

# Good Practice Guide



## POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS 2015

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# Good Practice Guide

## BACKGROUND



This good practice guide was developed as part of the OLT project “Renewing first year curricula for social sciences and humanities in the context of discipline threshold standards”. The project investigated what we need to do in first year in order to prepare our students to meet the Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for the discipline by the time they graduate.

The TLOs for Political Science were developed by the Australian Political Studies Association under the leadership of Professor Adrian Little and Professor Ann Capling. Consultation occurred across the academic sector and employers. The APSA endorsed version of the TLOs can be found at URL: <http://www.auspsa.org.au/page/political-science-discipline-standards-statement>

The intersection of the graduate Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs), signature pedagogies and the first-year pedagogy principles involves an approach that is both transitional (including both curricular and co-curricular elements) and discipline specific—and these are intertwined. The approach is based on an expectation that

students learn and are able to demonstrate, at a level appropriate to first year, knowledge and understanding of certain disciplinary concepts, methods, terminology etc, and the kinds of skills that enable them to apply or express this knowledge—and these learning outcomes must be assessable.

At the same time, the approach suggests that curriculum and assessment design, and other aspects of pedagogical practice are organised around the challenges of transition to university study, the diversity of students’ backgrounds and prior learning, and the need to scaffold first year students’ learning in order to set them on their way to meeting the TLOs in their final year.

The challenges—or possible barriers to maximising learning—are similarly both transitional and discipline specific, and are experienced very differently by different students.

Our teaching strategies must also, therefore, involve both transitional and “signature” (or disciplinary) pedagogies. We need to design and teach in ways that will engage and motivate student learning. To cater for student diversity, creativity and agency, we need to make the disciplinary discourses accessible, design assessment that is challenging yet achievable, and make our criteria and standards explicit. We must scaffold and support students, at the level of individual assessment items and, more broadly and in the longer term, to help them become efficacious and independent learners. We need to focus our curricula design on student learning rather than discipline content, yet at the same time ensure that, at the end of first year, all students who have met the minimum requirements are—and feel that they are—well-equipped to continue their studies in the discipline and meet the TLOs at the end of their degrees.

This guide was developed to complement the website for the project that contains more detail [www.firstyearlearningthresholds.edu.au](http://www.firstyearlearningthresholds.edu.au). The website and the guide were developed in consultation with the Politics academics who attended our workshop in November 2013.

### The guide is organised around the TLOs and focuses on:

1. What do first year **students need to know and do** in order to set them on their way to meet the TLOs by the time they graduate?
2. What are the **barriers to students learning?**
3. What **teaching strategies** can we use?

A few specific examples are included in the document but there are more examples available on the website at [www.firstyearlearningthresholds.edu.au](http://www.firstyearlearningthresholds.edu.au).

NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE



**What students need to know and do**

Students need to develop an appreciation of the breadth of politics and international relations (IR). Studies of politics centre on the state and the activities of politicians, but they also involve non-state actors, and the studies also surface in other arenas, including the family.

Another important understanding generated by studies of Politics and IR is an **appreciation of academic political analysis, and an understanding of how it differs from partisan political argument**. Political analysis involves combining theory, empirical evidence, an understanding of historical context and the way underlying structural forces shape political phenomena. Linked to this, students need to understand that the academic study of Politics and IR does not automatically entail a defence of the status quo: in fact, rigorous political analysis is often used to reach critical judgements about the state of existing structures and processes.

**Student barriers to learning**

A significant number of Politics and IR students are highly critical of politicians and disenchanted with party politics. They may have a misconception that the study of Politics and IR is just about political parties and politicians, which many students disdain.

**Students also sometimes overlook the important role that conflict plays in politics.**

As a result, students can assume that partisan conflict over issues reflects a failure in the political system rather than fundamental normative and empirical disagreements. When there is conflict over an issue, students can also express a simplistic preference for the majority view, automatically assuming that this must be correct, failing to adopt a critical perspective on the issue itself and on the often fleeting nature of majority opinion.

