

# Section 3: Study skills

## Critical thinking, objectivity and bias in the study of politics

The need for critical thinking is crucial in the study of politics. I used to advise my first-year students, 'Question everything. Take nothing on trust, least of all from me.' Some students are uncomfortable with doubt, and crave certainty. They seek right answers, and are unhappy when even their tutors do not claim to know what the right answer is, and positively invite criticism. If you feel this way, and cannot change this mindset, you would be well-advised to consider another subject!

Yet others have no difficulty in accepting that controversy is inseparable from the study of politics. Indeed, this is why many are initially attracted to the subject. They enjoy debate and argument, challenging the views and analyses of others, and advancing and defending their own ideas. Often they already have strong political convictions of their own. They may hope that studying politics will help them to further a particular cause, or promote their favoured **political party**, or even assist their own political ambitions. Indeed some of those who have studied government and politics have gone on to practise politics at the highest level (and some who have practised politics have subsequently retired to study it). It is hardly surprising that there should be such an interplay between the practice and study of politics.

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## Practising politics and studying politics

Yet the study of politics requires a different approach from its practice. The practising politician, like the practising lawyer, tries to make the best of his or her brief, and is sometimes skilled at 'making the worse cause appear the better'. It is not their job to present other arguments, to supply opposition to their own case. They can be as partisan and one-sided as they like. Students of politics, by contrast, are obliged to consider all sides to a question, and to seek to understand, and represent fairly, political perspectives with which they personally disagree. They are not supposed to ignore or gloss over inconvenient facts that do not suit their case.

## Facts and values

Indeed, as we have seen, politics today is regarded as a social science, aspiring to the same objective scientific approach as other sciences. Scientific method requires that hypotheses should be formulated in such a way that they can be tested rigorously against the available evidence. Research in politics, as in other sciences, should be capable of being replicated (or successfully repeated) by other researchers. Much scientific research

is dependent on extensive quantitative analysis, and this is true of some political research, most notably on voting behaviour. With some other topics it is more difficult to test hypotheses using extensive quantitative analysis, yet a scholarly approach still requires that theories and causal explanations should be tested thoroughly against the available evidence.

Yet one of the problems with the social sciences in general and politics in particular is that we are part of what we are studying. We bring our own preconceptions, interests and preferences, sometimes unconsciously, to what we study, and scientific detachment is more difficult than with the physical sciences. Indeed, we would be (literally) inhuman if we failed to derive normative recommendations from some of our political analysis. International war, genocide, poverty, starvation and the destruction of the environment are all things that most of us would prefer to avoid. So perhaps we should also accept that the study of politics can embrace both a dispassionate analysis of political behaviour and recommendations for a better life for individuals and society (as indeed it did for Aristotle).

Yet if the discipline of politics involves both facts and values, it still demands obligations from students to examine evidence rigorously, not to ignore inconvenient facts, and to present arguments fairly. This is as true of political philosophy as it is of political science. If we study modern political philosophers such as **Rawls** or **Nozick** we may come to agree or disagree with their arguments, but we should still outline them fairly first. The same is true of the study of political **ideologies**. We may strongly oppose some ideologies, but we still need to understand what they are, and why and how they are held. That holds even for ideologies, such as **fascism** or **racism**, that most of us find abhorrent. The same is true of political behaviour. We may deplore political apathy on the one hand or **terrorism** on the other, but simply to condemn them will not enable us to explain either.

*Always remember, when you are writing an essay, or presenting a seminar paper, that you are not making a political speech.*

A student of politics needs to adopt a sceptical, critical approach. This means you can by all means criticize particular institutions, thinkers or creeds, but do so from knowledge and not from ignorance. Always remember, when you are writing an essay, or presenting a seminar paper, that you are not making a political speech. You will often be invited to 'discuss' a particular statement. Normally this will involve exploring both sides (or all sides) of the issue, fairly and dispassionately, before finally reaching a balanced judgement. This may involve a reasoned support for a particular viewpoint. Yet how you are assessed will depend much less on the conclusion you reach than on how you arrive at that conclusion.

## Media bias

Politics students are urged to keep up with current political developments. They are encouraged to make full use of the mass media, to read about politics in serious newspapers and magazines, to watch news and current affairs programmes on television, to surf the internet for a range of information and opinion. Yet they are also expected to cultivate a healthy scepticism with regard to the political news and the interpretations on offer from official sources and from the media. Indeed, an examination of government 'spin' and the sources of media bias and influence may figure strongly on their course.

## Your own bias

Anyone studying politics needs to become sensitive to other forms of bias, not least their own bias. You should acknowledge that your own upbringing, education and the broader influences to which you have been exposed have inevitably shaped your political understanding and make you more predisposed to accept some political perspectives than others. Studying politics may not change your views, but should make you more aware and understanding of the often very different assumptions of others.

