

## Interacting Collaboratively in Political Science

### Or: How Not to be a Bully

Our goal as academics is to generate knowledge about the world. Criticism of existing theories and findings is a necessary part of improving understanding, but serves this purpose only when accompanied by effective solutions. Though academics often seem to enjoy identifying flaws for the sake of identifying flaws, doing so rarely helps to move the field forward. Suggesting clever or technically complex approaches that do not actually solve the problem, or that ignore practical, ethical or political constraints, is similarly unhelpful.

Engaging in non-constructive criticism alienates other people, including potential coauthors and reviewers, while contributing nothing to the overall improvement of research in the discipline. It also, however unwittingly, exacerbates inequalities in the field: when we aren't deliberate about our criticism, most of us will tend to be more critical, and less constructive, towards women and scholars of color.

Therefore, we expect you to be purposeful in the critiques you make and how you make them. There are two things to keep in mind when making critiques, especially in the beginning of your career. The first is to presume competence: assume the author knows as much as or more than you do about the discipline, and about their sub-field in particular. The second is to be honest with yourself about your own skills and insight. If something about a study seems wrong, it's possible that the authors made an error, but it's also possible you are misunderstanding something.

Beginning from a stance of humility will lead you to engage less like a competitor and more like a collaborator, and prevent you from coming across as aggressive or self-aggrandizing.

## Identifying Constructive Criticism

As a brand-new political scientist, how can you know whether you are offering constructive criticism? Ask yourself,

- Am I making this comment to make the author's job easier, rather than to demonstrate my own intelligence?
- Have I read carefully enough to be sure that my criticism is relevant?
- Have I made an effort to consider why (other than abject incompetence) the authors might have done things the way they did?
- Is this criticism actionable? Is there something the authors or others could reasonably do to resolve the issue?
- Have I tailored my suggestion to the particular constraints the authors are working under? Have I spent time thinking about what those constraints are?
- Am I ready to graciously accept a response to my criticism that makes it clear the error was mine?

If you answer no to any of the above, refrain from making a criticism now. Ask questions (real ones, not criticisms disguised as questions) and plan to spend more time preparing your critique next time.

## No-Go Areas

When your goal is to be helpful, certain types of criticisms are completely out of bounds. For example:

### **“Correlation does not equal causation.”**

Of course it doesn't, and anyone who has more than a semester of graduate training knows this; there is no value added by pointing this out. More importantly, most of us who are relying on correlations are doing so because demonstrating causation is quite difficult, even with sophisticated methods. Unless you are an expert in causal inference *and* have a solution that can be run on available data, refrain from noting that causation has not been established. (See also, “What about reverse causation?”)

*What to do instead:* Help to identify other testable implications of the author's theory and suggest ways to test these implications with data that the author has or can easily gather.

### **“This isn't externally valid.”**

Once again, the concept of external validity is something that is taught in the first year of graduate school and there is no need to explain it to an academic audience. Additionally, simply pointing out a lack of external validity is usually unhelpful: *all* empirical work in political science is limited in some way, because data are finite. If we insist that all work demonstrate external validity before we will accept it, we will never learn anything. If an author makes a claim to external validity as a centerpiece of their stated contribution, then you may offer critiques, but otherwise, pick something else to focus on. (See also, “You didn't explain how this is relevant to [particular area of expertise]!”)

*What to do instead:* Help the author identify the scope conditions of their theory (i.e. where and when we would expect it to be applicable based on the theory's assumptions). Help the author improve internal validity. Offer to coauthor a piece testing the theory in [particular area of expertise].

### **“I know you already collected the data, but you should have...”**

They already collected the data. It doesn't matter how reasonable your suggestion, it cannot be implemented. Your criticism is not constructive. (See also, “Maybe you could run another survey...”)

*What to do instead:* Help the author identify hypotheses that can be tested with the data as it is. Help them reframe the piece to avoid making claims they can't support with their data.

### **“I won't believe this until it's replicated!”**

We all understand that replication is the gold standard. We also all understand that replication takes time and money and is not currently incentivized in our profession. If you wait for everything to be replicated before you find any value in it, you are going to spend your entire career perpetually 20 years behind. (See also, “How do we know this wasn't p-hacked?”)

*What to do instead:* Identify the aspects of the claim that are making you particularly skeptical; help the author figure out how to better support those claims. Replicate the study yourself.

**“I don’t find this paper interesting.”**

This doesn’t even merit being classified as criticism. There are thousands of questions in political science that we need answers to, and the fact that a certain question hasn’t captured your imagination is not relevant to...well, anything. Don’t do this. (See also, “Why didn’t you look at...”)

*What to do instead:* Focus on improving the theory and evidence to make the study as valuable as possible for people who *do* find it interesting. Help the author link their paper to related literatures that might make the paper relevant to a broader audience.

## Phrasing

Let’s say you are making a comment in the spirit of collaboration. How can you signal this clearly to the author? There are certain ways of phrasing criticisms that indicate you are intending to be helpful and willing to accept that the error might be yours. Start working these phrases into your professional vocabulary.

- “Please correct me if I am misunderstanding, but...”
- “I apologize if I just read too quickly, but I don’t think I saw you address...”
- “I’m a bit puzzled and would like some more explanation about...”
- “Have I missed some context about why you chose to...”
- “Someone here may know better than I, but I think there is an error...”
- “I wonder if it would help if you...”

Note that using these phrases does not grant you a free pass to say whatever you want: phrasing a bad-faith criticism politely does not turn it into a good-faith criticism. If your criticism does not meet the characteristics of a high-quality comment listed above, just refrain from commenting.

## Know when to fold ‘em

We all like to be right, and we all like to be acknowledged when we are. But we are either right or we are not, and which it is does not depend on whether we can get someone else to capitulate. No matter how reasonable your criticism is, repeatedly trying to make someone acknowledge your criticism is never appropriate. Make your criticism once, or *possibly* twice, if there was a genuine misunderstanding. If the author continues to misunderstand, or rejects your argument, let it go. Similarly, take a pass on bringing up a point that others have already made. In general, if your comments are not moving the conversation forward, offer to discuss the issue with the author later one-on-one, and bow out of the conversation.

## When you get it wrong

You will accidentally violate the norms above at least once, and probably many times, especially when you are just starting out and you are in a situation where you are expected to say *something*. In a seminar setting, where you are criticizing authors who are not there to hear you, the remedy is simply to learn from it and avoid making similar comments in the future. If you violate these norms while actually interacting with the author, apologize: “Sorry, that wasn’t helpful” is usually sufficient. However, if you are violating norms regularly without improvement over time, then you are no longer in the realm of accidental violations, and have simply chosen not to exert the effort necessary to meet the norms of the discipline. Expect negative feedback from instructors and colleagues.

## Conclusion

You have probably noticed by now that the advice in this memo requires a lot of you. Preparing useful criticism is quite a bit more difficult than just finding flaws. That does not mean it is not worth it. The skills you need to generate high-quality criticism are the same skills you need to identify and fix the flaws in your own work. Appreciating and following norms of constructive criticism will also make you less afraid to present your work (and make others more inclined to treat you generously when you do.) Finally, and most importantly, this is simply what we do. We became academics because we want to understand the world, and our understanding improves as the collective quality of our work improves. Your legacy as a scholar will include not only the contributions you make with your own work, but also the contribution you make to others’ work: there is no reason to delay making the latter contribution when you can begin now.