

How to Read Political Science*

Prepared for Gov. 20, Harvard University, Autumn 2013

1 The Big Picture

Your goal as you read an article is to be able to answer the questions outlined below. Don't get bogged down in dense passages or minor historical details. It is not necessary to take extensive notes on each book chapter or article. Instead, read each piece actively and critically with an eye to answering the key questions. If you can, you will be very well prepared for lively discussions and exams. Remember, political science is fun (really!) because it attempts to answer big, important questions about the world.

2 Key Questions

1. What question is the author trying to answer?
 - Think about this narrowly, in terms of his/her specific case(s), and broadly, in terms of politics generally.
 - What is the dependent variable?
2. Why is this question important?
 - Why was this reading assigned? [Hint: The answer isn't "to be cruel"]
 - Think of at least one other example that the author does not address where you think the answer to this question would be relevant
 - What are the implications of this question for other cases or historical periods?
3. What is the author's answer to this question?
 - Can you summarize this argument in 2 or 3 sentences?
 - What is/are the author's key independent variable(s)?
 - What mechanisms does the author propose?
4. What alternative explanations is the author arguing against?
 - How does the author go about establishing that these alternative arguments are wrong?

*This document draws heavily on resources for students created by Elizabeth Carlson, Emily Clough and Noah Nathan.

- Do any of the other readings from Gov. 20 make one of these alternative arguments? If so, which one(s)?
 - If yes, why do these authors come to different conclusions about the same issue?
5. How does the author structure her argument? What types of evidence does she use?
 - How well do the indicators with which the author measures the independent and dependent variables match their larger concepts?
 6. Do you agree with the author's conclusions?
 - If no, why not? Is there another reading in the course with a better answer to this question?
 - Why do you prefer the other reading?
 - What evidence in the other reading is more convincing and why?

3 How to Read

1. Read the abstract, introduction and conclusion
 - You should be able to answer many of the key questions outlined above after reading only the abstract and conclusion
2. Look over the graphs, tables and figures and read accompanying text
 - Doing so often will allow you to understand the author's methodology and sources of evidence
 - Begin to think about how the evidence highlighted through the figures (does not) support(s) the author's claims in the abstract and conclusion
3. Read the full article, paying special attention to the mini-conclusions at the end of each section
4. Ensure that you can answer the key questions

4 Additional Resources

You are not alone! Consider reviewing the following resources, all of which are available online.

1. Elizabeth Carlson
 - <http://ecarlso.bol.ucla.edu/pdf/readingwell.pdf>
 - <http://ecarlso.bol.ucla.edu/pdf/Questions%20to%20Ask%20When%20Reading.pdf>
2. Harvard Writing Center
 - <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html>
3. Dan Lindley
 - <http://www.nd.edu/~dlindley/handouts/howtoread.html>