## Tutor bias

Some students are so careful to avoid voicing their own political preferences that they go to the other extreme and suppress their own convictions, writing what they imagine will please their tutors rather than what they believe themselves. Politics students are often only too aware that their tutors and professors have their own political preferences. They may know that lecturer X is a conservative, that professor Y is a Marxist, that tutor Z is an advocate of animal rights. Often students think they will win favour (and grades!) by aping the views of those who teach them, even if it means suppressing their own.

This expectation is almost invariably wrong. Any tutor who only rewards those who agree with his or her own political views is acting unprofessionally. Almost all politics tutors would prefer a well-argued case with which they personally disagree to a badly argued essay in support of their own views. I once caught an able student (who might have been fairly described as 'New Right' or 'neoconservative') scribbling graffiti, 'Marx means marks', suggesting that Marxist views would be well rewarded (a comment that was perhaps directed more against one or two of my colleagues than at myself). After he and his fellow students had graduated I asked him whether he still thought that 'Marx meant marks' on his degree course. He grinned sheepishly and replied, 'No! Not after I've seen the results!'

*Almost all politics tutors would prefer a well-argued case with which they personally disagree to a badly argued essay in support of their own views.*

By all means try to discern your tutors' own forms of bias – not just their party political preferences but their more subtle academic bias, including their preferences for some theories or methodologies over others. This will help you to a more detached and informed perception of their teaching. You may still appreciate them and profit from what they have to give, but learning also to criticize your tutor is part of your own education. None of us have a monopoly of wisdom.

## Time management (and taking responsibility for your own learning)

It may not occur to some students that they need to think about managing their time, because in the past much of their time was organized for them. Most universities treat students as adults who should take responsibility for their own learning. They tell you the rules, provide timetables for classes and lectures, issue submission dates for assessed course work and publish the time and format for examinations. How you deal with this information is up to you. Some universities may not even check on your attendance at seminars and lectures. You are free – you may never have felt so free before in your entire life (and you may never be so free again). You are free to make what use you want of the facilities the university offers. You are also free to fail.

Many students unfortunately are ill prepared for the increased freedom they have to

manage their own lives, and cannot cope with it. There are often plenty of other enticing opportunities and distractions open to you at university. There will seem to be more important things than your academic work. You may indeed learn a great deal outside your politics course, but you are sacrificing years of your life to study at university, and you (or more commonly your parents or guardians) may be making a considerable financial sacrifice for the privilege of attending university. If you perform well, you may set yourself up for life. If you do not, you may spend many years playing catch-up, and perhaps regretting lost opportunities. You do need to think about organizing your life and managing your time.

### Timetabled lectures and seminars and 'free' time

On a politics course (as in most degree courses in the humanities and social sciences) the hours of class contact per week may be relatively light, with long gaps in between. There is a strong temptation to retire to the student union or coffee bar between classes, passing your time chatting, drinking or playing games. Yet the university will expect you to spend much of this 'spare time' studying – reading in the library, making notes, preparing for classes and working on essays, reports, seminar presentations and other projects. Commonly, most of the work on which your assessment and progression is based is 'end-loaded' in the form of end of semester, end of term or year examinations or course work. Even if deadlines seem pleasantly distant, you need to get started early, in plenty of time. If you do not prepare adequately for this work you are unlikely to meet the required standard. You risk failure.

You need to acquire good working habits, from the start if possible, and keep to them. Commonly you will be given course or module handbooks full of advice and instructions. Read and digest all the material you are given on what is expected of you. Make sure you know submission dates for course work, and the exam timetable. Draw up a daily schedule of work, and keep to it. You can reward yourself with planned free time, which will be enjoyed all the more if you have earned it following hours of productive study. Do not relying on 'burning the midnight oil' to complete course work or last-minute cramming before exams.

### Making the most of lectures, seminars and tutorials

Unless you are studying by distance learning, you will normally be attending university or college regularly on a full-time or part-time basis. While much of the work you undertake on your course will involve private study in libraries, college rooms or at home, you will be expected (and often required) to attend a number of formal timetabled sessions for students each week. The hours of formal class contact may vary considerably between institutions, and over the period of study. (Commonly, more class contact may be expected in the first year, less in the final year.) These formal timetabled sessions may take various forms: for example, lectures, seminars and tutorials.

#### Lectures

A lecture normally involves one-way communication between, commonly, a single lecturer and a (sometimes very large) number of students. They are a cheap, but not necessarily very efficient form of teaching. Students have only minimal opportunities to participate beyond listening and taking notes, and research suggests they may retain very little of the material presented. Lectures are best seen as the start of the learning process. A good

lecture will provide an introduction to a topic, raising issues and questions for students to explore further, individually through their own reading and course work, and collectively in seminar discussion and sometimes collaborative projects.