**Our teaching strategies**

Academic teachers of Politics and IR should endeavour to push the focus beyond a particular herd, whether parties, politicians or policies. This disruption to current herd expectations models non-partisan forms of analytical, critical, and evidence-based inquiry.

Another way is to discuss how students' disenchantment with the system is itself a political attitude. In these ways students are invited to consider how the study of politics is actually concerned with evaluating and critiquing existing political structures. **Academics should model the type of analysis that examines diverse views without the manipulations and spin** often used in the political arena. This could be combined with learning activities that confront explicitly students' naïve faith in the given nature of current majorities.

**Example 1: Helping students understand the pervasive nature of politics and government and its significance in our everyday lives**

This exercise takes the students out onto the streets to look for the (NIMBY/IMBY infrastructural) "politics" in the streets around them and how it might connect with theory. The tutor asks the students to find the conflict and power tensions demonstrated in the streets around them. Examples might be public transport, traffic, public housing or graffiti politics – anything close to "home" or to the "bone". The students can observe in any way they like, but the academic prompts them and guides them suggesting concepts and theories that might inform what they observe. If the university is not situated in a place suitable for this exercise then a worksheet can be developed and the students asked to do the exercise in their neighbourhood. They then share their findings with the group.

**Exercise 2: Understanding the difference between the study of politics and the rhetoric of politics**

Students are divided into groups and each group is provided with copies of newspaper articles with a current political debate. The students are asked to determine what the issues are and to look either for the "facts" in the articles, or for the "values" in the articles. In the first instance the lecturer might then model for them how they might take an academic look at the same issue. Later in the first year, they could be asked to do this for themselves.

## DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND THE CONTEXTS IN WHICH THEY OPERATE

### What students need to know and do

Students need to **appreciate the ways in which different political organisations and institutions interact with one another** in different political systems and the political consequences of this interaction.

### Student barriers to learning

When comparing the nature of Politics and IR in different countries and regions, **students often underestimate the importance of cultural, national and institutional differences**, assuming that politics everywhere is essentially the same. Conversely, some students can over-estimate the importance of cultural, national and institutional differences, ignoring broad similarities between politics in different countries. At its extreme, this can result in a misplaced sense of national exceptionalism, whether proud, indifferent or disgusted.

### Our teaching strategies

Using case studies can assist students in examining the context of specific scenarios, policies and political systems. **Academics should build comparative dimensions into the curriculum**, so students develop a sense of the broad similarities and differences between different political systems.

Tutorial groups could be split into groups with each group investigating a particular issue from the context of a different political system or contextual factor. They then report back on their findings to the whole group.

### Example 1: United Nations - Investigating a particular issue from different contexts

Students are divided into small groups and each group is given a particular country. They have to investigate the issue from the perspective of that country. (For example, the issue might be refugees and asylum seekers.) They research and prepare a briefing paper from the perspective of that country. Care should be taken to choose countries that the students can find information about.

A United Nations Forum is then held where each group presents their briefing paper. Alternatively, the process could be extended across a few classes, the better to incorporate reciprocal elements of negotiation, cooperation and response. The Secretary General (lecturer) then summarises the arguments and puts forward a motion with about 6 points. The groups then work individually as their country or with one another to form alliances and write a brief paper on what they agree and disagree with. Secretary General then takes these away and summarises them again to present the "final" argument. This exercise requires a substantial amount of time and needs to be planned well. It can be used as an assessment task with the briefing paper and the presentation being graded.

### Exercise 2: Gain an understanding of a political institution or process

The students are asked to draft new institutional rules for an important public position, such as selections of Justices for the High Court, of a Governor General, or even of members of the Cabinet. Students research the existing selection policies and customs. They then use comparative data to write an individual paper of the processes, outcomes, positives and negatives, using evidence. Students then work in small groups to draft new rules for Australia. They present their proposal to their tutorial group.

