

HOW TO STUDY POLITICAL THEORY

A Student Companion
to Graham and
Hoffman, *Introduction
to Political Theory*

Intended learning outcomes – developing your transferable skills

University courses have what are called ‘intended learning outcomes’ (ILOs). An intended learning outcome is what a student should be able to achieve on the completion of a course and can be tested through, for example, tutorial/seminar participation, unseen written exams, seen exams (‘takeaway papers’), multiple choice questions, and course essays. There are at least four different kinds of ILO: transferable skills; generic academic skills; cognate academic skills; and, subject-specific skills. This guide concentrates on the last of these: the skills specific to the understanding of political theory (the ‘10 rules’). However, it is worth saying something about the other three kinds of ILO:

Transferable skills

These are skills useful in employment situations. Specifically, the study of political theory should strengthen the following:

1. General reasoning abilities – recognising valid and invalid arguments.
2. Capacity to make valid conceptual distinctions – the consistent use of concepts.
3. Writing skills.
4. Oral skills – the ability to argue a case through, for example: (a) defending your own position; or (b) playing ‘devil’s advocate’.
5. A deeper understanding of social relations, including the ability to abstract from everyday situations – reflection on ‘case studies’ is particularly important here.
6. Ethical reasoning.
7. Empathy – the ability to recognise other people’s points of view.

Generic academic skills

These are skills which can be ‘transferred’ to other university subjects, especially in the arts (or humanities) and social sciences. They include the skills listed above under ‘transferable skills’, but additionally:

1. The ability to write grammatically and syntactically correct and properly referenced academic essays.
2. The capacity to construct arguments under examination conditions – that is, in a specified time and without notes.
3. The framing of an oral argument and ability to defend it in group discussion.

Cognate - subject academic skills

Political theory ‘interfaces’ with a number of other disciplines, or sub-disciplines, and skills gained in the study of political theory are ‘transferable’ to these other sub-disciplines. Cognate disciplines and sub-disciplines include:

- History, especially the history of ideas.
- Economics – e.g., welfare economics and rational choice.
- Law – e.g., legal philosophy and legal theory.

- Sociology and anthropology.
- Social and public policy.
- Literature – e.g., textual analysis.
- Biology – e.g., sociobiology.

It is important to recognise that different disciplines pose different questions and these should not be confused. However, it is also important to avoid arbitrary distinctions between disciplines – knowledge, understanding, and skills acquired in one discipline can be transferred to another.

Ten rules for studying political theory

Rule 1: Think for yourself

So long as you acknowledge alternative positions, it is better to present your own arguments rather than a boring list of alternative claims. Have confidence in your own position! There is, however, a difference between presenting your own argument and engaging in a polemic: you must provide a reasoned defence of a particular position. Furthermore, while political theorists disagree, it does not follow that political values are 'subjective' – you are giving other people reasons for accepting a certain claim and not simply banging the table and saying (in effect) I feel strongly about something (you can, of course, communicate reasons and feel strongly, but the reasons are crucial).

Rule 2: Use concepts with precision

Concepts are central to all academic disciplines, but especially the humanities and social sciences. Some political theorists claim we can agree on the meaning of concepts, such as (say) freedom or democracy while disagreeing about the value attached to each, or how we settle conflicts between values. Other political theorists argue that disagreement pertains to the meaning, as well as the value, of concepts. Whichever view you take, it is important to define your concepts, even if other people may disagree with your definition. You must also be consistent in your definition and application of concepts.

Rule 3: Recognise the importance of everyday experience

Even before you began studying political theory you had engaged in 'political theory': reflections on the fairness or unfairness of wealth distribution, or the legitimacy or illegitimacy of restrictions on freedom, involve theorising about politics and morality. Although few politicians read works of political theory (or philosophy), they often (implicitly) make moral judgements about 'political issues'. Case studies are a particularly good way of drawing out the moral implications of everyday experience. These contrast with artificial thought experiments, where the aim is quite deliberately to remove contingent elements or to force you to think in a certain way – both case studies and thought-experiments can be useful.