**BOX**  
**1.10**

### tips for making the most of lectures

- › Adopt a questioning approach. Do not take material on trust. Sometimes lecturers seek to provide a balanced overall summary of different views, sometimes they express their own distinctive approach, sometimes they take a deliberately provocative line. What was your lecturer attempting to do? Compare the analysis of your lecturer with that in textbooks and more specialist books. Discuss lectures with fellow students formally and informally. You may find they react very differently to the same material.
- › Make full use of any accompanying material supplied. Most lecturers will provide at least a list of the lecture topics, and some helpfully supply a synopsis of each lecture, either in a pre-circulated module or subject handbook, or in material distributed in each lecture, or provided online.
- › Make brief notes during the lecture, concentrating on key points and important supporting evidence. If a lecture outline is provided, you may be able to make marginal notes on this. If not, most lecturers provide some hints on what is worth recording. You may want to make rough copies of any tables, charts or diagrams introduced in the course of the lecture. Do not try to record every word. If you do, you will be writing too frantically to be able to concentrate on understanding the lecturer's argument.
- › Go over your notes as soon as possible after the lecture, while it is still reasonably fresh in your mind. Tidy them up, and highlight what appear to be key points. Write down any questions that occur to you or points that need clarifying in your own mind. You may have opportunities to follow these up in seminars or tutorials.
- › File your notes, so that you can find them again when you might need them.
- › Learn from and reflect on the style and technique of good lecturers. They may provide good role models for oral presentations (see later) that you may be required to undertake. (You might learn what to avoid from some lecturers!)

## Seminars

Seminars commonly involve a seminar tutor and a small group of students, say from around a dozen to 20 or more. They may be scheduled to follow lectures, pursuing and developing material from the lecture, or they may involve a quite distinct programme of activities not closely related to the lectures. Either way, ideally seminars should involve two-way communication, with plenty of active student participation. The ideal is not always realized. Seminars may be poorly structured, so that students have no clear idea of what is expected of them. Alternatively, students may not have undertaken the preparatory work expected before the seminar, relying on others to do the work and the talking. In either case, there may not be much effective student participation and the tutor will do most of the talking, virtually delivering an impromptu mini-lecture. You may think you will learn more from simply listening to the tutor, but in politics especially you learn principally by testing your ideas and understanding in open discussion.

Seminars may be structured to achieve this by a clear specification of tasks to be undertaken both before and during the seminar. Thus the whole seminar group may address a series of questions or tasks, perhaps arising from the previous lecture or from prescribed reading. A large seminar group may be broken up into smaller groups of three

or four, each given specific problems or questions to investigate, reporting back to the whole seminar. Individuals or small groups of students may be required to deliver more formally an oral presentation to begin seminar discussion. Some students regard an oral presentation as a fearful ordeal, but it is extremely useful skill that it is well worth acquiring (see below for more on oral presentations).

Active participation in seminars is valuable in itself. However, it is increasingly the case that many students take what might be described as an instrumental attitude to the work required of them. Thus they concentrate their efforts on work that is formally assessed, and will determine whether they pass or fail, and the level of their final mark, grade or class. They neglect work that is not formally assessed. This can be a bad mistake. Some seminar activities may be excellent preparation for tackling formal in-course assessments or examinations. However, on some courses extra incentives may be provided to encourage effective involvement in seminars. Thus students may be required to write up seminar logs of their activities, and these may form a (generally small) part of the assessment of the module or subject. Alternatively, or additionally, individual or group seminar presentations (see below) may be formally assessed as part of the overall assessment package. While some may deplore the need for such incentives, some formal assessment of seminar activities can significantly improve their quality.

## Tutorials

Traditionally, tutorials involved meetings between a tutor and just one or two students. They are thus a very expensive form of teaching. While in some ancient universities whole courses still revolve around weekly tutorials, in most institutions they are very sparingly provided. Indeed the use of tutorials as a regular and systematic part of teaching is now commonly confined to dissertations or extended essays (if these are part of a course) often in the final year. Where such facilities are provided, use them!

In some institutions, new students may be assigned a personal tutor, who is expected not to teach them on particular topics or modules, but to take an interest in their work and progress, perhaps over the first year or over the whole course. This tutor is normally the first person you should see if you have any academic, health, family or personal problems. They will provide contact details and/or times when they may be available in their room, but most of the initiative is left to the student. Students may only be exceptionally summoned to see their tutor, usually following some reported shortcoming – poor attendance, missed work, or a more serious disciplinary problem. Relatively few students voluntarily pursue meetings with their tutors, even if they run into serious difficulty. Indeed, they may purposefully avoid any contact. This is a serious mistake. Most tutors are understanding and sympathetic. Although it is sometimes difficult to imagine, all tutors were once students, and commonly experienced similar sorts of problems themselves. If you are open with them, they can often provide constructive practical help and advice, both on issues directly concerned with your course, and on other problems affecting your work and performance. They can also put you in touch with a whole range of specialist services.

