

# Reading History Pieces in a Political Science Course

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## 1 Purpose of this Article

This brief memo offers advice on how to read and get the most out of history-oriented readings in the context of learning political science. The disciplines of history and political science can be quite different in approach, method, and goals, and this article should hopefully help you to navigate those differences so that you can maximize the amount of **relevant** information you draw from the readings while minimizing the time you spend on them.

Two starting caveats: for advice about reading theoretical political science pieces, see my other article titled “Advice on Reading Theory Pieces in Political Science.” Also, I should mention that this is by no means the definitive word on how to read a history book or article. You may find other methods that work best for you, and you should by all means pursue them.

## 2 History v. Political Science

It is most helpful to start with the basic purposive differences between history and political science.

History is (obviously) the study of past events, focusing primarily on developing a *narrative* of what happened. We know that X causes Y in historical writing because X leaves traces of its effect on Y. How do I know the dog ate the homework? Because there are pieces of shredded paper lying around on the floor, with teeth marks that can only be made by a dog. More relevantly, when asking, *What led to the Iraq War of 2003?*, a historian examines evidence from the national archives, media reports, and interviews

to develop a picture of the influences on, say, then President Bush's decision to go to war. Detailed reconstruction of events is the hallmark of good history, including all the points which could contradict their narrative about a particular event. Consequently, the primary debates in history concern the validity of conclusions drawn from particular pieces of evidence. Moreover, because they focus so carefully on specific events, historians tend NOT to draw grand lessons out of their research. A historical examination of the French Revolution, say, would outline the policies of Louis XVI and how particular factions, groups, and even individuals reacted to them. It could also discuss the wider social forces that political leaders used to gain power and overthrow the monarchy. However, because of all the detail, it is more difficult for a historian to say that the specific forces which led to the French Revolution also led to revolution in, say, China.

By contrast, that IS the focus of political science, which searches for regular and general patterns of political behavior. Political scientists identify factors which exist in, say, multiple countries. The focus is not on explaining every single step that led from, for example, Iraqi-American hostility in the 1990s to war in 2003. Instead, the goal is to see if and how these factors lead to particular outcomes, and whether that cause-effect relationship persists across countries and time. Because of this, political scientists tend to focus on broad trends or classes of events, not particular moments in history. For example, we tend not to ask *What led to the Iraq War of 2003?*, but rather *Why do states go to war?* And, to give just one example, a possible answer could be because of information: if statesmen had better information about each other's capabilities, they would know which country was stronger and therefore just bargain to avoid paying for the costs of war. Of course, the difficulty with this type of analysis is that there are always other factors which affect the outcome you're interested in. So, the job of a political scientist is to test her theory in as many cases and time periods as their question allows, to be sure that she can weed out these other factors.

### 3 Reading History

Because of these different intellectual purposes, history readings can often include a lot of material which is extraneous for a political science course. Good history is still incredibly valuable, as it forms the empirical foundation for all of our generalizations. That said, not all of it is necessary for theories that we will be discussing. The following tips can help you cull through the

material and get to the heart of the argument.

1. *Start with Theory*

Every political science course has a foundation of theory that you should understand before you start tackling the history. Sometimes this is just the first week out of the entire course. At other times, you will read theories for each week or even lecture. The important thing is to read these pieces very carefully.<sup>1</sup> Internalize the arguments, and then consider: What is the main argument of each theory? What is the cause and effect relationship that the author thinks accounts for what's going on? How do I feel about this argument? Which author do I agree with more, and why?

2. *Consider the Theory*

Before you start reading the history pieces, consider the following questions in relation to every theory you have read: What evidence would I need to prove this theory is correct? What facts do I NOT need? What information would cripple this argument?

3. *Reading the History*

With those questions in mind, read the history pieces. Think about how the different facts you encounter either support or contradict the theories you have read. And of course, don't forget that historians also have their own theories and perspectives which you will want to take into account.

Reading history in a political science course is very much an active process. Engaging with the material means constant and careful consideration of how well facts and theories fit together. So make sure you're in the right frame of mind when you start the reading. You'll also want to be in a quiet setting without distractions. Finally, keep notes, but not too detailed (see also the last point). You don't want to end up at the end of the semester having essentially rewritten all the theory and history pieces that we have assigned to you. Your reading and notes should be **directed**: Giving you the best evidence to support or tear down the theory, and therefore helping you to better analyze political behavior, institutions, and dynamics.

Just as importantly, you should skip over any sections of the readings which have no bearing on the main arguments you are examining.

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<sup>1</sup>See my "Advice on Reading Theory Pieces in Political Science" for tips on how to engage these materials.

When I taught U.S. foreign policy, one of the readings had an amusing, but unnecessary, section on General MacArthur's Filipino mistress, who was told to call him "daddy" and whom he took great pains to hide from his mother. (You can't make this stuff up.) You can bet I never asked my students about this incident.

4. *Cliff Notes*

If you are completely unfamiliar with the subject of a book or article, look up the relevant Wikipedia article to get a broad sense of what happened. But don't make the mistake of thinking the Wikipedia article will be sufficient. Many events that at first glance look like they support one theory could, upon deeper analysis, actually support another. That level of detail can only be found in the books and articles that we assign to you. Moreover, outside reading, while encouraged, will not be taken into consideration in your grade.

5. *Identify the appropriate level of generality/specificity*

As a political science course, we want you to identify the main theories, develop opinions on them, and know the relevant evidence. For that task, you do not need to memorize every esoteric detail about a historical event. Instead, you'll want to prioritize "large" facts: the most notable or critical events which buttress a particular theory AND disprove others. That last point is particularly important. Remember, given the broad trends that are the focus of political science, we look for particularly notable or critical pieces of evidence to help us figure out which factors and theories matter more, which ones less, and under what conditions.

Now, I have often been asked to simply state what the appropriate balance of specificity and generality is. Unfortunately, there are two reasons why I cannot tell you that. First, it very much depends on the course and the theories themselves. Some theories call for extremely nuanced pieces of evidence, some can be effectively supported by much broader facts. So, I cannot provide a "one-size-fits-all" rule. Second, and perhaps more importantly, being able to figure out that balance is a critical skill, not just for this course, but for your educational and career development more generally. Your ability to effectively identify the key pieces of evidence - and not be lost in either minutiae or grand arcs of history - is precisely what your instructors and even your future employers want you to demonstrate. It is one component of critical thinking, and to simply give you an answer (if it even existed)

would be to cheat you out of an extremely important educative task.

One final thing: talk with each other. Do it early, do it often, and do it in a *collegial, but combative*, way. Too often students discuss the readings only near the final, which just backloads all the work you're doing onto the most stressful time of the semester. Moreover, they sometimes simply end up all agreeing with each other, which does not encourage critical thought. No, you want to challenge each other's positions (in a nice way), so that you can each develop your own opinions on the theories by identifying the best possible evidence to support your arguments. Remember: no theory is completely perfect, but so long as you carefully justify why you think the evidence in favor is strong/should be weighted more heavily than the evidence against, you will have done your job.

Please let me know if you have any questions about this piece. I hope it will help with your preparations for class.