Rule 4: Be critical of everyday assumptions

While everyday experience is valuable – because it demonstrates the relevance of political theory – it is also important to be critical of everyday assumptions. The ‘person in the street’ might say ‘it’s just common sense that such and such is (ought to be) the case’. It may be that after critical reflection you come to endorse the ‘common sense’ view, but then in defending the view you would not be appealing to common sense.

Rule 5: Read texts critically

There is a great deal of published work in political theory, some good and some bad. Even the work of the greatest and most respected political theorists are open to challenge. In studying political theory think of a building. Buildings have ‘stress points’ and ‘loadbearing’ elements, and so do theories – but the precise location of these will vary from one theory to another. When you read a work of a great theorist, such as Hobbes or Locke or Marx, you need to identify the stress points, because these are the points that are most open to attack.

Rule 6: Learn to analyse texts

Continuing with the building analogy, just as a building can be deconstructed so can texts. While it is important to respect the text as a whole rather than pick out the supposedly ‘good bits’ from what may appear to be a great deal of ‘padding’, nonetheless, some sentences carry greater weight than others, and the more you engage with texts the better will be your ability to identify the central arguments.

Rule 7: Engage with the argument

Some theories will appeal to you, others will not – indeed, you may even find some arguments obnoxious. While there is nothing wrong with disliking a theory (see rule 1), it is important to engage with it, which means trying to put the most credible interpretation on it. It is also important to avoid ‘naming’ an argument as a substitute to criticising it: for example, some people might regard the term ‘classical liberal’ as derogatory. They then identify a particular thinker’s work as ‘classical liberal’ as if that were a sufficient ground for rejection. Genuine criticism involves drawing out the truth of an argument – it is not simple rejection

Rule 8: Employ lateral thinking

It may be quite challenging to employ lateral thinking at an introductory level, but some moral problems in politics look intractable because we make false assumptions, or because there are considerations at play which are not obvious from the way the problem is explained (a ‘problem’ is here defined as a puzzle). Lateral thinking involves looking at a problem from new and possibly strange angles. In political theory, the term is rarely used, but nonetheless, there is much lateral thinking, and it often takes the form of analogical thinking – using something from outside politics to explain a political problem. The Prisoner’s Dilemma is a classic example, for it helps elucidate the problem of why people who are in profound conflict with one another might cooperate.

Rule 9: Argue cogently and coherently

Arguments in political theory do not always depend on 'logic' in the strict sense of the word – that is, conclusions do not follow in a linear manner from a set of premises. There is reliance on empirical claims about the nature of human beings and society, which can reasonably be challenged.

Nonetheless, there are standards of cogency and coherence, and while an argument will always be open to challenge, it is usually obvious when a person has advanced obviously contradictory claims.

Rule 10: Form matters

Writing grammatically and syntactically correct sentences is not only an important transferable skill, but can be indicative of cogent and coherent argumentation – form (good writing) and substance (good arguments) are not independent of one another. Writing comes more easily to some students than others, but it is important to take pride in what you write.

Using the Graham & Hoffman resources

This part of the guide explains the various features of the textbook and the Companion Website and how to use them most effectively.

Case studies

Each chapter begins with a case study. Your tutor/instructor will provide further guidance on how to approach them, but there are some general points to be made about the case studies:

- Tackle the case study before you read the rest of the chapter.
- Engage in a 'brainstorming' exercise: write down anything relevant to the case under consideration, then:
- Go through the list, deleting what, on reflection, you think is unimportant, and put the remaining points in categories according to the type of argument or claim being made (e.g., factual versus normative, or 'evaluative'), and then rank the points in order of importance.
- When you have read the chapter, return to the case study and consider whether your views have changed (it may be that your conclusion has not changed, but that you have revised the arguments which lead you to that conclusion).

There are further case studies on this website.

