



**ORIENTATION GUIDELINES FOR
EXTERNAL REVIEWERS OF POLITICAL
SCIENCE DEPARTMENTS**

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1. Introduction¹

Most institutions conduct regular external reviews to ensure that degree programs are meeting institutional and disciplinary performance standards, to gain outside perspectives on which parts of current programs are working well or not so well, and to get suggestions on new programs and processes that might benefit their departments. Departments enlist colleagues from peer institutions to conduct these reviews. The following *Orientation Guidelines for Serving as an External Reviewer of Political Science Departments* are provided by the American Political Science Association (APSA) to share information on what to expect for those who have been invited by another institution to serve as an external reviewer, and for those who are considering adding their names to the APSA list of potential external reviewers.

2. Why You Might Want to Serve

Serving as an external reviewer is an honor that signals that your peers value your experiences and insights. But it also requires a considerable amount of time, work, and thoughtfulness in return for minimal compensation. Why, then, should you consider doing these? One reason is because it is a service to the wider discipline. Perhaps you want to return the favor after your own department benefitted from a helpful outside review. Perhaps you know someone at the department that is inviting you, and you want to assist that department. But some of the other reasons to do this are more selfish. Above all, many faculty members find that serving as a reviewer contributes to their own professional development, providing them with insights about curricular innovations and expectations at other institutions, and about different budgeting practices and priorities. Reviewers often come away with lessons about effective practices (or, sometimes, with ones to avoid) that will help them address challenges in their own departments. Reviewers also have opportunities for networking with fellow reviewers, and with faculty and administrators at the host institution. In short, both the reviewers and the departments being reviewed can benefit from these opportunities to share professional experiences and practices.

3. What to Expect

You should receive the departmental self-study and other documents from the institution well in advance, usually at least a month ahead of time. These documents are likely to include explicit guidelines for reviewers, such as questions that the reviewers' report is expected to answer, expected length of the document, and a timeline for producing it.

Reviewers are expected to prepare carefully in advance of the visit. You should familiarize yourself with the program and the institution based on the documents provided, and probably also based on web pages for the department and the university. Arriving at the visit with some initial impressions, questions and possible suggestions enables you to use the on-site visit to follow up on these topics. As part of your preparation, you may want to have an e-mail exchange

¹ These Guidelines have been prepared by members of the 2021-2023 APSA Departmental Services Committees, including Susan E. Scarrow (chair), Kathleen Bruhn, Cyril Ghosh, Craig Parsons, Cammy Shay, Scott Straus, Jonathan Woon. The document has benefitted from input from current, past and future APSA presidents Lisa Martin, John Ishiyama and Mark Warren, from APSA staff member Casey Harrigan, and from members of the APSA council.

or virtual meeting ahead of time with your fellow reviewers to agree on topics to pursue in the interviews. This can also be done once you arrive at the host university if the schedule has set aside time for the reviewers to meet alone at the start of the review.

For many visits, the final day includes an exit interview with members of the higher administration. If this is listed on your schedule, you may be expected to deliver a report at this meeting that previews the likely findings of your report. This can be a challenge, given that you will have just had intensive meeting days, ones which often run from breakfast through dinner, with little time for reviewers to talk amongst themselves. In what little “free” time you have, you or other reviewers may well be dealing with issues that have arisen at your home institutions. This is another reason why it can be helpful to have conferred with your fellow reviewers prior to the start of the meetings so that you have a sense of your shared intuitions, even though some impressions will (and should) change because of the information that you receive and questions you ask during the visit.

If you are lucky, the schedule will include some time for the reviewers to confer together before you leave campus. If you have this time, use it! It will be much easier to draft your report later if you have agreed on some overall points, and if you have divided up who drafts the various sections. The sooner you start drafting the report, the better, as the details tend to fade quickly once you return to the responsibilities awaiting you at your own institution.

4. Professional Responsibility

Being an external reviewer is a big responsibility: a department opens its secrets to you and inviting you to ask questions and make suggestions. Faculty, staff, and students will be showing you hospitality and giving you a great deal of their time. In return, you need to approach the job with professionalism, courtesy, and tact. This includes:

- Being on time for meetings and helping the department stick to its schedule.
- Being a good listener, even at the end of a long day.
- Focusing on helping the department achieve its goals, not what you think its goals should be.
- Remembering that you are not a judge, and not a grader, but a consultant whose goal should be to help a department get stronger.
- Maintaining confidentiality.
- Submitting your report in a timely manner.

You have an obligation to honestly report on issues and concerns you may discover, as well as to praise good practices and innovations that may be underappreciated by home institutions. However, reviewers are brief visitors who cannot possibly fully understand the dynamics at other institutions, so it is important to tread carefully, especially when commenting on practices that may need improvement. You cannot be sure in advance whether your report will have any impact, but you don’t want your observations to be used in ways you did not intend.

5. Logistics

After you accept the invitation to serve as an external reviewer, you should expect to receive further information on the specific dates. You also will be asked to fill out forms so that the institution can reimburse your travel expenses and pay you an honorarium. It is customary for institutions to cover all reasonable travel costs for external reviewers, and to pay a modest honorarium (sometimes, very modest). The honorarium rate is generally set centrally within an institution and is not negotiable.

6. Concluding Thoughts

We hope that this guide has made you more interested in serving as an external reviewer if you are asked to do so. This is an important type of professional service, one which can involve mutually beneficial exchanges of ideas among reviewers and faculty in the department being reviewed. If you are interested in being considered for such opportunities, one way to signal your willingness to take on such assignments is to add your name to APSA's list of potential external reviewers. If you would like to volunteer as a reviewer, please [submit your information here](#).