receive 85 percent of the benefits.” “Opponents are wrong to argue that the benefits of Head Start can't be measured past second grade.”

Repeat this analysis for each contention on your list. Edit your contentions until each of them meets the test. Once you have a complete list of contentions on behalf of your policy proposal, you need to organize them hierarchically. Please consult *A Good Argument Is a Hierarchy of Contentions*.

A Good Argument Is a Hierarchy of Contentions

Visually your hierarchy is a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid is your policy recommendation. Your policy recommendation is supported directly by a number of primary supporting contentions. Those, in turn, are supported by secondary supporting contentions. The structure of the pyramid is up to you. Only you can decide how many primary arguments there are for your policy. Only you can decide how many secondary arguments are required for each primary argument. At the base of your pyramid, you must supply the empirical evidence upon which the whole edifice is built. Textually your hierarchy is an outline. One example might look like this:

Policy Recommendation (a.k.a. “Primary Contention” or “Thesis”)

- Supporting Contention #1
 - Subordinate Supporting Contention #1
 - Evidence for Subordinate Supporting Contention #1
 - Subordinate Supporting Contention #2
 - Evidence for Subordinate Supporting Contention #2
- Supporting Contention #2
 - Subordinate Supporting Contention #1
 - Evidence for Subordinate Supporting Contention #1
 - Subordinate Supporting Contention #2
 - Evidence for Subordinate Supporting Contention #2
 - Subordinate Supporting Contention #3
 - Supporting Contention #3
- Supporting Contention #3
 - Evidence for Supporting Contention #1

Remember, a contention is a statement of fact for or against a proposal. Your contentions are statements of fact for (on behalf of) your policy recommendation. Without supporting empirical evidence your contention is just an assertion. The passion with which you believe something to be true is not evidence for its truth. Show me the evidence! And document the source!

Timeline:

Wk	<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>	<i>Weekend</i>
1			Instruction session with librarian: finding topics & locating sources.			Paper topic and working bibliography due.
2		Instruction session with librarian: improving your sources.				Policy recommendation & outline of contentions due.
3					Policy paper due at noon.	
4			Policy paper rewrite due.			

Also see timeline in Section 1 of the Guidebook under Essential Questions.