

Politics

Overview

An extended essay in politics provides students with an opportunity to undertake an in-depth study of a specific political question. The outcome of the study should represent a focused, effectively organized analysis that addresses the question and investigates its specifically political dimension.

Choice of topic

Politics is a discipline that can draw reference from almost any human activity and politics essays can quite legitimately be concerned with varied activities from United Nations peacekeeping to the decisions of local school authorities. The key consideration in judging the quality of essays in such a diverse field is the extent to which they deal with political institutions, use the tools of political science (broadly defined) and address the concerns of relevant political theories.

The choice of topic must be such that **all** the various assessment criteria can be satisfied. Students are advised to avoid topics that are too broad in scope to permit an in-depth study within the prescribed word limit. A limited, specific topic, thoroughly researched and with a clear focus, is preferable to a broad topic that can only be examined superficially.

The importance of choosing a topic that permits the gathering and sorting of relevant information, and that connects with broader political concerns, cannot be overstated. This will prevent the content of the essay from being merely superficial or generalized, or, worse still, tangential to the discipline of politics. If these matters are given due formal consideration, then the selection of a suitable topic, as well as the structure and presentation of the essay, can be addressed.

This important point is best illustrated by example. The question "Is the US government losing the drugs war?" is not well formulated but could, nevertheless, form the basis of a sound politics extended essay. It should focus on the nature of the problem in broad political terms, analyse the policy-making machinery, and consider the role of government institutions and the part played by pressure groups and public opinion. It should discuss the problems within the framework of relevant political theories and reach its conclusion on the basis of these investigations. An essay that simply gave a detailed account of the prevalence of various forms of drug abuse and showed how drugs have an impact on people's lives, however well written and researched, would be tangential to politics.

The following examples of titles for politics extended essays are intended as guidance only. The pairings illustrate that focused topics (indicated by the first title) should be encouraged rather than broad topics (indicated by the second title).

- "The politician as representative: an assessment of the effectiveness of a local politician in representing local interests" **is better than** "A week in the life of a politician".
- "The political debate over the death penalty in the USA" **is better than** "The rights and wrongs of capital punishment".
- "The concept of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' in Marxism-Leninism" **is better than** "Marxism-Leninism".
- "US intervention in Grenada: a study of the War Powers Act and the war-making powers of the US president" **is better than** "The US president and US foreign policy".
- "A comparison of the nationalist vote in Scotland and Wales in the British general elections of 2005" **is better than** "The British general election of 2005".

Treatment of the topic

As the previous examples illustrate, topics for extended essays in politics may be drawn from any one of the various areas of the discipline, such as political thought, political institutions, international or comparative politics, or political behaviour. Whatever area is chosen, it should be one of genuine interest to them.

Essays about local politics (for example, an investigation into the work of some aspect of local government or local interest group) are acceptable, provided that they are approached with sufficient methodological rigour and are not largely anecdotal. In such a study, relevant theoretical perspectives on representation could be considered.

Ideas for topics may be stimulated by current events, but essays should move beyond the mere description of such events. Comparative perspectives may offer another useful approach, but a clear focus must be maintained if the topic is not to become unwieldy or overly descriptive. Theoretical perspectives will also enhance such studies.

It is helpful for the student to consider how the study will conclude before beginning to write it. The conclusion must be seen to provide a comprehensive judgment on the inquiry and to follow logically from the argument. If the student has a clear idea of the conclusion, it becomes easier to construct a logically consistent argument. For example, if the research question is whether a decision by a local education board was democratic, it will help if, having done the background research, the student decides on the conclusion before writing the study. It would naturally follow that the structure of the essay would incorporate a discussion of those theories of democracy that led the student to this conclusion. In this way, the study would be stronger both structurally and thematically.

The use of clear, relevant diagrams, graphs and/or statistical tables should be encouraged where appropriate. Where these are derived from other sources, these sources must be acknowledged.

Studies of traditional political ideas or theories, or of past events or issues, are unlikely to involve the major use of primary sources. In other studies in the discipline of politics, however, the use of primary sources, such as interviews, and newspaper and documentary sources, is strongly recommended. The Internet is an almost universal source of information today and it is often invaluable, but it is important to recognize that secondary sources, especially established treatments of the themes of the study, remain crucial. Indeed, if a student does not refer to established secondary sources that deal with the principal themes, the study might be deemed to be unsatisfactory and could be tangential to the discipline of politics.

Some examples of possible topics and approaches include the following.

Topic **Is the US government losing the drugs war?**

Research question Is it politically possible for the US government to win the drugs war?

Approach An investigation into the pressures and constraints on government institutions and agencies, within the framework of relevant political theories. A catalogue of the social consequences of drug misuse would not be appropriate.

Topic **Does the British Conservative party have a future?**

Research question Which social and political values should a modern British Conservative party seek to conserve?

