**Preparing for Politics Tutorials: An End-to-End Guide**

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**1. The Syllabus**

*Your tutors will have thought long and hard about how the course is structured. Think about both the weekly topic and the big picture of the course to try to get a deeper understanding of the purpose of each week’s lesson.*

1. The Question in Context
   * Understand the purpose of the topic and what might be important about its academic study
   * Think about the question
   * Are there multiple questions to choose from?
     + Which interests you more?
     + Which ones seem to have the most relevant literature on the reading list?
   * What might the question be asking? What type of answers would you expect for this question?

**2. The Reading List**

*Oxford reading lists can be long and daunting, but there are tips to overcome the stress. You almost certainly don’t have to read it all!*

1. Study the reading list
   * Are there recommended readings?
   * Which readings seem the most relevant to the question from their titles?
   * Pick up fundamental texts first
     + These will help to give you an overview of the topic so you understand the key questions, before delving into the details.
   * Your tutor might note fundamental texts, but if not, some give-aways might be:

-textbooks

-works with short titles

-anything with the word ‘Introduction’ in the title

* + Google books titles if you’re unsure of their content

1. Research Skills
   * For Books
     + Use the table of contents to look for Chapters that look the most relevant
     + Use the index for search for key works
     + Read the introduction and conclusion of chapters to get a feel for the main arguments
   * For Journal Articles
     + Read the abstract to help you decide if it’s relevant
     + Read the introduction and conclusion
     + Use section headings
   * Practice [skim reading](https://www.dummies.com/education/language-arts/speed-reading/how-to-skim-text/)

**3. Taking Notes**

*Just because you’re now at uni doesn’t mean that note taking is any different that it was in school. Remember, you know how to do this part!*

1. General Tips
   * Watch an Oxford video [here](https://youtu.be/IcfeFbAX0Gc)
   * It might help if you have a system
     + Consider the [Cornell System](https://lsc.cornell.edu/how-to-study/taking-notes/cornell-note-taking-system/)
     + Or [Mind Maps](https://www.port.ac.uk/student-life/help-and-advice/study-skills/mind-mapping)
   * Keep in mind what kinds of things will be important to write down
     + Definitions
     + Arguments and the premises and conclusions for those arguments
     + Facts/Evidence
2. Taking Notes in Lectures
   * Note the lecturer’s point, rather than their words
     + This will help ensure you’ve understood and digested the information and won’t plagiarise the lecturer’s words
   * The slides will usually be online afterward
3. Taking Notes while Reading

* Always remember the essay question. What are trying to learn?
  + TIP: Group points into sections. For example:

-definitely relevant for this essay

-might be relevant

-noteworthy for revision, but not immediately relevant

* + - Don’t bother taking notes on irrelevant points!
* Organise your notes by theme, rather than author
  + - This can help you easily know what the main debates are and who says what.
  + Make sure to cite **Author** and **Page Number** as you go!

**4. Writing the Essay**

*This is often the hardest part of the process, but remember, all you have to do is answer the question and say why you answered that way. Easy! Here is a* [*general guide*](https://student.unsw.edu.au/writing-your-essay) *to essay writing and one that will be helpful specifically for* [*theoretical essay writing*](https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief_guide_to_writing_philosophy_paper.pdf)*, e.g. for Theory of Politics.*

1. Getting Started

* Start with a very general outline:
  + - Introduction
    - Body
    - Conclusion
* Put the question at the top of the page so you remember what its asking and can refer back to it
* Have a rough idea of what you want to say summarise it in a sentence or two at the top of the page

**4.1 Writing the Introduction**

*Keep it simple at first. Once you’ve mastered the basics, you can start to add more.*

1. You only *need* two elements in an introduction
   * **Thesis statement**
     + “In this essay, I will argue X.”
   * **Essay plan**
     + “To establish my thesis, I will first do A, then B, then C.” (These A, B, C sections will correspond to arguments in the body of your essay)
       - Think about what arguments you must make to substantiate your thesis.
       - Use the essay plan sentence to limit the scope of your essay.
   * Remember you don’t need to include everything you read about. Only include arguments that are relevant to your thesis/argument.