## Researching topics, using books, articles, the internet and other sources

You have been set a politics assignment on a specific topic that you need to research. How do you set about it?

Commonly you will have been given a reading list. This may begin with a chapter or two

from textbooks you have been advised to purchase and have to hand. Beyond that, you will almost certainly have been recommended to consult a number of more specialist books and perhaps journal articles, which can normally be consulted online. Such reading lists can vary considerably in their usefulness. Sometimes they appear mercifully brief – until you discover there are no copies of the titles recommended left in the university library, and alternatives are not suggested. You may need to search for these yourself. Sometimes the list is formidably long, so that you could not possibly be expected to consult more than a small number of sources, but there is little indication of which are the most important to look at. Rarely will you be expected to read a book from beginning to end, but specific page references are not always provided (see advice below on ‘finding what you need from books and articles’).

## Use the library

With luck most of the books and articles you are recommended to read will be accessible in your university library, or from other libraries to which you can gain access (such as a city reference library). You should be able to access the library catalogue giving full book details, location and availability. Familiarize yourself thoroughly with the layout, facilities and regulations of your own university library and other useful libraries. You may already be aware of the Dewey cataloguing system. Most politics books will be found catalogued from 320 to 330, although you may find other useful texts under different headings (e.g. ‘public administration’ from 350). You will often need to look on the shelves housing subjects linked with politics, such as sociology, economics, law and history. If you cannot find the books you need in your university library, you should be able to order them on inter-library loan. Very recent books, not yet purchased or catalogued by your library, may sometimes be perused quickly in bookshops (but it is not usually easy to take notes!).

*Familiarize yourself thoroughly with the layout, facilities and regulations of your own university library.*

Do not neglect the library reference section. The downside is that you cannot normally take reference books out, but the compensating advantage is that you are more likely to find the books you need on the shelves, or after a short wait if they are in current use. Ordinary dictionaries and even encyclopaedias may not be sufficiently specialist for your purposes, but you will find some more specific politics dictionaries, sourcebooks, yearbooks, handbooks, collections of statistics and journal abstracts. For some assignments these resources are invaluable.

You may also be expected to consult journal articles (perhaps less so initially, but more frequently as your course progresses). Current journals may be found unbound. Past journals may be found loose in cardboard files or bound in volumes by number and date. However, today many journals can be consulted more readily online. Some important developments in the discipline have sometimes first appeared in journal articles. Publication in prestigious journals is highly prized in the profession, and students who use such sources can feel they are at the frontiers of knowledge and research. Sometimes it is possible to follow the course of a major academic controversy through a series of journal articles.

## Finding what you need from books and articles

Academic reading is not like reading a novel or a popular work of non-fiction. You seldom need to start at the beginning and read to the end. A book is a resource from which you

take what you need. You should already have some idea of what you hope to learn from it: perhaps questions you want answered, theories or approaches for which you seek explanations or criticisms. Do not read passively, hoping to 'soak up' knowledge, but actively and thoughtfully. Some passages that are less useful for your immediate requirements may be skipped or skim-read. Other passages you may need to re-read carefully until you have fully grasped their meaning. If there are words that you do not fully understand, you will have to look them up in ordinary or more specialist dictionaries. Once you have read the relevant chapters or pages, think about them, then close the book and try to note down the key points (see section on note-making). Then go back to check that you have included all that is necessary.

**BOX**  
**1.11****parts of a book**

You should also become familiar with parts of a book that you might neglect if you are reading simply for entertainment, such as publication details, tables of contents, references and the index.

- › You will need full *publication details* for your own reference purposes (see the section on referencing, page 40–2).
- › The *year of publication* may be particularly significant, as it tells you how up to date the book is. Not only recent political developments but important theoretical advances may be missing from older sources. This is important if your assignment requires up to date information and analysis, in which case you should also check that you have the latest edition available.
- › With the classic texts of political science and political philosophy the date matters less. If they involve *translation* from another language, note that translations can vary considerably, so the name of the translator is significant. Also some editions may include useful expert *introductions*.
- › An *author's preface* may give important insights into his or her intentions.
- › The *table of contents* will give you a brief overview of the structure, approach and detailed coverage.
- › For specific information, turn to the *index* and check the page numbers of relevant entries.
- › Notice the *system of referencing* employed. You may need to follow up some of the references yourself.
- › As you pursue your studies further, you may find it helpful to skim the *bibliography* to gain some idea of the source material the author has used, and perhaps underlying theoretical assumptions.

