

Writing Political Theory: Lessons from an Apprenticeship

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In 2003–2004 I served as the assistant editor of *Political Theory*. During my term I reviewed hundreds of manuscripts, read scores of outside reviews, and communicated regularly with Stephen White (the editor) about the criteria of a successful manuscript and the direction of the discipline. To aid graduate students looking to publish, as well as others, I offer several principles to facilitate writing and submitting a political theory essay.

Devote care to the cover letter

A cover letter is the first thing that an editor reads when he or she opens your envelope. Too many authors write, in effect, “Here is my submission. Tell me what you think.” A better strategy is to state who you are and why the journal ought to publish your essay. The main question an editor asks when reading a manuscript is: Does this essay say something new about an interesting topic? Use the cover letter to answer this question (briefly). Mention the academic debates you are entering. Refer to recent essays in this or other pertinent journals on the topic. Explain the stakes of your essay. A good cover letter piques the editor’s curiosity.

Craft the abstract

The second thing an editor reads is your abstract. An abstract outlines the argument of your essay. It describes, in about 150 words, the question you are addressing, how other scholars approach it, your plan to answer it, and posits the originality and importance of your answer. This is a lot to accomplish in an abstract, which is why many authors opt not to write one. This is a mistake. A good abstract gives the editor a map of your argument. A manuscript without an abstract produces additional work (and irritation) for the editor.

Nicholas Tampio defended his dissertation on The Kantian Problematic in Contemporary Political Theory at Johns Hopkins University in September 2004.

Specify the problem(s) immediately

When reading a manuscript, an editor wonders about the audience for the essay. Experts on the topic already have their thoughts, and others have not yet given the topic close attention. Most potential readers, in other words, need a compelling reason to devote their time and energy to your essay. An author helps the editor by elucidating, in the opening pages, why political theorists ought to read the essay. What political problems does your essay address? What intellectual problems? Does your essay shed light on terrorism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, globalization, affirmative action, technology, environmental politics, or secularism? Does your essay help us understand a canonical political philosopher (e.g., Plato or Machiavelli), a contemporary political theorist (e.g., Judith Butler or Ernesto Laclau), an ongoing theoretical debate (e.g., between liberals, communitarians, and postmodernists), or a nascent theoretical movement (e.g., Eastern European democratic theory)? Does your essay clarify the meaning and history of an important but elusive concept, e.g., power or freedom? A political theory essay should begin like a detective novel, with an event or a puzzle that captures the reader’s attention.

Demonstrate mastery of the topic and the secondary literature

Up to now, we have considered principles to impress the editor and the general audience of the journal. The next set of readers for which to account is the outside reviewers of your manuscript (assuming the editor likes your essay enough to send it out). Outside reviewers are traditionally selected because (1) they are experts on your topic and (2) they disagree with you. How does one win over outside reviewers? The key is to look at one’s topic from a variety of perspectives, something that can only be done by reading deeply and widely in the field.

Say, for example, one writes on the work of John Rawls (the most popular topic during my tenure at *Political Theory*). Rawls published five major books: *A Theory of Justice* (1971, 1999), *Political*

Liberalism (1993), *Collected Papers* (1999), *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (2000), and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001). Rawls also inspired hundreds of critiques, including Michael Sandel’s *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982, 1998), Bonnie Honig’s *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993), and Allan Bloom’s *Giants and Dwarfs* (1990). To advance a novel, significant, and accurate argument about Rawls today, one needs a profound understanding of his entire corpus and the literature surrounding it. If one accuses Rawls of having a metaphysical conception of the person in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawlsians may observe that he revised his conception of the person in *Political Liberalism*. If one censures Sandel for ignoring Rawls’s late works, a civic republican may respond that Sandel analyzes *Political Liberalism* in the second edition of *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. The point is: the most common reasons a reviewer recommends declining a manuscript are that the author advances an inaccurate or simplistic argument or rehashes a familiar argument.

End strong

Most reviewers know, before the final pages, whether or not they are going to recommend publication. A strong finish, however, buttresses your case. Most good political theory essays address a narrow topic with broad implications. In the conclusion of your essay, speculate how we may think differently—about an author, a concept, current events, the history of political philosophy, the nature of political theory, politics in general, etc.—after reading your essay.

Edit

Before you submit your essay, check that every paragraph has a topic sentence, that there are no misspelled words or grammatical mistakes, that each subsection is marked and has a heading, and that the essay conforms to the page limit of the journal. Reviewers do not necessarily admire a well-written and edited essay, but they always resent a poorly composed one.

Explain changes if resubmitting

If the editor tells you to revise and resubmit, do so. Be sure, however, to list your changes in an accompanying letter. At all stages of the process, remain in the editor's good graces. Detailing your revisions helps the editor determine whether you have adequately addressed the reviewers' criticisms or concerns.

Study, rebel, create

The best general advice about writing political theory, I think, comes from the section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* entitled, "On the Three Metamorphoses." In this passage, Zarathustra (or Nietzsche) advises his charges to proceed through three stages of enlightenment. First, become a camel, i.e., someone who carries the weight of inherited values and tradi-

tions. Then, transmogrify into a lion, i.e., someone who resists established ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Finally, become a child, i.e., someone who sees the world through fresh eyes. Stated more prosaically: young political theorists ought to (1) master the primary and secondary literature on a political or theoretical issue, (2) challenge the orthodoxy on that issue, and (3) invent new ideas and arguments.

Note

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