

How to Write an Academic Petition

A satirical guide for academics looking to denounce one of their colleagues in an open letter or online petition



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The traditional methods of scholarly criticism—like picking apart your opponents’ arguments in an article, book or research note—are thoroughly outmoded. Everyone who’s anyone now recognises that the most esteemed way to criticise your opponents is through an open letter or online petition. How does this work, you may ask.

Well, first you need a target—that would be someone who has written or said something, or (even worse) who has associated with people who have written or said something, that threatens one of your sacred values. A good example who would be an individual who disagrees with you about something that you consider ‘not up for debate’.

Next, you need some like-minded colleagues to back you up. These are people willing to add their names to the document you’re putting together. Ten is an absolute minimum. A hundred is better, but still not ideal. (Two hundred is enough for the newspapers to use the plural ‘hundreds’ when referring to your handiwork.) A thousand signatures is the prize—this is the centre of the dartboard for which you should aim. (Note: you don’t need to have everyone signed up straight away; many will add their names once they can see there’s enough strength in numbers.)

Now that you’ve got some back up, you need to craft what you’re going to say. This is the part where I can really help out. For your benefit, I’ve read through

seventeen of the most eloquent academic petitions to date, and distilled their content into an easy-to-follow, 10-point guide. Each of my points is helpfully illustrated with examples, so you know exactly which phrases and terms to drop into your own petition. (Targets' initials are provided in square brackets at the end of each quotation.)

1. Allege poor scholarship or failure of peer-review:

- “her ignorance of basic theoretical principles of race theory renders her an ill-informed and substandard interlocutor” [RFB]
- “As historians of empire already know, such projects require the fabrication of history not its careful study” [NB]
- “this article is poorly executed pseudo-“scholarship” and should be retracted immediately” [BG]
- “we can only conclude that there has been a failure in the review process, and one that painfully reflects a lack of engagement beyond white and cisgender privilege” [RT]
- “Chronic and pathological, unscholarly behavior [...]” [PB]

2. Claim that a concept can't be separated from a certain context:

- “The ‘balance sheet’ approach to empire is rooted in the self-serving justifications of imperial administrators” [NB]
- “[...] cannot be taken out of the context in which BIPOC around the world are surveilled, disenfranchised, and murdered” [BG]
- “In a context where the far-right is on the rise across the world [...]” [NC]
- “It is impossible to dissociate an idea from the context in which it emerged and the practices which it led to” [JA]

- “[...] the social and historical legacies that shape the formation of these categories, and constrain their utility” [DR]

3. Claim that something has been ‘legitimised’ or ‘normalised’:

- “we demand that the legitimacy that his professorship confers to his public statements be challenged and withdrawn” [JP]
- “[...] the way that a high-profile keynote like this might legitimise racial geneism” [LG]
- “We are deeply concerned that racist pseudoscience is being legitimised through association with the University of Cambridge” [NC]
- “this article normalizes a practice that has been, and continues to be, associated with the discipline and punishment of racialised people” [JA]
- “[...] a pseudo-public debate legitimised with academic credentials” [GKFAP]

4. Mention sexism/racism/white supremacy/transphobia:

- “These arguments betray her fundamental lack of knowledge concerning the discourses of structural racism and white supremacy” [RFB]
- “[...] broad and sustained engagement with those theorists whose lives are most directly affected by transphobia and racism” [RT]
- “he cannot claim that racism does not motivate his argument” [JA]
- “[...] writings reproduce dangerous transphobic tropes” [MM]
- “this debate was framed within the terms of white supremacist discourse” [GKFAP]

5. Refer to a ‘community’ or ‘communities’:

- “[...] justify his violence against their respective communities and cultures” [BG]
- “As scholars who have long viewed *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* as a valuable resource for our communities [...]” [RT]
- “[...] the inherent worth of the transgender and gender nonconforming members of the *DS* community” [MM]
- “[...] diverse perspectives within Native/Indigenous academic and activist communities” [AS]
- “[...] communities who are already subject to oppression and hostility” [GKFAP]

6. Refer to groups that are ‘marginalised’, ‘vulnerable’ or ‘racialized’:

- “[...] scholarly work by those who are most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions” [RT]
- “This applies especially to minoritized people” [AS]
- “western societies have associated value with whiteness, abled-bodiedness and prosperity to the detriment of racialised people” [JA]
- “[...] target those who are most precarious — living at the intersections of marginalized and targeted identities” [MM]
- “her self-presentation adds to the vulnerability of the communities and constituents she purports to represent” [AS]

7. Use hyperbole and appeals to emotion:

- “her words do far more grievous damage” [RFB]
- “It is an active attack on BIPOC scholars, thinkers, and people, as well as on the project of decolonization” [BG]

- “[...] the dangerous erasure of anti-Blackness and the erasure of the Black labor on which the rhetoric of our own letter is built” [RT]
- “it reveals a deep contempt for more than half of humanity” [AS]
- “[...] risks making *Disability & Society* complicit in epistemic violence and active harm” [MM]

8. Mention ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusivity’:

- “[...] what measures will be taken to safeguard principles of equality, inclusivity and diversity” [NB]
- “We endorse *Hypatia*’s stated commitment to “actively reflect and engage the diversity within feminism” [RT]
- “[...] the degree of academic rigour, diligence and respect for principles of equality and diversity that we would expect” [NC]
- “[...] the opportunity to direct disability studies towards a positive, inclusive future” [MM]
- “We respect that diversity” [AS]

9. Call for an institution to disavow something:

- “We insist that you, *Third World Quarterly*, retract and apologize for the publication of Professor Bruce Gilley’s appalling article” [BG]
- “Issue a statement taking responsibility for the failures of judgment associated with publishing this article and apologize for the initial uncritical response” [RT]
- “Will the IAEVG and the Swedish organising committee issue a public statement distancing themselves from Gottfredson’s work on race and intelligence?” [LG]

- “We call on St Edmund’s College, the University of Cambridge, and the Newton Trust to issue a public statement dissociating themselves from research [...]” [NC]
- “We also urge the editorial board to write a public statement that condemns anti-transgender bigotry” [MM]

10. Emphasise the need for more humanities scholarship:

- “women’s and gender studies, science and society studies, physics education research, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and Black studies have had much to say [...]” [AS]
- “physics and astronomy are home to many in-house experts on the sociology and philosophy of physics. This moment reminds us to pay attention to their work” [AS]
- “gender studies, ethnic studies and Black/African American studies programs are not new and have had to fight for their claims to knowledge against an academy designed to minimize them” [PB]
- “Geneticists should work in collaboration with their social science and humanities colleagues to make certain that their biomedical discoveries make a positive difference” [DR]

So there you have it—an easy-to-follow, 10-point guide for how to write a petition about one of your colleagues. Now get writing!