**Other learning resources**

Most university libraries and learning centres will contain a wide range of other resources, such as collections of video tapes, audio tapes, compact discs and DVDs, which may be particularly useful for some assignments. You will probably be able to read newspapers and watch television programmes from around the world (useful sometimes for comparative politics). The library may often record television and radio programmes for you. It will also normally contain large numbers of computer terminals, with access to expensive and sophisticated networked software not easily available on home computers.

**The internet**

For many students today the first port of call will be not a book or journal article, but the internet. This is admittedly a very useful resource. Indeed, you may be advised or required



to use specified websites for your assignment. There are some very useful and highly respected academic websites which you can consult. Additionally, and particularly if you are studying political communication, or specific aspects of government, political parties or pressure groups, you would be well advised to consult official government department websites, political party websites, and the websites of particular interest and cause groups. Newspaper websites contain masses of information on politics around the world too recent for even the most up to date textbook. Many students will already be very familiar with searching the internet for information with Google.

Much of this can be very helpful. Some online material is not only free but excellent. Yet one problem with the internet is that there is no effective quality control. Anyone can publish material on the internet. Thus entries on Wikipedia and other similar sites are not subject to an extensive process of peer review, as journal articles are. Some material may be one-sided, or simply wrong. So do not rely on it uncritically, and check against information in published sources. Some students today are over-dependent on the internet, and do not read enough books and articles. Use the internet by all means (you would be foolish not to), but use it critically and never as a substitute for other more traditional sources of information.

## Note-making

*Your notes provide a potentially invaluable store of raw material for writing essays, dissertations and other assignments, preparing oral presentations, and revising for exams.*

Much of the writing that students undertake on a politics degree is designed to be read, and often assessed, by someone else; but notes are generally made for our own purposes, and not scrutinized by anyone else. Indeed they are often so illegibly scribbled, with a private system of abbreviations, that anyone else might find difficulty in deciphering them.

Why do we make notes? Partly to help us concentrate and make sense of what we are hearing or reading, but largely because we feel we need a record that we can return to and use later. Lectures are fleeting and most books have to be returned. Your notes provide a potentially invaluable store of raw material for writing essays, dissertations and other assignments, preparing oral presentations, and revising for exams. Yet they will be of little use if they are not written, organized and filed so that they can easily be found and read later. Note-making is to some extent a personal thing. The style of notes that suit one student may not suit another. (See Cottrell, 2003: 126–32.) Here are some suggestions.

- **Keep notes brief.** Some students write too much, noting down every other word in a book or lecture. This is not only hard work, but counter-productive. It is impossible to understand the sense of a lecture or book chapter if you are scribbling non-stop. Also, it can lead to suspicions of plagiarism if you later expand such full notes into essay form (see 'plagiarism and how to avoid it', page 42–4).
- **Concentrate on key points.** Before reading, consider what you hope to learn from a particular book. Read with questions in mind. Then close the book and jot down the key points. Only then go back and check you have what you need. Use sensible abbreviations.
- **Clarify your notes.** Particularly after a lecture, but also after noting a book or article, you may need to spend a few minutes doing this. Number pages, and underline, circle or highlight important points. Use arrows to make connections clearer. Correct any slips. Names, dates, statistics and quotations need to be accurately recorded.

- **File your notes**, using any system that makes sense for a particular module of subject in a loose-leafed folder. You can separate topics by coloured card dividers. This makes it easier to find relevant notes later.
- **Avoid writing notes in the margins of books**, particularly library books. Librarians and tutors regard defacing library books as a serious offence. It is also distracting for later readers who may be seeking answers to different questions. (You can deface your own books as much as you like, if you really want to, unless of course you plan to sell them on later.)

## Quantitative and IT skills

### Quantitative skills

Quantitative skills are sometimes, rather illogically, bracketed with IT skills. Computers can certainly do some of the laborious mathematical calculations that previously had to be undertaken by students, and they can certainly present statistical information effectively and attractively in a variety of ways. To use statistical information appropriately requires some elementary understanding of statistical methods. Advanced statistical programmes (such as SPSS) facilitate the complex manipulation of data through, for example, multiple regression analysis, which was once extremely difficult and time-consuming. Yet at undergraduate level advanced mathematical skills, although potentially very useful, have not become as essential for the study of politics as they are already for the study of economics. However, they are undoubtedly important for anyone hoping eventually to undertake research on aspects of politics requiring advanced quantitative analysis, such as voting behaviour.

### IT skills

Computers are now a familiar tool of education at every level, but particularly in universities. It was not always so. When computers were initially introduced, elementary courses had to be provided for the many students with no previous experience of their use. Now the vast majority of students are far more experienced and proficient in the use of computers than some more elderly academic staff. Indeed among some students who have become over-dependent on sophisticated computer software and the internet, it is more traditional skills that are more often lacking. Staff accustomed to elegantly written and beautifully presented word-processed assignments can get quite a shock when they encounter illegible and badly spelled hand-written examination scripts from the same students.

