POLS 170: Frequently Asked Questions

Content

1. Will this course be like my other political science courses?

In your other classes, there is usually an applied component. That will be different. This is a course in social and political philosophy. You will be engaged in abstract, conceptual analysis, rather than in the applied study of politics. We will focus on the question of what the difference is, if anything, between legitimate authority and brute force, rather than asking how any actual given society is organized, or whether or not any particular state is legitimate.

2. What’s the purpose of a course like this?

The purpose of the course is to help you to think deeply and critically about social and political phenomena. In order to achieve this end, you will need to investigate whether or not there is anything significant or valuable or true about certain fundamental ideas and lines of argument. And in order to be able to do that you will need to be able to think abstractly and to accurately digest complex written material.

You can expect to use what you learn in this class in your other political science classes, as well as outside of school, to help you to ask questions that you might not have otherwise known how to ask.

3. What can I expect to learn from this course?

In terms of content, you will learn the ins and outs of 5 answers to the question of what, if anything, distinguishes legitimate authority from brute force. In doing so, you will gain a command of new ideas, thereby increasing your own conceptual vocabulary. You will also see, first-hand, that it is not an easy question.

In terms of analytic skills, you will learn how to identify underlying assumptions; articulate ideas clearly and accurately; follow and assess lines of argument; and see relationships between ideas.

The upshot of learning new ideas and learning to see how ideas do and do not go together is that you will be better able to question familiar beliefs. As I’ve said, you can expect to apply what you learn here in your other courses, as well as in your life outside of school.

4. Will the reading be different from what I’m used to?

For many students, yes. First of all, you will be reading original sources, not a textbook. Textbooks do all of the work for you, by telling you what the author thinks the key points are. Sometimes they even tell you twice, by putting things in boxes. Second, unlike textbook prose,
the material is challenging, stylistically. For both of these reasons, you can expect to have to read the assigned work for each class **multiple times** before you understand it. You may also need to **outline** it.

**Grading**

1. What will I have to do get an A or A- in this course?

A final grade of A or A- indicates that you do, indeed, **excel** at all aspects of the course. Make sure that you appreciate this point. Excelling at something is not the same as holding your own in relation to it, or having a solid grasp of it.

**A-level work is not simply factually correct** (in this case, “factually correct” would mean having an accurate understanding of a thinker’s views).

In addition to being factually correct, A-level work is also:

- sophisticated, complex, nuanced, refined;
- probing, trenchant, insightful, analytically rigorous;
- original, creative and/or elegant.

If you consistently produce work of this caliber, you will surely get an A or A- for the course.

2. Will I have to work harder than I normally do to get a B-level grade in this class?

You might. Sometimes you can get a B just for memorizing things that a professor has presented on power-point and/or that have been summarized for you in a textbook. Neither of these options will be available to you in this course. Most students, if they work hard enough, can earn a B-level grade in this class.

3. What is the purpose of the “benchmark” assignment?

By giving you a written assignment early in the semester, I provide you with a benchmark against which to assess the rest of your work in the course. The “benchmark” essay is graded, but the grade does not count. In addition to the grade-that-does-not-count, I also give you a lot of information about how you could have strengthened the essay. You might feel disappointed if the grade is lower than you would have liked, but you will have clear feedback regarding your abilities at the start of the semester. **This feedback will help you to track your subsequent improvement.** If you do not submit a “benchmark” essay, you will flunk the course. There is no other way to put it.
Format

1. Why don’t you lecture more?

Listening to someone lecture can be a good way to accumulate information about a topic. But the educational research shows that it is not a good way to actually learn. In order to master the material for yourself, you must be actively involved in thinking and talking about what you have read. Therefore, I design my courses so that the in-class instructional content is delivered mainly through discussion and back and forth exchanges with me.

2. How can I take notes in a class like this?

Good question. First of all, in a class such as this one, your job during class time does not involve note-taking. Rather, you should be actively thinking about the material, primarily by talking about it with me and with your fellow students. Notes taken in class should be reminders, things to help jog your memory.

I explain content thoroughly and carefully. But I do not do the work for you of organizing and systematizing your ideas -- by, for example, giving you lists of things that you can just write down and then memorize. My goal is to have you actually understand the material. That way, if you would like to have notes in the form of an outline, or a power-point presentation, you will be able to put them into that form yourself.

Whatever you choose to do in terms of note-taking, you will need to figure out what works best for you. You may want to copy down the things that I put on the board in order to facilitate discussion and explanation. If those prompts are helpful, do; if not, don’t. If you want to organize what you learned into outline form, you will probably need to create your notes after class, rather than during class. I will always tell you, at the start of class, what we are focusing on for the day. As a general rule, that would be a good thing to jot down.

If you leave a class not knowing what was important, then you should certainly come to talk to me, so that we can figure out why you were having trouble keeping up.

3. What will I need to do to prepare for class?

In order to feel, and to be, prepared for class you should plan on doing the following before each class: (1) read the assigned material, marking it up as you go along; (2) re-read the material, even more carefully this time, and outline each step on a piece of paper; (3) simplify your outline, so that the main points stand out very clearly; (4) look back over the material, with the aid of your simplified outline; (5) write down any thoughts, questions or comments that you have.

If you do not do all 5 of these steps, separately (do not combine the first two), you may well have the experience of “not knowing what to look for” or of coming to class (and maybe even leaving class) confused. Also, if you don’t come to class prepared, it will be hard to excel in the course.

Sometimes I will give you additional prompts to help you prepare.
The reason why the reading is relatively light in quantity is that you have to work hard to understand it.

4. Will this class will be different from what I’m used to?

It might be, depending on your past experience. In keeping with SLU’s Jesuit mission, I expect you to assume a high degree of intellectual responsibility. You may have to read, write and think in a more concentrated and independent way than you have been asked to do in other classes. Luckily, intellectual effort of this type is genuinely pleasurable, in addition to being rewarding in other ways.