Web resources

Web resources can be found on this website. Obviously the idea of the web is that one website leads to another and your journey through the web may take you to some weird and wacky places. Some academics are quite dismissive of websites, and although this may be partly a reflection of age and generation, there are some dangers with web resources:

- Although a great deal of rubbish appears in print, there is greater ‘quality control’ on books and journal articles than on web-based material. After all, it takes no more than ten minutes to start a blog. On the other hand, there are many intelligent blogs, often with links to interesting articles and websites. Be discerning in your use of web-based materials.
- Arguments should be assessed on their merits rather than *ad hominem* from their source, but given limited time, there are some tests which can help you discriminate useful and useless websites:
 1. How well-established is a website? The longer, the better. How many ‘hits’ has it got? The more, the better. How many other websites link to it? The more the better.
 2. What is the quality of the backlinks (that is, links from the website)? High status web extensions are .edu and .ac.uk.
 3. Is the material available in published form? Some websites, such as www.jstor.org are, in effect, online libraries, where everything on the website is available in hard copy in university libraries. Other websites contain legal documents, which, likewise, are available published in hard copy.
 4. You should avoid excessive reliance on websites in writing course essays (see section on writing essays).
 5. You should not break any laws or regulations in your web search. Some of the topics discussed in the Graham & Hoffman textbooks are controversial, and using certain keywords, such as ‘pornography’, will produce web pages which contravene your college or university regulations, if not laws. The same issue may apply to ‘guns’. If you have any concerns, you should contact your course tutors/instructors.

Further Reading

At the end of each chapter is a guide to further reading. Practices vary between countries, but in Britain lecturers tend to put more items on their reading lists than they expect students to read, with the intention being that students can choose what to read. Items may be more or less relevant depending upon what essay question you are answering. (Furthermore, there can be intense pressure on libraries, so that having a fairly long reading list to some extent reduces that pressure).

In other countries, students assume that everything on a reading list must be read. We have followed the British practice.

Finally: note-taking

Note-taking in lectures and from books is an important skill. Lecturers’ styles and approaches vary greatly – some lecture without notes and/or PowerPoint, while others have detailed notes and overheads which are made available to students. Do not be obsessed with overheads – many lecturers use them simply to give some visual structure to the lecture and it is not intended that students write everything down. It is important to listen to lectures. If you do take notes then consider whether or not a ‘linear’ technique is the best – sometimes ‘trees’ with branches leading from one point to another is better than writing sentences.

Taking notes from books is quite different to note-taking in lectures. Try to avoid writing very long notes – try to condense the argument. If you photocopy from books then avoid underlining or

highlighting large chunks – when you come back to the text you want to be able quickly to identify key arguments (do not write in or mark library books!).

Writing essays (papers) in political theory

In this section, we provide guidance specific to writing essays (papers) in political theory.

Some important general points:

1. There are no 'model answers' to essay questions – two students can answer the same essay question and both get A grades, but their essays may be very different in style and argument.
2. Answer the question asked and not a question you would like to have been asked – be relevant!
3. You should express your own reasoned views.
4. You should develop your own style of writing, but pay attention to grammar, syntax and spelling.
5. Think about the structure of the essay.
6. Read carefully and with discrimination – develop note-taking skills. Do not read too much.
7. Organise your time – there may be many students on your course and a great deal of pressure on library and computing services.
8. Be aware that plagiarism is a serious offence.

Structure

Essays should have a beginning, middle, and end. Very roughly speaking, the beginning, or opening part, should constitute about 10-15% of the essay and tell the reader what the essay is going to say. The middle part, or 'core', should be about 70% of the essay and contain the central arguments and discussion, while the end, or concluding part, should provide a strong conclusion, and may be slightly longer than the opening part (say, about 20% of the essay).

Here is an example, but please note this is not presented as a 'model answer', but rather is intended to be an illustration of a well-structured essay:

Question: Should the state prevent people harming themselves?