It is thus hardly necessary to emphasize the advantages of modern word-processing packages, of sophisticated programmes like Excel for manipulating and displaying quantitative data, and PowerPoint for illustrating oral presentations. In each case there are easy practical guides available, but facility grow fast with practice. It is also largely superfluous to draw attention to the extensive information available on the internet. Some politics modules and specific assignments may recommend accessing particular websites.

## Writing essays and other assignments

You may be assessed in various ways on a politics degree, and other forms of assessment are discussed elsewhere. However, the traditional essay remains the principal form of

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assessment, both on formally assessed course work and in examinations. In some ways the essay is an extremely specialized and rather artificial form of communication. Some students may never be required to write another essay in their life after graduating, but good essay-writing technique remains of crucial importance for success on a politics degree course.

Good advice on writing essays can be obtained from general books on study skills (for example Dunleavy, 1986, ch. 5; Cottrell, 2003, chs 7 and 8). More specific books on writing include Peck and Coyle (1999), and Greetham (2001). You should also pay particular attention to any advice provided by your university, course and individual tutors. After all, they are responsible for your assessment. Beyond that, consider the following points.

- › The most frequently provided advice on writing answers (and perhaps the advice that is most commonly ignored) is to *answer the specific question set*. Do not write all you know about the topic, or provide a precis of a lecture or textbook chapter.
- › An essay requires not the mere regurgitation of knowledge and theory, but the *application* of that knowledge and theory to a specific question. It tests how well you can *apply* what you have learned to provide a structured argument that answers the question set.
- › You should therefore *examine the question carefully*. Look for key words or phrases that tell you what you have to do, such as 'Account for', 'Compare and contrast', 'Critically evaluate', 'Discuss' and 'To what extent ...?' Each 'question' requires a distinctive approach. (You may notice that only the last requires a question mark at the end of a sentence.)
- › A common device is to provide a quotation with the innocent instruction, 'Discuss'. Whether the quotation is genuine (in which case the source is normally provided) or made up, you are not necessarily expected to agree with it, but to explore it, criticize it, expose any limitations and indicate alternative perspectives.
- › You may need to *explain or define terms or concepts* used in the question. Make sure you know their meaning and significance.
- › Plan your answer. Organize your plan around a number of key points (say five to nine) that you can support with evidence and expand into paragraphs.
- › The first plan that comes into your head may not be the best. There are often different ways of tackling a question. Consider alternatives.
- › Be prepared to modify your plan as you proceed. Word processing makes it easy to shift blocks of text if you conclude your initial order was wrong.
- › Write your essay using your plan and other notes you have made. This will help you to use your own words. Avoid writing with books open in front of you. In this way you will avoid copying and accusations of plagiarism (see pages 42–4).
- › Utilize, apply and explain any relevant theory, model or key concept.
- › Support your arguments with evidence (facts, figures, quotations etc.)
- › Use short quotations from reputable sources that support your own arguments. Do not use quotations as a substitute for your own analysis. (Some student essays involve little more than a series of long quotations joined with connecting sentences.)
- › Use the referencing system recommended by your course or tutor, or if none is recommended, choose the system you prefer. Whichever system you adopt, you should source all quotations and research findings, as well as theories and concepts associated

with particular political scientists or thinkers (see the section on referencing, below, for detailed advice).

- ▶ Writing style is a personal matter. However, you should avoid slang, colloquialisms, and abbreviations used in everyday speech (e.g. 'didn't', 'could've'). Use other abbreviations only sparingly.
- ▶ Some advise avoiding the first person. Certainly it should only be employed sparingly, if at all, perhaps in an introductory 'signpost' paragraph. Avoid peppering your essay with 'I think' or 'I consider'. Such phrases are redundant. The whole essay should be what you think.
- ▶ Some advise writing in plain English and avoiding jargon. The advice is sound, up to a point. Do not use long rare words when short common ones will do. But all disciplines use a specialized vocabulary, and politics is no exception. Many key political concepts (see Part III) are either unfamiliar, or use familiar terms in an unfamiliar specialized sense. You do need to show you have mastered the appropriate terms.
- ▶ Write in paragraphs that each discuss and explore a single point, as part of a connected, structured argument. This should not be too difficult if you are writing to a sound plan. A series of disconnected short paragraphs or a continuous undivided text both suggest a haphazard series of disconnected points rather than a structured argument.
- ▶ Throughout, ensure that everything you write contributes to an answer to the question set. This does not necessarily mean repeating the actual words of the question at regular intervals throughout your essay (which can be tedious for writer and reader), but it is advisable to refer back explicitly to the question in your conclusion.
- ▶ Normally you will have been given a number of words for your essay (typical lengths are 1500 or 2000 words). You should be able to provide an answer to the question set within this number of words, and you may be penalized if you exceed it (check whether it is a guide to the average length expected or a limit that should not be exceeded). If your first draft is too long or much too short you may need to make appropriate changes.
- ▶ Make sure you thoroughly proofread your essay. Poor spelling and grammar and inaccurate details show a careless, unscholarly approach and will be penalized. Make sure proper names are spelled correctly, dates and other figures are accurate and quotes are exact.
- ▶ If you think you have followed all the above advice and still get a poor mark, seek a meeting with your tutor for further feedback. Try to learn from criticism.