*Example Introduction*

In this essay, I will argue that Sabrina is a great Politics tutor. (THESIS) In order to establish this point, I will first establish three criteria for what makes a great Politics tutor. I will then describe Sabrina’s tutoring qualities. I will finally compare the criteria for a great tutor against Sabrina’s tutoring qualities, concluding that she meets them, making her a great Politics tutor. (ESSAY PLAN)

1. Can I include other things in the Introduction?

* YES: Definitions
  + - Include definitions in the introduction if they are short and straightforward
    - If they are complex or require discussion then save that for the first body paragraph
      * (i.e. you’ve chosen to go with one definition over another or choose to adjust an author’s definition)
* NO: Attention grabbing opening sentences
* NO: Irrelevant fact
  + - Unless they help you prove your point, there’s no need to include them.

1. I’ve mastered the basics. What else can I do?
   * Include analysis of the question in your introduction:
     + Write why you think it’s being asked, or why it’s important to discuss this topic. This will show you understand the contex
     + Pick the question apart: are there any hidden implications in the question that you want to address in your essay
       - TIP: This is often the question with ‘either/or’ questions. They might be setting up a false binary that you want to break down.
     + Identify key terms: Does the question use any descriptors that might change the meaning or need interpreting? Write about this.

**4.2 Writing the Body**

*The structure here is up to you, but there are some basic things to keep in mind*

1. Making an Argument
   * An argument has:
     + Premises
     + Evidence
     + Conclusion
   * Don’t just summarise the author’s point
     + Briefly recap what an author said, and then evaluate it.
     + Here are some questions you can ask yourself to help you do that:
       - Do you think it’s a good point that they made? Why or why not? Are the premises flawed? Maybe they used really compelling examples? Does it line up with our intuitions? Does it have desirable outcomes?
   * Consider counter-arguments to strengthen your own position
     + What authors (would) disagree with you? Why are they wrong and you’re right?
2. Stylistic Points to Remember

* Each paragraph should have its own theme.
* Remember to have a topic sentence at the beginning of each body paragraph and a transition sentence at the end
* Use signposting and transition words to show how your argument is flowing “i.e. this point has demonstrated X” and “now that we have established this fundamental point, we can build on it by discussing Y”

1. Other things to keep in mind
   * You MUST have citations
     + Ask you tutor if they prefer a certain style (most don’t)

* Use evidence to support your points
  + - In Practice of Politics these might be country examples that fit the theory you’re trying to prove.
    - In Theory of Politics it might be a word or phrase the author used, or a counter-example that shows why a theory is mistaken.
* Every sentence should have a point and should build towards establishing your thesis. If it doesn’t help you do that, don’t bother including it!
  + - In tutorial, you can always discuss anything you weren’t able to include
  + Don’t worry about trying to prove to your tutor you read everything; a well-written essay will show understanding without having to include
  + It’s better to have clunky sentences than make your point than to have fancy ones that no one can decipher.

**4.3 Writing the Conclusion**

*You’re almost there!*

1. Just summarise what you wrote above. That’s it!

* “In this essay I argued …”

1. Don’t include any new information.
2. It’s fine if it’s only a few sentences.

**5. The Tutorial**

*This is probably the scariest part, but it’s also your best opportunity to get feedback what you’ve just learned and deepen your understanding. Most tutors will have you turn in your essay before you meet them for tutorial. They’ll read it and give you some comments. This will also inform some of the content of the tutorial. Find a guide* [*here*](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/tutorials)*.*

1. Preparing for tutorial

* Reread your essay
  + - Make notes on things you may have had questions about.
* Read your tutorial partners’ essays
  + - Note differences and what you think they did well and where you maybe think they could have made their points stronger.
* Go over your notes
  + - Was there anything you wanted to discuss that you didn’t get to put in your essay? Your tutor should give you time to bring it up.

1. Tutorial Structure\*  
   \*This can vary greatly by tutor, but this should give you an idea. Do watch the video [here](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/tutorials) to get an idea about Oxford tutorials.

* Essay discussion
  + - The tutor has the students summarise their essays.
    - The tutor asks the students to comment on each other’s points, and ask questions of each other.
    - The tutor comments on or asks questions about the essays.
* Establishing the basics
  + - The tutor asks fundamental questions about the material that may or may not have been discussed in your essays.
* Discussion
  + - The tutor will ask your opinion on things from the readings. This will often make up the bulk of the tutorials (especially in FHS papers).

1. Tips

* Don’t be afraid to ask questions, or worry you’ll look stupid
  + - Your fellow students are probably wondering the same thing!
* It’s better to have go at answering than to sit in silence
  + - Even if you don’t give the answer that your tutor was looking for, you might touch on something important or help to clear up things that others are thinking, as well.
* Your tutorial partners are just as nervous as you are
  + - It might even help to discuss ideas with each other before or after tutorials!