

How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps

Amelia Hoover Green
Drexel University
2013

This is a basic how-to, with apologies to Timothy Burke at Swarthmore College, who has also written a very fine introduction to reading in college: <http://blogs.swarthmore.edu/burke/permanent-features-advice-on-academia/how-to-read-in-college/>. Compared to Tim Burke's "How to Read in College" (which, if you're smart, you'll read alongside this document), what you're reading now is a lot more specific. It is specific to Political Science; more than that, it is specific to *empirical* political science (not political theory), and it focuses on single articles or chapters (not whole books).

Before getting into the nuts and bolts, it's important to point out that—unless you have a photographic memory—you probably won't gain much by reading academic work once, straight through. Some of this stuff is complicated *and* important. Other stuff is neither complicated nor important. So it doesn't work to read as if every sentence has equal importance.

It's also important to point out that, as they say on the internet, your mileage may vary: the approach I talk about here might not work for you at all. If so, keep trying. You've got to have a system for academic reading if you're going to survive college, but it doesn't have to be this one. Whatever your system is, it will probably involve "skimming," but skimming might mean lots of different things. As Burke writes, "[S]kimming is not just reading in a hurry, or reading sloppily, or reading the last line and the first line. It's actually a disciplined activity in its own right. A good skimmer has a systematic technique for finding the most information in the least amount of time." Your personal systematic technique might not match mine. Whatever technique you end up with is going to feel awkward and unrewarding and slow at first. That's because learning a technique, whether it's playing the piano or sinking free throws or, you know, reading, requires practice.

Your technique will *include* skimming, but skimming will not be the only thing you do. I hope. Here's what I do when I'm reading an article.

1. Title, Headings, Abstract

First things first: what is this article about? If there's an abstract (not an introduction, an abstract; do you know the difference?) read it carefully. Whether or not there is an abstract, you should also page through the article and write down the title, the section headings, and any sub-section headings. Voila! You have an outline. Some articles will have none of this stuff (which is super annoying), but you should always look. Why? Because it helps you focus on the right stuff. The title, headings and abstract provide a map (shopping list?) for future exploration of the article. You want to identify the main question or debate, get a sense of the themes of each section, and build a list of words or phrases that you don't understand. If there's a phrase in the title or a section heading that you don't understand when you start reading, make sure you do understand by the time you finish step 4.

2. Skim for Signposts

OK, you've been through the article once, looking at just the title, abstract and any section headings. If there are any headings, and/or if there is an abstract, you know what the main parts of the article are. If there were terms in the title or section headings that you didn't know, you're on the lookout for those. Congratulations, you've gotten to the hard part! Over the years, I've developed a long, categorized list of "signpost" words and phrases. These don't always mean that something is important -- and important stuff doesn't always come with a signpost—but it's worth looking for them. When you find them, MARK them. I usually just circle, but if you're addicted to highlighter, here's where you can use it.

Category	Signposts	Why it Matters
Causal Questions	"accounts for", "causes", "explains." Also watch out for clumps of questions, especially those that start with "Why" or "How."	This stuff will tell you what the main question of the article is, or help you figure out what the question you've already identified actually means.
Summary/Restatement	"In other words", "That is", "In short", "In brief", "This book/chapter/article addresses", "I focus on"	This stuff is gold. Often a single paragraph will tell you "in short" or "in brief" what the whole argument is. Often an article will do this several times! How helpful!
Conclusions	"conclude(s)", "draws the conclusion", "thus", "therefore", "I/we determine"	Closely related to summaries and restatements, though not quite overlapping, these signposts often indicate a main finding or the resolution to a debate.
Assumptions	"assume", "assumption", "taken for granted", "expectation", "based on", "supposed"	Can identify either the author's own assumptions or the assumptions of others. Often incredibly important in an assessment of the overall argument.
Lit Review/Counterarguments	"some scholars", "some analysts", "others", "critics", "may object"	These phrases help identify two things: the background or context of the article, including debates it addresses, and possible counterarguments to the article -- often counterarguments and background are the same thing.
Lists and Emphasis	Any time you see "First", "second", "third", etc., or any time text is presented in <i>italics</i> , boldface , with <u>underlines</u> , pay attention.	If it's a list, make sure you know what it's a list OF. If it's emphasized, figure out why.

The stuff in the table isn't meant to be an exhaustive list, obviously. But it will help guide you to the most important bits of the story. Especially in qualitative political science research, you may get lost in oodles of narrative detail (much of it, I hasten to add, rich, interesting and important for those who are looking to understand an argument in detail) unless you learn to look for signposts. If you find yourself getting bogged down, don't be afraid to literally draw a line through paragraphs that are all detail. You will know them because they (usually) contain very few of the key words listed above. You can also draw a line through "side notes" and other digressions. (What's a digression? It's something that's not necessary to get the gist of the section. It may be very important to a close read, but it's probably not worth focusing on unless you're reading this article in order to provide a detailed review.)

On the next page, I give a quick example from my own reading. My practice involves writing all over my books. With library books, I'll either take notes in a separate notebook or use a pencil and eraser.