## DEVELOP THE ABILITY TO ANALYSE AND APPLY THEORY

### What students need to know and do

Students need to appreciate the importance of the different concepts, models and theories they can apply to their factual knowledge of Politics and IR. At first year **they should learn that the concepts, models and theories are essential tools of analysis**, helping students identify different approaches to politics and patterns of political behaviour.

### Student barriers to learning

Some students misunderstand the role of theory. They adopt a *taxi rank* kind of analysis, a mode of engagement that confronts issues only at a linear and superficial level: one thing at a time with no explanations and connections. Students are often reluctant to recognise the important role theory plays in understanding political phenomena. They are abstraction-phobic.

Often these theory-phobic students will argue that we should “just look at the facts”, without recognising that the selection and interpretation of data is strongly shaped by underlying theoretical assumptions, whether or not these assumptions are consciously recognised. This **fact-fetishism and theory-phobia may be because these students still find it difficult to think in the abstract**, assuming that Politics and IR is “out there”, ready to be tripped over and “found”. That said, there are also some theory-focussed students who may be reluctant to connect theoretical knowledge to the “real world”.

### Our teaching strategies

The teacher needs to invite, and/or model arguments and counter-arguments, and to generate discussion about how a particular Politics and IR phenomenon might be explained by different theories, and to show how theories and facts/evidence are combined in things the students are reading. Students must be given opportunities to observe modelling of the ways of speaking and writing as well as practice these for themselves.

Academics need to discuss explicitly the conventions and expectations of the discipline. This may mean explicitly modelling examples of good practice in the structure and logic of a Politics and IR essay.

**Simulations work well:** the role play and modelling of real-life situations requires students to deploy both theoretical understanding and empirical evidence. Small group activities where each of the members takes on the role of a particular stakeholder can also help them to look at the context of a situation through the eyes of the different stakeholders.

### Example 1: Think alouds

Take a piece of research or document (e.g. journal article) and model for students how you would go about analysing the research argument and evidence as if you were using it for your own writing/research. Instead of ‘thinking’ the actions, you would ‘think-aloud’ voicing the questions, the uncertainties, the dead-ends and the beliefs that underpin interpretation. Allow the students to venture their own ‘think-alouds’.

### Exercise 2: Investigating and applying concepts to the everyday

Begin with the familiar and with something that is both relevant and seen to be relevant, for example, the concept of power. Apply conceptual approaches to that issue. Question students to assist them to see the different ways in which power is expressed, operates and can be distributed. Refer to resources, such as readings, television clips and relevant research.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

**What students need to know and do**

First-year **students should be introduced to the ways in which scholars of Politics and IR make judgements about sources.**

They need to understand the work of interpretation guiding fact selection, and the ways interpretations relate to factual evidence.

**Student barriers to learning**

**Students with strong political views and partisan allegiances may find it difficult to critically evaluate different interpretations of political phenomena.**

These students tend to view politics as matters of conviction. This can discourage them from engaging in critical analysis because they think that political disagreements simply reflect unresolvable differences of opinion. Such students have a tendency to automatically endorse material that supports their own views, and to automatically reject material that goes against them, resulting in a superficial engagement with the literature. Many students' experience of family life, neighbourhood and schooling may not have exposed them to diverse environments, let alone diverse political and international perspectives. These students can mistake the reassuring and the familiar for conviction.

**Our teaching strategies**

Students often just collect facts when they start advanced studies. They need training to help them see the work of interpretation guiding fact selection, and the ways interpretations relate to factual evidence. When beginning to analyse information about Politics and IR, students should be encouraged to undertake a careful reading of the texts and to discuss their sources, agendas and historical contexts. The key knowledge and skill is simply trying to move the student beyond reading simply for comprehension towards a critical reading.

The academic must encourage students actually to engage with views other than their own: perhaps by drawing upon compulsory readings that disagree. Academics in Politics and IR need to model explicitly in class how to reconcile and distinguish between contradictory and contrasting evidence and points of view. This means **modelling how to 'do' political science rather than simply reading passively** about Politics and IR.

