

## Guidelines for Reflection Papers

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### Purpose:

The reflection papers are designed to get you in the habit of thinking carefully about the material you have, and creating a quick set of analyses and suggestions on what they bring to the issue(s) at hand. This is the preparation that will allow you as a researcher or analyst, to have influence in decision-making meetings, and signal your contribution to group discussions. Of course, it also allows for considerably improved incorporation of the materials into your own knowledge base, consideration of the multiple possible perspectives and types of analyses on issue(s), and stimulation of your own creative suggestions/analyses. It will allow you to develop a strong thesis statement, the key to good research.

### What it is not:

The reflection paper does not require extensive outside research. It is not a summary of each paper. Remember, you will be coming to a meeting where everyone else has access to the same materials. The key point is for you to develop your own unique view of the issues and to learn to be persuasive in using the materials available. Therefore, although for yourself it will be useful to create a set of notes by author, the key for the paper will be what have you learned from them?

### If comparing authors;

Once you have made detailed notes of each author, you should find ways to compare them. That is, there must be common questions, variables, actors, etc by which you can compare and contrast their perspectives on the issues. You should also not neglect how differences in methods, frameworks of analysis, and evidence affects their analyses. It is often helpful to make an outline and/or a table/diagram to sketch this out more clearly in your mind. I would suggest the following elements: thesis, evidence, conclusion/implications, and strengths and weaknesses of the argument. You will then write up your comparison, with one important aim- what do you think about what these authors say. What could you contribute in terms of how to move forward from the contradictions and limits of the current discourse? What is missing from the discussion?

### If answering a question:

In this case, you want to give take an assertion, thesis, or salient observation/conclusion from the readings, as a point of departure for your own take on the question. Does the point make logical sense to you? Breakdown the concepts, logic, and framework of the argument and give your own improvement. Does it apply to the real world? Look at data and test it out. Then give your own improvement on the assertion made.

What it will help you to accomplish:

- 1) This exercise will help you read more strategically for key analytical points through large amounts of materials. Over time, you will become more efficient and purposive in your reading. This is an absolutely essential skill in a time of seemingly overwhelming information.
- 2) Your own analytical skills will improve considerably by breaking down the strengths and weaknesses of leading authors. The purpose is not to just critique but to see how one sets up convincing research and what can be done to improve it through the comparison and contrast (as well as the natural limits of any piece).
- 3) It pushes you to think more carefully about the issues at hand, to push yourself towards developing your own perspective, to be shared and tested out in group reflection at the meeting. Ultimately, you will have to “sell” your own analysis, so this is a good bridge towards that goal.

Preparing your discussion of the reflection papers:

-This discussion part of the exercise is like the West Wing, where you meet as a policy group and you give your suggestion about what should be done. You will do this all the time in your professional life.

Therefore, you should NOT summarize. You should be giving your own analysis of a particular POINT on the reading and developing it further. You should not have a collection of several thoughts with no particular ties to them. Choose one focal point and begin to develop the outline of an original analysis around it.

For your discussion, write down 3-4 bullet points that you will highlight. Do not read from your paper. Talk to the person at the far end of the room, making eye contact. The 3-4 analytical coherent observations with a central focus point (thesis) that is easy to follow. You should be able to do this in 3-4 minutes or less. What you are doing is suggesting a provocative new way to look at the readings, or an application of them. See my website for examples. This will allow us to have more of a discussion and back and forth.

Remember, this is a reflection paper for discussion, not a careful research paper. The reflection paper is meant to suggest a new way of thinking about these problems, one which potentially could be developed in a research paper in the future.