Here's an example of how I, personally, read political science. These lines are from my copy of Stathis Kalyvas's excellent book *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2006), which I've read several times. Let's pretend I've been assigned the introduction and I'm reading for an outline of the book's main argument.

First, signposts. I circled "theory" in the first line because I imagine he's going to tell me what it is. I also circled "prediction," because I want to know what his theory predicts will happen in the real world. I circled "in other words" because that suggests he's going to restate something important (in this case, the prediction). Finally, I circled the word "two" because it signals a list, and lists are important. Note that not all of these signposts are in the table on the previous page. You will develop your own list of signposts over time.

After circling, I read carefully in the neighborhood of my key words and underlined a few key sentences. Your goal: underline no more than a few sentences on any page.

At the bottom of the page, Kalyvas lapses into a discussion of what the rest of the book will do. I don't care; I'm reading the Introduction to get the main argument. So I cross out the last third of the page.

The theory bridges the meso- and microlevels and predicts the likelihood of violence as a function of control. On the one hand, political actors do not need to use violence where they already enjoy high levels of control and cannot use selective violence where they have no control whatsoever; having no access to information, they may use indiscriminate violence, but it will be counterproductive. Instead, they want to use selective violence in contested areas, where they have incomplete control. On the other hand, individuals want to denounce only where it is safe for them to do so; this is the case where their victims have no access to the rival political actor and, therefore, lack the option of *counterdenunciation*. In turn, this option is related to control: the higher the level of control for one actor, the lower the presence of the rival one and, hence, of the option of counterdenunciation. The prediction is that violence is most likely to occur where one actor is near hegemonic, not where this actor is in full control or is being contested. Violence, in other words, is most likely where the organizational demand for information meets its individual supply. Outside this space, violence is less likely: political actors may demand information but individuals will fail to supply it (or veto its transformation into violence); and individuals may supply information but political actors won't act on it because they know that defection is unlikely. In short, the prediction is, rather ironically, that strategic political actors won't use violence where they need it most (in the most contested areas) and, likewise, strategic individuals will fail to get rid of their enemies where they are most willing to denounce them (in the areas fully controlled by one actor).

The empirical test requires the specification of variables that effectively circumscribe the space of violence. There are two key variables: the likelihood of individuals "defecting" to the opposite side must be high enough for political actors to be willing to resort to violence, and the likelihood of counterdenunciation or retribution facing individual denouncers must be low enough for them to be willing to denounce their neighbors. To an important extent, however, defection and most denunciations tend to be "invisible" processes. Fortunately, the operationalization of these variables exploits an essential feature of control, namely its inverse correlation with defection and denunciation: the higher the level of control, the less likely are individuals to defect (because the risks of getting caught are likewise high) and the more likely they are to denounce (because the risks of retribution are low). I compare the theory's predictions with anecdotal comparative data (Chapter 8) and test the hypotheses with data from a micro-comparative study I conducted in Greece (Chapter 9). The evidence is far from optimal, but optimal evidence does not exist for problems such as those explored in this book. It is, however, extremely suggestive and constitutes an important step in the direction of systematic and comprehensive testing. I also use the theory's mispredictions as a tool for capturing the causal mechanisms at work. Because the theory uses a rationalist baseline, its predictive failures may be a way to grasp the work of noninstrumental factors, such as norms and emotions. Finally, I conduct a series of out-of-sample tests across Greece, including a replication in an ethnically divided area of the country and the testing of additional implications using data on 136 villages collected from local histories, ethnographies, agricultural studies, research papers, and interviews.

3. Read Strategically

Now you've been through the article or chapter twice: Once really briefly, to map it out via the title, headings and abstract; once less briefly (but still pretty briefly!), to mark key words and eliminate unnecessary stuff. Now you're going to actually read. Keeping in mind the overarching map/themes/goals from your first trip through the paper, read the whole paper, skipping only the paragraphs you literally drew lines through. But don't give equal attention to all paragraphs. Read more slowly and carefully where there are thick concentrations of signposts; read as quickly as you can elsewhere. For each paragraph, try writing 1-3 words in the margin to describe it. Take notes on key assumptions, arguments, and conclusions, if you're a note-takey type (I am).

4. Review

This is best accomplished with a friend or two. In plain English, after looking at your notes, try to identify:

- new terms or concepts
- the main question(s) the article tries to answer
- the main argument(s) of the article
- the evidence used in the article
- the author's stated and unstated assumptions

Last but not least, be critical. What evidence is missing? Is there other evidence that the author is ignoring? Does the argument make sense? What would have made the article more convincing? And so on. Congratulations! You are now finished reading this article.

Final Notes

Obviously—and as noted above—your mileage may vary. Depending on the amount of time available, you may only get to read the very most important paragraphs. You may not get to review at all. But at the very least, signposting will give you some ideas about which paragraphs are important, and which you should skip over.

One last note: as a colleague of mine has recently said, "This is not a novel. There should not be a cliffhanger. No one is trying to hide anything." Political science is not known for the beauty of its prose. (Sorry.) But neither is it known for extreme structural complexity or outright obfuscation. Usually the author will say to you, quite literally, at some point: **HERE IS WHAT I AM DOING**. Look for that place (or those places) and, when you find it, don't overthink it.