The use of current events as a springboard to discussion and debate is a common one and is often successful in engaging students. The pitfall of this approach, however, is that the immediacy of current controversial issues increases the likelihood of students having an existing conviction from which it is difficult to develop objective analysis. Historical or hypothetical simulation exercises can circumvent this pitfall. Using historical events still allows students to apply their political knowledge and skills to a real-world context, but with less of a temptation to fall back on existing beliefs and convictions. The investigation of current, empirical events and debates is still necessary, however, and cannot be avoided by the use of historical and hypothetical situations. Political philosophy can also provide another starting point for such discussions, minimising student reliance on existing assumptions.

**Example 1: Constructive controversy: Survey students along an Agree/Disagree spectrum**

Take a controversial issue relevant to the subject being taught:

1. On a 5-point **strongly disagree**<-to->**strongly agree** scale, ask students to indicate where they stand on an issue. Task each group to develop their position using a theoretical perspective.
  2. Each group then presents its case
  3. At the end of the class, all vote again and we all see if they've changed places.
- This exercise can be used to introduce a topic that then gets investigated further in class using more academic methods.

**Exercise 2: Debate**

Construct four political debates on topics that will elicit divergent responses (e.g. Bill of Rights, immigration). Group students into pairs and assign them a topic and a position of "for" or "against". Give student pairs ten minutes to prepare their presentation in which they need to explain their cases and offer four to six arguments. Each side has two minutes to present. The debate is followed by class discussion.

# TLO 5 Demonstrate knowledge of the different research methods used to investigate political phenomena

# TLO 6 Demonstrate the capacity to use the different research methods used to investigate political phenomena

# TLO 11 Recognise the importance of ethical standards of conduct in the research and analysis of politics

## RESEARCH METHODS AND ETHICS



### What students need to know and do

These three Threshold Learning Outcomes are important, but they are best introduced to students in a basic way at first-year level, saving more in-depth discussion until second and third-year level. At first-year, it is enough for students to learn the basic building block skills of research and literature studies. **The key analytic tools for the first year are the qualitative and quantitative distinction, and the idea of dependent and independent variables.**

### Student barriers to learning

Students may find **research design and methods technical and demanding** and may not understand their use and relevance in the real world.

### Example 1: Scaffold students' writing of a research essay

Provide the students with a scaffolded approach to essay writing using tutorials to model techniques and have students practice them. Skills building could include:

- Analysing and composing research questions;
- Finding and evaluating appropriate sources;
- Paraphrasing and summarising (without plagiarising);
- Presenting an argument and evidence;
- Synthesising research (using their own voice); and
- Referencing.

### Our teaching strategies

There is some debate among political science academics as to whether these TLOs can be developed from first year. If introduced **they need to be part of a scaffolded approach to building their skills** in preparation for the advanced years.

First years should be able to find and recognise good quality research. Students can be asked to select a research article, summarise it, assess its structure (for qualitative quantitative or mixed methodologies) and evaluate it in terms of its structure, authority, currency, relevance, ethics and accuracy. They should learn how to synthesise research and avoid plagiarism.

Lecturers can show them how pervasive research is about political issues and how it is reported (for example, documentaries, shock jocks, etc). Provide examples of ethical and non-ethical research and ask them to evaluate it.

Students can start to learn some simple analysis of data, for example, introduce a topic and provide data from a government source. Ask students what data tell us about the topic.

### Exercise 2: Simple data analysis

Provide the students with data from census or government sites and have them compare/interpret that data to determine what the data is telling us. The data could be presented to the students in the form of graphs or tables rather than them having to do the statistical analysis themselves at first year.

