

Critical Response Papers

PSCI 2221: Causes of War
Professor Brenton Kenkel
Fall 2016

Instructions

You will turn in two critical response papers over the course of the semester. Each paper will consist of a critical assessment of one of the course readings (required or supplemental). Each paper will be no more than five pages long.¹

1. The first paper is due **Wednesday, September 28** and must cover one of the readings from August 24–September 21.
2. The second paper is due **Wednesday, November 9** and must cover one of the readings from September 26–November 4.
3. An optional bonus paper is due **Friday, December 2** and must cover one of the readings from November 7–18.

Late Policy: Critical response papers are due in class on their due date. There is a letter grade deduction for each day the paper is late after that.

The optional bonus paper, if you choose to hand it in, will replace the lower of your two grades on the first two critical response papers. You must turn in both of the first two papers—you cannot skip one and replace it with the bonus paper.

A critical response paper makes an argument. It is not a summary—in fact, it should be written under the assumption that the reader is familiar with the work it is responding to. To be “critical” of a work does not mean to be “against” it, but rather to reflect on it in a well-informed, objective way. Your criticisms must be grounded in reason and evidence, not personal taste.

¹Page lengths quoted assume a double-spaced document with 12-point text and 1-inch margins. I reserve the right not to read any content past five pages and to reduce your grade for exceeding the page limit.

Here are some examples of the kind of argument a critical response paper might make. This is not an exhaustive list; criticism can take many forms.

- For theoretical readings:
 - Using historical evidence to evaluate the plausibility of one of its assumptions
 - Proposing an important factor that the theory neglects and showing how that would change its conclusions
 - Characterizing an additional implication of the theory that the author does not discuss
- For historical readings:
 - Pursuing an alternative interpretation of the evidence the paper presents
 - Evaluating how the case fits (or fails to fit) a particular theoretical model
 - Arguing, based on a theoretical model, for how the case would have played out differently if some factor had been different

I will focus on the *clarity* and *quality* of the argument when grading a paper. I recommend George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" (<http://tinyurl.com/orwell46>) as a guide to clear writing.