

Tips on reading political science

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These tips will help you understand what you're reading, read it more quickly, and more fully enjoy an in-class discussion.

If you are reading

1. Imagine the day is over. You're having dinner with a friend. What would you say was the point of the reading? Having an answer is goal #1.
2. Most social science tries to explain some outcome. Sometimes we call this a "dependent variable." What is the outcome in the reading assigned? Start by working on that.
3. You probably don't need to read every word – and probably shouldn't.
4. Most readings follow an outline. How much can you get from section headings alone? The first sentence of each paragraph? The first and last sentences of each paragraph? And so on.
5. Google is your friend (except when it's stealing your personal data).
6. No explanation is perfect. What is wrong with the one in the reading? Having an answer is goal #2.

If you are leading discussion

1. Start with a brief restatement of the reading's main point. "So, Joe Fatala argues that..."
2. Follow by stoking a controversy. Examples:
 - "For me, the gaping hole in this argument is..."
 - "This explanation simply doesn't apply to..."
 - "I'm interested in changing the world. The cause-effect argument did make some sense. But the course of action implied is quite stupid..."
 - "Frankly, I have no idea what he means by..."
3. I'm here to help. That's why they pay me.