

Tips on Reading and Notetaking: “Smart Reading” in College

We often forget that reading is an important skill to master, and while we learned one mode of reading while in elementary school, the purpose of reading changes as one enters and moves through college/university. Rather than reading to improve our vocabulary or general knowledge of a topic, academic reading regularly requires strategic, “smart” interaction with the text. Rather than seeking to memorize the author’s argument verbatim, we should seek to pull the key insights from the reading. That is, we want to understand what it is trying to demonstrate or claim; how it is situated, vis-à-vis other, related readings; and what our reactions are to it.

Academic publications may be particularly difficult to comprehend, for the language and format used is often insular and thus inaccessible to newcomers. Whether they name-drop or not, political scientists are in discussion with one another, trying to address fundamental questions, understand contradictions in evidence and logic, and bolster existing claims about how political processes “work.” Our job as “consumers”—and eventual producers!—of political science is to be able to understand what the authors are trying to demonstrate or claim; how the readings are situated, vis-à-vis one another; and what our reactions are to the claims/evidence. We are to read actively, purposefully, and—most importantly—critically!

As you make your way through the course readings, you should keep a few key questions in mind. While they won’t apply to every reading, I find that these questions pop up regularly and go a long way in helping us to “extract” what matters from different readings:

1. **Key Motivating Question(s):** what is the purpose of the article, chapter, etc.? What is it trying to explain, understand, dispute? Importantly, why does this question matter?
2. **Key Claims/Points/Arguments:** what argument(s) is it making? What claims does it make regarding the argument(s)?
3. **Key Evidence:** what evidence does it use to support the claims/arguments? Does the evidence convincingly support the claims/arguments, and why/why not? What evidence is missing? What evidence is irrelevant, and why?
4. **Key Assumptions:** what assumptions is the author explicitly or (often) implicitly making about how the world (politics) works, how a certain social process works, what the reader knows/believes? Is the argument supported on its own terms (on its own assumptions)? Is it supported on broader terms—by those who don’t hold the same key assumptions?
 - a. These questions are particularly important for International Relations, given that much of its early/middle decades (1960s – 1990s) was spent in “paradigm wars” around how the world works and why “actors” (states, international organizations, leaders and so forth) do what they do. This question nevertheless remains important as the “science” part of political science emerged as the mainstream approach to studying politics.
5. **Reactions:** what reactions do you have to the reading, and why? Are you convinced? Importantly, why/why not?
6. **Key Remaining Questions:** what important questions does the author leave either unaddressed or unanswered, and why are they left unaddressed/unanswered? What new questions does the reading prompt, and why?
7. **Key terms:** What are the key terms? What do they mean? (If you don’t know what a concept or term means, don’t skip it; look it up!)

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