

READING AND CRITICAL THINKING FOR UNDERGRADUATE GOVERNMENT COURSES

Effective learning in an undergraduate government course depends to a great extent on your willingness to learn, to be open to diverse opinions, and to formulate your own opinions. You do not need to have a strong background in government to perform well in 310L or 312, for example. It is more important that you gain the factual information on which to build your own assessments and opinions of the political theories and practices about which you are learning. How can you gain this information and become an effective student of government?

CONSIDER THESE SUGGESTIONS:

1. Get to know your textbook. Carefully read the introduction and preface. What is the author's background? What is his political orientation? What are his biases? What does he want you to learn by reading this book? How is the textbook organized? Look at the table of contents, the glossary, the index. How is each chapter organized and what study aids does it contain? Plan to use the organization of the text to help you study it effectively.
2. What organizational pattern/patterns does the author use? Details and illustrations? Definition? Cause and Effect? An awareness of these approaches will help you to better comprehend and retain the information.
3. Check your vocabulary. The new vocabulary you encounter in a government course will be fundamental to your understanding. Plan on making flash cards and using them to help you review essential vocabulary.

EX:

laissez-faire	policy of gov't non-intervention in the economy
FRONT	BACK

4. In studying government, think about what you are reading or learning in lectures. You will often be asked to analyze, synthesize or evaluate what you are learning. Practice these skills while studying. For example: Define liberalism. How has this theory been implemented in American government? Who were its major proponents? In what ways is it workable? What have been some negative aspects of this theory?

Example of analysis:

ANALYSIS: By making a careful study of liberal programs, be able to state four or five of the major assumptions upon which liberalism is based — assumptions about the nature of humans and human institutions, the purpose of government, the role of government in solving social problems, etc.

Example of synthesization:

SYNTHESIZATION: By making a careful study of the material in the textbook on liberalism and conservatism, formulate a system of classification in which the liberal and conservative positions on major social issues are compared.

Example of evaluation:

EVALUATION: Judge the logical consistency of the liberal and conservative positions on the major social issues developed in your systems of classification.

5. As you study and prepare for exams, generate general questions and then narrow them into categories where examples may fall. Professor J. Frederick MacDonald, UCLA, created the following mnemonic device to help you remember important categories:

S	Social
T	Technological
A	Administrative
M	Military
P	Political
I	Intellectual
E	Economic
R	Religious
E	external (foreign policy)

Through categorizing, you may take a general study question such as "What are the implications of the Bakke decision of Affirmative Action programs?" and focus your answer on, for example, the social, political and economic implications of that Supreme Court decision.

6. **BEWARE** of falling behind on your reading and/or reviewing lecture notes. It is unfortunately very easy in social sciences courses to let your assignments build up. Set aside a time early each week to get an overview of your reading assignments and break them down so that you can tackle a manageable number of pages each day, and so that you can complete relevant readings before they are discussed in class. Also, get into the habit of reviewing your lecture notes immediately or as soon after class as possible. The more you can learn material the first time you encounter it, the better your retention will be. Ideally, by the time you are preparing for your exams, you will be reviewing, not relearning.