General Guidelines for Writing a Good Essay

Start with an Argument

First, make sure you have an argument or thesis that directs the essay. By an argument, I mean a clearly stated position in response to an assertion, question, or topic, backed by reasons supported by evidence. For example, do you agree or disagree with the author’s claim? An essay that only summarizes the readings is insufficient. The point is to analyze the readings. You might think of these essays as analytical book reviews. I don’t need a book report; I read the book. Questions to consider in framing the essay are: what theme or claim does the author make? What types of evidence does the author present to support his claims? Have different authors reached different conclusions about the same general problem? What is the basis of their disagreements? As we read more, you might compare authors’ arguments across the weeks.

Second, do not accept everything that the authors say at face value. They may disagree with each other, and you may disagree with one or all of them. What matters is that you ground your disagreements in clear reasons.

Third, you must provide evidence-based reasons. The point is to analyze the readings and arguments that we have considered in class and form reasoned conclusions by which I mean “conclusion for which you have a reason based on available evidence.” The following statement lacks evidence-based reasons:

“Wealthy countries become democratic because richer people get along better.”

While it is possible that this true, the statement fails to explain how getting along better is essential for democracy and offers no evidence that this is the case. It is an assertion without evidence-based reason. By contrast the following statement, while debatable, is based on reasons:

“Making countries wealthier might not make them more democratic because there are a number of wealthy but authoritarian states, like Singapore and Bahrain.”

Scope of the Essay

The essay cannot cover all the arguments and nuances in the book. What matters is how you focus the essay. Rather than discussing the distribution of power, prestige, and the rules of the system in Gilpin, you might focus on how two of these interact. Be wary of back-tracking – discussing books from a previous class more than the book for the week the essay is due. To me, the essay will read as if you didn’t bother to do the reading for the week.

Do Not Ignore Counter-arguments
Always address obvious counter-arguments to your thesis. For example, if you think that Gilpin’s critique of Waltz wrong, you should discuss why Gilpin’s critique is flawed, not just state your reasons for why you prefer the first image.

**Examples vs. Research**

These are not research essays. There is no need to do new research to get a good grade on them (indeed, you may get a poor grade by failing to discuss the readings sufficiently). You should, however, use examples to illustrate your arguments. They can be drawn from the readings, lecture, periodicals, or from work in other courses.

It is essential to explain why the example is relevant. Detailed stories are unnecessary, but you should write a sentence or two showing how the example relates to your claim. (E.g., "There is little evidence that revolutionary states directly cause wars. For example, the 1917 Russian Revolution lead to Russian withdrawal from World War I. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iraq, a non-revolutionary state, invaded Iran.")

**Be Clear Rather Than Clever**

Do not try to toss around jargon that you do not understand or use a three-syllable word when a one-syllable word will do. For example, the statement “Realism betrays an ontological myopia toward the agency of entities apart from reified post-Westphalian states” is better replaced by the sentence, “Realists largely ignore non-state actors.”

**Do Not Plagiarize!**

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**Citations**

When it is clear from the context of the sentence, cite the page number parenthetically, as I have done above. When citing outside sources, use either the Modern Language Association or Note style. This Dartmouth website is helpful:

http://www.dartmouth.edu/~sources/contents.html

**Spell-Checker May Deceive You**

I do not want to read about the dangers of “unclear” weapons in the hands of “rouge” states. Print a draft to proofread, or have a friend proof-read it. An essay with many misspelled words and grammatical errors will be down-graded. I have to be able to understand what you are saying.