Approach An assessment of the relevance to modern British politics of the values that Conservatism has traditionally championed and a judgment on how (if at all) they should be amended. Students would refer to traditional Conservative theorists and to modern quality journalism. Interviews with local and national activists would be helpful. An essay that simply described the problems that the party faces in seeking to increase its share of the vote would not be appropriate.

Topic **Why the US policy on Iraq is failing**

Research question Account for the domestic unpopularity of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Approach An investigation into the changing balance of popularity of the invasion and its aftermath, primarily through the use of survey material. Students would need to discuss the issue of international legality and the attitude of other governments, and, finally, to comment on the difficulty of achieving the invasion's aims. In such an essay, balance would be important: an essay that constituted a selection of partisan Internet articles would not be appropriate.

Interpreting the assessment criteria

Criterion A: research question

The research question must be appropriate to the particular subject in which the essay is submitted. In politics, the subject matter **must** lend itself to assessment through the criteria specifically appropriate to politics. Although the focus of the essay can be best defined as a question, it may also take the form of a hypothesis or proposition.

Criterion B: introduction

The introduction should explain succinctly the significance of the topic, why it is worthy of investigation and how the research question relates to existing knowledge on the topic. The student's personal experience or particular opinion is rarely relevant here.

Criterion C: investigation

Students should aim to make use of both primary and secondary sources as appropriate. Source material should not simply be repeated but should be deployed subtly, or even challenged, in a balanced way. It should always be used in support of a student's argument, not as a substitute for such argument. The Internet can be an invaluable source of information but students are strongly advised neither to use it to the exclusion of any other source material, nor to assume that information obtained from web sites is necessarily accurate or unbiased. Students are strongly advised to consult the relevant established texts.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Knowledge and understanding here relates specifically to the political/historical context of the subject of the essay, and to the political institutions, actors and theories relevant to the area of study.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

Students should be aware of the need to give their essays the backbone of a developing argument. Personal views should not simply be stated but need to be supported by reasoned argument and reference to accepted sources. Straightforward descriptive or narrative accounts that lack analysis do not usually advance an argument and should be avoided. It is crucial, when constructing an argument in politics, to seek to achieve a balance, by presenting conflicting views in an impartial way before reaching a conclusion. Lack of balance in a politics essay constitutes a flaw.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

The employment of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to politics will raise an essay from a largely descriptive account to a truly incisive and illuminating one. Students should bear in mind that such an account would answer not only the formal questions—such as who, when, and where—but also the more demanding and interesting questions of how and, above all, why.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

It is expected that students will be familiar with the basic vocabulary that is appropriate to politics, such as the executive, judicial and legislative arms of government. They should know that contested or ambiguous terms may need to be defined. It is not expected that they will use various pieces of specialized jargon from little-known sub-disciplines within politics, such as game theory or public choice theory.

Criterion H: conclusion

Students should reflect on the research that they have presented and draw conclusions from that research. New information should not be introduced into the conclusion, although the identification of new questions arising from the research is encouraged. Students should avoid conclusions that are perfunctory; to be effective, conclusions should be consistent with the arguments developed in the essay and provide a synthesis of those arguments.

Criterion I: formal presentation

This criterion relates to the extent to which the essay conforms to academic standards about the way in which research papers should be presented. The presentation of essays that omit a bibliography or that do not give references for quotations is deemed unacceptable (level 0). Essays that omit one of the required elements—title page, table of contents, page numbers—are deemed no better than satisfactory (maximum level 2), while essays that omit two of them are deemed poor at best (maximum level 1).

It is important that students give proper attention to the formal layout and organization of the essay, and follow the prescription set out in the general guidelines. Careful recording of the relevant details of all evidence significant to the research question is necessary so that complete references, including page numbers, can be provided in the essay. The bibliography should contain all sources used, with details of the author, title of publication, publisher and date of

publication, which should be in alphabetical order (by author's family name). Tables and charts should appear in the body of the essay, as close as possible to their first reference. All material that is not original must be acknowledged.

Criterion J: abstract

The abstract is judged on the clarity with which it presents an overview of the research and the essay, not on the quality of the research question itself, nor on the quality of the argument or the conclusions. Students are required to set out clearly their research question or hypothesis, and explain how they approached their investigation and the conclusions that they reached.

Criterion K: holistic judgment

Qualities that are rewarded under this criterion include the following.

- Intellectual initiative: Ways of demonstrating this in politics essays include the choice of topic and research question, locating and using sources that have been little used previously, and new approaches to traditional topics (based on a re-evaluation of accepted theories).
- Insight and depth of understanding: These are most likely to be demonstrated as a consequence of focused research, of thorough and well-informed reflection, and of reasoned argument that consistently and effectively addresses the research question.