# TLO 7 Demonstrate the capacity to develop evidence-based argument and evaluation

## TLO 8 Gather, organise and use evidence from a variety of secondary and primary sources

### EVIDENCE AND SOURCES



#### What students need to know and do

Students often have difficulty distinguishing between politics as an activity and politics as an academic discipline. Tertiary-level studies of Politics and IR, like most humanities and social sciences subjects, develop higher-order communication skills. Tertiary agendas set students to consider things more deeply. Depth usually means more emphasis on evidence, coherence and reflection. These expository skills relate to framing and substantiating lines of argument that are clear and fair, sound and coherent. This advanced skill-set can seem daunting. Academics want their students to combine a certain distanced and even-handed disinterest with the selection and substantiation of points of importance and interest. These are subtle distinctions and major challenges. **Students in the first year must begin to construct evidence-based lines of argument that equate with the accepted practices of the discipline.**

#### Student barriers to learning

Students often fail to fully appreciate the differences between rigorous academic arguments about politics, and the rhetorical way in which many politicians and media commentators “argue” about politics. Because there is so much material written about politics in the public domain, **students often have difficulty identifying appropriate sources.** In particular, they do not appreciate the difference between media commentary and academic journal articles. The students miss the “positionality” of text sources they use, overlooking the quality-checking role of peer review. This confusion among students results in inadequately researched essays. It can also reinforce misconceptions about the nature of political argument.

The accomplished digital literacy of students does not necessarily translate into information literacy. When these students are asked to engage with academic sources and the Internet they still may still be unable to evaluate information and they may be frustrated by the challenge.

#### Our teaching strategies

Academics need to explain what to look for as a sign of quality in a reading: the referencing, the peer review, the depth of evidence, the attention to the contexts of the standpoints, and indeed to the existence of other standpoints.

This means that lecturers need to introduce students specifically to critical reading and evaluation of articles from a variety of sources. The academic help students understand the difference between evidence-based analysis and mere arrangement and criticism. This can be explicitly modelled in lectures or tutorials. The lecturer can have the students work in small groups or individually to find the lines of argument and topic sentences. Frame exercises that model and teach students how to analyse what they are reading, and how to accept there’s more than one way of looking at something.

The open-ended nature of problem-based learning in Politics and IR has been seen as a good way to develop students’ skills in critical reading, above and beyond fact collection. This is because there is no script for them to follow, only an interest to develop and explain. **Using a problem-based approach allows a student to examine a topic considering a number of alternatives and perspectives.**

An additional library workshop program has also been shown to help students go beyond a ‘one-shot’ approach to research.

#### Exercise 1: Introducing referencing and avoiding plagiarism

This task is designed to introduce students to referencing and ethical use of materials.

1. Students are handed three paragraphs, one of which is plagiarised but all using the same source, accompanied by a copy of the university/institution’s plagiarism policy.
2. Students, in small groups, then identify which paragraph is plagiarised according to the university policy.
3. Students then identify why the other paragraphs are not examples of plagiarism, which shows how the argument in the paragraph sample ‘works’.
4. The groups report results back to the class and workshop the different paragraphs.

#### Exercise 2: Secondary sources and conflicting opinions

Students are given two secondary sources, or perhaps a policy options paper, related to the issue they will write about in their essay. Each of the sources has a different perspective on the issue.

The assessment task requires students to identify the central argument/s the author is making and paraphrase it. (This is like an annotated bibliography restricted to 1-2 sources). The lecturer then discusses with class how they might go about investigating the issue further so that they can decide on their own opinion and provide the evidence for that opinion in their essay. Students then can use the summary/s as ideas etc in the final essay (other relevant readings provided as a set).

## PROBLEM SOLVING

### What students need to know and do

The goal in first year is to develop the students' intellectual maturity. **The capacity to cope with positions other than your own, and to appreciate the way context shapes and limits policy solutions is a sign of intellectual maturity** in the study of Politics and IR.

### Student barriers to learning

Immature students tend to settle on the first "solution" which conforms to their preconceptions and priorities. Empathy and imagination is involved, but this does not necessarily mean engagement with the literature, with competing perspectives, or the difficult political context in which a problem arises.

**Students often have difficulties understanding structural constraints on political actors.** Their notions of the political are often deeply personalised. Students are less likely to begin an inquiry by attending to the constraints of structures, media or cultural heritages. As a consequence, some students tend to propose unrealistic solutions to problems. For example, they might airily propose that a powerful state threaten to use nuclear weapons as a means of advancing its objectives in a trade dispute.