• Introduction and Core:

1. Define the concepts in the question: state (= coercive); prevention (= interference); harm to self.
2. Introduce the concept of paternalism.
3. Discuss 'extreme cases' of harm to self. Pose the question: could anyone reasonably argue that the state should not intervene?
4. Is there a danger of a 'slippery slope' from extreme to 'moderate' cases of harm to self? Discuss the 'moderate' cases.
5. Could we consent to paternalism?

• Closing part: tell the reader what you think – but the conclusion must follow from the arguments set out in the 'core'.

Referencing – house style

Different academic departments recommend different forms of referencing ('house styles'). A relatively easy one to use is the Harvard System, which is the one adopted in the Graham & Hoffman textbooks.

Whatever style you adopt, you should:

1. Use a house correctly and consistently – if you are unsure look at a book on the Further Reading lists and follow its style of referencing.
2. Always reference – failure to reference may open you to the charge of plagiarism.

Other style issues include:

1. Margins and spacing – always give the marker space to write comments. There should be reasonably sized margins and at least 1.5 spacing, if not double spacing.
2. Font – use a clear and attractive font. Arial, Calibri and Times New Roman are good fonts.
3. Use a reasonable font size – the size will depend on the font used, but anything smaller than 11 point is probably too small.
4. Avoid excessive use of bullet points.
5. Depending on the length of the essay, it may be appropriate to divide the essay into sections with section headings. A section should run for at least a couple of pages.

Grammar, syntax and spelling

Do not assume spelling and grammar checks are infallible – there are many mistakes which they will not identify. There is no alternative to checking the essay yourself. Below are listed some common errors made in politics and political theory essays:

- English, like any other language, has different 'registers': using English in an academic essay is quite different to using it in a bar. This is obvious. However, sometimes there is a slippage between levels. For example, in lower registers, such as conversation, we contract: **I am** becomes **I'm**; **they are** becomes **they're**. In higher registers, such as essay writing, we avoid such contractions. Likewise, colloquialisms should be avoided.
- Use of the 'first person': **I** and **we**. There is a division of opinion here – in political theory it is common to write in the first person (single or plural), whereas in political science it is not regarded as good practice. So long as the use of the first person does not lead to a lazy spouting of unjustified claims it is acceptable.
- Confusion of possessive and plural – this arises because both use the s. The possessive uses apostrophe + s: **Mill's argument** not **Mills argument**. The plural does not use an apostrophe: **workers** of the world unite not **worker's** of the world unite. Regular plural + possessive is expressed with an apostrophe after the s: **workers' rights** (but not with irregular plurals: **women's rights** not **womens' rights**).
- **Its** and **it's**: **its** is a possessive pronoun – the government's policies = **its** policies. An apostrophe is not necessary because there can be no plural of it and hence no confusion of plural and possessive. **It's** is simply a contraction of **it is**.

- Latin and Greek endings: the standard 'Anglo-Saxon' ending is with s but as well as Anglo-Saxon irregulars, such as women, children, mice, geese, there are also Latin and Greek endings: **criterion** > **criteria**; **stratum** > **strata**; **spectrum** > **spectra**. However, there is a tendency to standardise: **referendum** > either **referenda** or **referendums** (both are now acceptable, although the Oxford English Dictionary argues that **referendums** is the correct plural). If unsure, check the plural in the dictionary.
- **Principle** and **principal** are often confused.
- Some people write **loose**, when they mean **lose**.
- **There** and **their** are sometimes confused.
- A normal sentence should have a verb (in the indicative): Mill **attempts** to reconcile utilitarianism and individual rights.
- Number agreement. A subject in the singular should correspond to ('govern') other elements (verbs, pronouns) in the sentence – so a singular subject should be complemented by a verb and pronoun in the singular.
- Subjunctive: this is a mood of the verb which expresses an unreal condition. It has virtually disappeared from the English language but is retained in the verb to be: if I **were** a woman not if I **was** a woman.

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Revised July 2022