## Referencing

Scholarly academic books and articles normally provide extensive references. A reference provides the reader with the source of information that can be followed up and checked. The extent and accuracy of references is one test of scholarship. An absence of references does not mean that the information is necessarily wrong, but it does make it very difficult to check, and thus unreliable.

Increasingly many universities try to encourage good habits from the start and expect all student assignments, from first-year essays onwards, to be properly referenced. That means citing sources in the text, and providing a list of all the sources you have cited in a full bibliography at the end. Your references and bibliography provide one rough and ready initial indication of how much work you have done. A tutor marking

your work will often start at the end, with your list of references or bibliography. (Of course, an impressive list of books and articles does not mean that you have actually read and understood them, but it will commonly be clear to a perceptive tutor from the evidence of the essay whether you have, so do not cheat!)

If nearly all the references cited relate to one or two sources, the tutor may conclude you have made little use of most of the other books and articles listed in your bibliography.

The tutor will also look at your references cited in the text of your assignment, checking how they relate to the bibliography at the end. If nearly all the references cited relate to one or two sources, the tutor may, not unreasonably, conclude you have made little use of most of the other books and articles listed in your bibliography. References will be examined particularly closely if there is any suspicion of plagiarism (see the section on plagiarism, page 42–4).

There are various approved methods of scholarly referencing. One common form involves footnotes (at the bottom of the page) or endnotes (at the end of chapters, articles or books) relating to small superscript numbers in the text, thus.<sup>1</sup> This is a well-tried system, and has the advantage that the flow of the text is not interrupted, but it can mean much tedious repetition of details of a frequently used source in footnotes or endnotes. Such repetition can be avoided by using approved abbreviations of Latin phrases referring to earlier entries (*ibid.* to mean ‘the same (as the last entry)’ and ‘*op. cit.*’ to mean ‘the work already cited by this author’), but this is not easy for the reader, who has to search back for the first citation of the source. Rather more common today is the Harvard system of referencing. Here you cite just the author (or first author where there are several authors and ‘*et al.*’ (abbreviated Latin for ‘and others’, to cover the others), year of publication and page number in brackets in the text: for example (Leach, 2008: 72). You then provide, at the end in ‘bibliography’ or ‘references’, a detailed reference with names and initials of all authors, full title in italics, place published and name of publisher, as follows:

Leach, R. F. (2008) *The Politics Companion*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

With journal articles the author’s name and initials and date of publication (in brackets) are provided, then the title of the article (in quotation marks, rather than italicized) followed by the journal title in italics, with volume and page references, as in the following example:

Lindblom, C. (1959) ‘The science of muddling through’, *Public Administration Review*, vol. 19, 79–88.

Your course may recommend a particular system of referencing, in which case you should follow this advice to the letter. Otherwise, choose the system you prefer. Modern word processing systems cope with traditional footnotes and endnotes well, automatically renumbering when you insert an extra note. Most modern books and journals, however, use the Harvard method, which is easier on the reader.

## What you need to reference

What should you reference? You *must* reference any direct quotation that you provide. If you are summarizing in your own words the argument or theory of a particular writer, or comparing and contrasting the views of different writers, you should also give references. You do not have to provide a source for all the information you provide, if it is uncontroversial and reasonably well known, but if you cite data or claims from academic research you should give the source. Beyond that, you should hope to cite a range of sources in your text that will figure in the final bibliography. If you have listed a book or article in your bibliography that is not cited in the text, you may want to re-read what you have written to find a place to insert a relevant reference. If you cannot find any passage that relates to a recommended source that you have actually used, you may want to consider revising your assignment to include some relevant reference, even if – or perhaps especially if – you take a view contrary to that of the author.

What should you include or exclude? You should not dishonestly inflate your bibliography with sources you have not read or hardly used, but you should not sell yourself short by failing to list all the various sources you have consulted. It is quite legitimate to list a source you have skim-read in a library or bookshop, as long as you have derived something from it. Where relevant, you may want to list websites or other relevant material, such as a newspaper article or television programme (for which you should supply relevant details and dates). Unless you have been directed specifically to such sources (for example in an assignment on political communication), you should beware of appearing over-dependent on them. A tutor will be unimpressed by a bibliography consisting largely of websites, particularly if you were recommended to consult a number of key books and/or journal articles (see under 'researching topics', page 34). You may be advised to leave out very elementary basic or pre-university sources (even if you still find it helpful to consult these sometimes). If you have been strongly recommended to use a particular source you would be well advised to list it in your references, if you can do so honestly.