### Our teaching strategies

As well as the more standard evidentiary and clarity questions of "How do we know?" and "What do we know?" academics need to focus student discussion on questions exploring domains of constraint like "How could it be done?" **Exploration of domains of constraint and complexity amounts to deeper and higher learning** in Politics and IR. These kinds of learning will also depend on whether the academics' goal for the discussion of "solutions" is a forensic exercise in critical thinking (the typical agenda of a politics class) or a practical and prescriptive study of outcomes and consequences of a particular policy (IR tends more toward this civic agenda, understood even in an international sense).

Hypotheticals, debates and simulations work well in Politics and IR settings, provided attention is also focussed on the resources available to the different actors and on their cultural, political and environmental contexts. Simulation activities in Politics and IR can be effective in engaging passive learners and prompting students to consider ideological and experiential positions other than their own. Students should be encouraged to apply theory before, during and after the exercise. Other active learning techniques emphasising problem-based and team-based learning can also elicit similar outcomes.

### Example 1: Role play – constitutional convention

1. Each student is assigned as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of <current year>.
  2. In tutorials each student presents a five minute presentation of their chosen constitutional reform or why the constitution should remain unchanged. Students are expected to role play using appropriate language, "fellow delegate".
  3. Each student also writes a briefing paper arguing their proposal reform in detail.
  4. Following presentations, the lecture is set up as a Constitutional Convention Plenary.
  5. A summary of the presentations by unit co-coordinator is presented and is followed by debate and contributions from students. Reform proposal is voted upon.
- Delegate speech in tutorials and briefing paper are assessed. Attendance and participation in Plenary are not. It is possible to run a modified online version of this task.

### Example 2: Stakeholder analysis – jigsaw method

Students are divided into groups of four to six (however many different stakeholders there might be for the problem). The group then assigns each person to investigate the topic from a particular stakeholder position. For example, if we were deciding whether we should allow forestry in the Tasmanian forests, we might have stakeholders from the community, the government, a conservationist, the forestry organisation etc. The stakeholders then all get together in their stakeholder groups and investigate the issue from their own perspective. After an hour they then go back to their original groups and have to determine a solution to the problem and the way forward.

## ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

### What students need to know and do

The key goal is excellence in written and oral communication. **Students need to be able to write and speak clearly and in a way that is sensitive to the subtleties of the context.**

### Student barriers to learning

Australian university students in the humanities and social sciences are often less articulate in oral presentations than in writing. A particular **difficulty can arise when students think that they must write and speak about politics as if they were a politician.** This can result in a great deal of rhetorical flourish without much substance.

### Our teaching strategies

**Academics need to give students more opportunities to develop both their oral and written communications skills.** One approach to developing professional writing skills might be through a policy writing simulation. The active integration of theory and targeted writing exercises provides students with a better understanding of the theory of negotiation processes, as well as the professional skills associated with policy making. Another such strategy emphasises structured classroom debates (SCDs) in which students are forced to actively apply political concepts.

### Example 1: A Three-Way Written dialogue

Modelling abstraction helps to reassure abstraction-phobic students. Here's an example from a political theory class. It could be adapted for a wide variety of other classes. Students read excerpts from Plato's dialogues (The Republic and Gorgias) as well as a chapter from "The Case Against the Democratic State: An Essay in Cultural Criticism" by Gordon Graham (2000). Students are asked to write a 1000-1200 word three way dialogue between Plato, Graham and a modern voter on the merits of democracy and the role of expertise in politics. Comprehension of key perspectives and arguments, and creativity are assessed.

### Example 2: Pecha Kucha

Pecha Kuchas ([www.pechakucha.org](http://www.pechakucha.org)) help students frame interesting informal talks. Ask students to frame a talk and display, using a Pecha Kucha PowerPoint template of 10 blank slides with an automatic 20-second change over. Students have 3 minutes 20 seconds to get to the heart of an political issue or question and make the audience care about it. Pecha Kuchas can also function well as a preliminary step to the framing of an essay.