

# POLCOMM | Dialectical Writing Assignments

**From:** Prof. Matt Nisbet  
**To:** POLCOMM students

In these three assignments you improve your ability to think and write “dialectically” about complex political debates and their communication-related dimensions. Dialectical thinkers seek out multiple perspectives — exploring their tensions and uncertainties, recognizing what each might offer of value. Dialectical thinkers do not see the world in black and white, but shades of gray. They also tend to be more mindful of the limits to their knowledge. For these reasons, dialectical thinkers are often skilled communicators who can build relationships that span political boundaries.

The opposite of dialectical thinking is Manichean, “either/or” thinking. Manichean thinkers tend to view the world as a battle of “good versus evil,” pitting the “powerless versus the all-powerful.” They view the motivations of opposing sides as either completely altruistic or totally self-serving. For the Manichean thinker, the stakes involved in a decision are “all pro” or “all con,” resulting in clear winners and losers. In today’s world of complex problems, polarized politics, and social media-driven outrage, it is much easier to be a Manichean thinker than a dialectical thinker. The reasons include:

- Social problems can be upsetting, and when we’re upset, we like certainty.
- It’s difficult to accept that there’s a lot we don’t know and don’t understand
- We can experience people who disagree with us as aggressive, arrogant, or rude, therefore it can be difficult to acknowledge when they have a point.
- We may fear that if we acknowledge that an opponent has a point, it will cause us to lose the argument, or lend credibility to “the other side.”
- We may worry that others will use any concessions we make to invalidate our argument or hurt/shame us.
- We may think that more extreme arguments are more persuasive/effective.
- It’s difficult to acknowledge negative things about people or views we cherish.
- Politics today is too often defined as “zero sum,” meaning that only one side or party in a debate can win, rather than compromises being reached where different sides each gain something they want.

To improve your ability to think dialectically, you will be writing three short papers. In each assignment, you not only must integrate the relevant class readings, but also the additional related readings. Provided with a specific statement you will be writing three “steel man” arguments for both the pro- and the con- positions (6 total arguments), and three genuine “uncertainty” statements (3 uncertainty statements).

- A pro argument supports the statement, a con argues against it, and an uncertainty statement is anything that you are unsure of that doesn’t neatly fit as a pro or a con.
- Avoid making “straw man” arguments (weak arguments you can easily defeat).
- Instead, make “steel man” (strong and challenging) arguments. Also, make sure to provide genuine uncertainties about the issue as opposed to “it may not go far enough” arguments.

You will be writing short dialectical papers specific to the following statements in the three pro, con, and uncertainty statement format [see template following rubric]. For all assignment due dates, see the CANVAS calendar.

## **Dialectical Paper 1.0 — “Ownership of U.S. National Park land should be given back to Native American tribes.”**

### Relevant course readings (2)

- Treuer, D. (2021, May). Return the National Parks to the Native Americans. The Atlantic.
- Ibram X. Kendi podcast interview of David Treuer “Repairing the past: Returning Native Land [41min] (See also Transcript).

### Additional readings to integrate (2)

- Robbins, J. (2021, June3). How Returning Lands to Native Tribes Is Helping Protect Nature. Yale Environment 360.
- Rose, J. Pitt A. Verbois R. & Weller, L. (2022). Incorporating Movements for Racial Justice into Planning and Management of US National Parks. Journal of Park & Recreation Administration, 40(1).

## **Dialectical Paper 2.0 — “Too much democracy is bad for democracy.”**

### Relevant course readings (1)

- Rauch, J. & LaRoja R. (2019, Dec.) Too much democracy is bad for democracy. The Atlantic, pg 1-8.
- Rosen, J. (2018, Oct.) Madison vs. the Mob. The Atlantic, 80-93.

