

Advice for the writing assignments, Spring 2016

- **Think before you write.** Clear writing comes from clear thinking. You should spend almost as much time thinking about what you’re going to write, as you do with writing it. Structure your thoughts and your argument before you start writing. Focus on developing a single idea or argument per essay.
- **Write carefully.** You will be graded on what you write, not what you meant to write. I cannot read your mind. If your thinking is sloppy or your writing unclear, I will assume you do not know what you’re talking about.
- **Write clearly.** If I cannot understand your perspective on my first pass through your essay, I cannot give you credit for it, even if it is thoughtful and interesting. Write your essays clearly. Explain your ideas. Use examples. Refer to the texts. Refer to the ideas. Expand upon the ideas. Speculate about consequences. Tease out second-order effects. Include references.
- **Discuss ideas in general, support them with examples.** This class is about general concepts and ideas, and your essays should grapple with them directly. You may use examples (either real or hypothetical) to motivate an idea, or to support a prediction, but keep your focus on the general idea, not on the details of a particular implementation or instantiation.
- **Say interesting things.** Don’t summarize someone else’s ideas or the class discussion. Tell me what *you* think. Have something to say. What strikes you as cool or novel or weird or interesting or counter-intuitive about a topic? What does it imply? Follow those implications to their logical conclusion, and discuss it.

A central goal of the class is for you to *think critically* about the topics, and their implications; your essays are your main opportunity to explore and argue through them. Incorporate your own personal experiences, opinions, and insights to support your argument. Arguing one side of an issue makes for a stronger essay than weighing the balance.

- **Be succinct.** Your essays are at most two pages long. Get to the point.
- **Don’t bullshit.** If you don’t have anything to say, don’t waste my time with several pages of bullshit. A document with the text “Nothing to say” (and nothing else) will be worth 25% partial credit. The “Nothing to say” rule applies to every writing assignment and every exam. A blank page is worth zero points.

- **Don't plagiarize.** Do not copy or plagiarize from any source. Do not insult my or your own intelligence by submitting someone else's writing as your own, in whole or in part. I take very seriously the principles of intellectual honesty and academic honor. It is far better, in my view, to submit shoddy work that is your own, than to plagiarize someone else's work as your own. The punishment for plagiarism is far, far worse than a poor grade (see the Honor Code statement below).
- **Proofread your essays.**
- **Common reasons to lose points:** (i) excessive spelling/grammar errors; (ii) each missing citation; (iii) unclear writing or poorly organized thoughts (the most common deduction); (iv) not enough original thought/discussion; (v) very little original thought/discussion.