### Additional readings to integrate (2)

- Raja, R.J. & Rauch, J. (2020, Jan. 31). Report: Voters need help: How party insiders can make presidential primaries safer, fairer, and more democratic. Brookings Institute.
- Blumer, E. (2017). Direct democracy: For and against. Report by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).

### **Box 2.0 | The benefits of dialectical thinking**

Even though dialectical thinking might be difficult, research suggests that this style of reasoning has many benefits that include:

- Facilitating dialogue.
- Promoting learning and understanding of others.
- Boosting our emotional stability.
- Helping identify more effective solutions that can gain broader-based support.
- Helping people get along and to recognize their shared interests.
- Promoting inclusion, empathy, and justice.
- Being more persuasive

## **Dialectical paper 3.0 — “Social media is the main driver of today's political dysfunction.”**

### Relevant Course Readings (4)

- Vaidhyanathan, (2021). Making sense of the Facebook menace: Can the largest media platform in the world ever be made safe for democracy? New Republic, 252(1-2), 22-27.
- DeCook, & Forestal, (2022). Of humans, machines, and extremism: The role of platforms in facilitating undemocratic cognition. American Behavioral Scientist, 1-20 (forthcoming).
- Roemmele & Gibson, R. (2020). Scientific and subversive: The two faces of the fourth era of political campaigning. New Media & Society, 22(4), 595-610.

- Jungherr & Schroeder, R. (2021). Disinformation and the structural transformations of the public arena: Addressing the actual challenges to democracy. *Social Media+ Society*, 7(1), [forthcoming]

Additional readings to integrate (2)

- Lewis-Kraus, G. (2022, June 3). How harmful is social media? *The New Yorker*.
- Edsall, T. (2022, June 15). We're staring at our phones full of rage for the other side. *New York Times*.

**Dialectical paper 4.0** — “Left-wing populism is as damaging to liberal democracy as right-wing populism.”

Relevant Course Readings (2)

- Inglehart, & Norris, (2017). Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in reverse. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2), 443–454.
- Klecker, C. (2020). Trump as the ‘Kardashian of Politics’? Daniel J. Boorstin’s ‘Pseudo-Event’ and the Rise of Donald Trump. *The Journal of American Culture*, 43(3), 215-231

Additional readings to integrate (3)

- Rohac, Kennedy & Singh (2018, May). Drivers of authoritarian populism in the United States. Joint report: Center for American Progress & American Enterprise Institute.
- Judis, J. (2016, Oct. 13). Us vs. them: The birth of populism. *The Guardian*.
- Frank, T. (2020, May). The pessimistic style in American politics. *Harpers*.

## **GRADING RUBRIC**

**A grade between 0-10 points will be assigned to this assignment based on the following criteria:**

### **9-10 pts. Exceeds Expectations**

- All of our pro/con arguments are “steel man” arguments.
- Each of your pro/con arguments includes a relevant source/citation.
- You incorporate all relevant class sources and additional sources into your arguments as citations/points of evidence.
- You can express genuine uncertainty by relying on clear reasoning.
- Your arguments/uncertainty statement are concisely and persuasively written.

### **8-9 pts. Meets Expectations**

- Your response reflects a mix of steel and straw man arguments and/or lack of genuine uncertainties— or some of your arguments lack clarity as to their reasoning or direction.
- You do not incorporate all of the additional sources into your arguments, or relevant course readings are missing as sources used.

### **0-8 pts. Does not Meet Expectations**

- You do not fully complete the assignment, or you do not turn it in.

[See Assignment Template Next Page]

## Dialectical Writing Assignment

[Name]

“Ownership of U.S. National Park land should be given back to Native American tribes.”

**Pro Argument**

Source(s):

**Pro Argument**

Sources (s):

**Pro Argument**

Sources (s):

**Con Argument**

Source(s):

**Con Argument**

Sources (s):

**Con Argument**

Sources (s):

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**Uncertainty statement**

Source(s):

**Uncertainty statement**

Sources (s):

**Uncertainty statement**

Sources (s):

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