It makes referencing much easier if you record the full details of sources as you use them. You can open a bibliography file for the assignment right at the beginning, adding to it as you go along. You may eventually decide that you do not want to list a particular source, as you made little or no use of it in writing your assignment, and you may then delete it. This may seem a waste of effort, yet you are likely to waste far more time looking up needed references that you no longer have to hand, if you have failed to record the details earlier. (The last point reflects bitter personal experience. I do not always follow my own advice, but I invariably regret it!)

## Plagiarism (and how to avoid it)

Plagiarism is copying work from books, articles, fellow students or other people, and passing it off as your own. It is a particularly obnoxious form of cheating which is the negation of everything that education is about. It is also unfortunately a serious problem in many universities, particularly on assessed course work, long essays and dissertations. Some institutions provide their own clear guidance on plagiarism, which you should study closely. (If you still do not understand what constitutes plagiarism, see Cottrell, 2003: 133–4, which refers back to pages 46–58 and forward to page 142. It is the clearest explanation I have come across.) Universities have also developed their own checks and formal procedures for dealing with the problem. Detecting cheating has become a minor

industry. Those who are caught can expect no sympathy, certainly not from university staff, and not from the vast majority of students, whose own achievements are devalued by the cheats.

I would prefer to believe that anyone reading this book is most unlikely to contemplate deliberately cheating in this way. Yet inexperienced students who have no intention of cheating can sometimes, almost unconsciously, appear to copy someone else's work, and find themselves accused of plagiarism. How could this come about, and how can it be avoided?

*Inexperienced students who have no intention of cheating can sometimes, almost unconsciously, appear to copy someone else's work, and find themselves accused of plagiarism.*

You should of course use your own words. There are some students, perhaps conditioned by expectations in other subjects at a lower level of education, who naively assume there are 'right' answers to questions they are set on politics courses (as there might be a right answer to a maths question). They further take it for granted that they will earn credit by copying out the 'right' answer, which they assume is the answer given in a lecture or textbook. Some indeed have even been taught that way. I have confronted students who have copied out whole paragraphs word for word from a book, and who protest vehemently that they have 'always written essays like that' and 'no one had ever told them it was wrong'.

There are others who understand that copying is wrong, but can be drawn into it unconsciously. It can result from writing an essay with a key book open in front of you. You may not mean to copy, but you may be drawn repeatedly into using similar phrases, because you cannot think of a better way of putting a point than as it is expressed in the book. By all means refer to books as you need them when writing an essay, but avoid writing with books continuously open in front of you. That will force you to use your own words, and help you to think about the arguments and to understand them.

Poor note-making can sometimes lead to essays that too closely resemble passages in a book or journal. A student conscientiously seeks to note a key source, perhaps a recommended textbook, and, unable to make a brief summary of the salient points, virtually copies down every other word. The essay is subsequently based on the notes, and as the latter are expanded again to make proper sentences, inevitably resembles the original text. You can avoid being accused of plagiarism in this way by improving your note-making, by not becoming too dependent on a single source or limited range of sources, and by developing your own essay-planning and writing skills (see under relevant headings elsewhere in this section).

Citing your sources with extensive accurate references (see heading on referencing) should ensure that you never face an accusation of deliberate plagiarism, although you may be urged to 'use your own words' if some of your own writing sometimes appears too close to that of a source you have cited. Those who set out to cheat commonly do not reveal the source material they have copied from, either in the text or in their bibliography. Indeed the discovery of chunks of material closely derived from an unlisted source provides fairly clear evidence of a conscious intention to plagiarize. One student who was found guilty of plagiarism at an institution with which I was connected was found to have copied almost all of his dissertation from two sources that were not listed in his bibliography, and were not even in the institution's library. Needless to say, once this was proved, he did not get a degree.

## How far can you be original?

The work you produce on a politics degree course is most unlikely to be original in the sense that no one else has thought of the points you express before. Yet it should be original in the sense that you have thought for yourself about the topic, and come to your own conclusions, which you express in your own words. If you think critically right through the learning process, from an initial lecture and early reading on a topic to a final draft of an essay, you will produce work that is manifestly your own.

Sophisticated computer programs can now often trace the source of work plagiarized from published sources. Other forms of plagiarism can be more difficult to detect, but once suspicions are aroused, some tutors are remarkably persistent in pursuing the issue and bringing offenders to justice. Plagiarism cannot be tolerated because it devalues the efforts and ultimately the qualifications of honest, conscientious students. Ultimately, if it became suspected that cheating was widespread, degree certificates would become as worthless as forged banknotes. Unfortunately problems with plagiarism have already led some institutions to reduce or discard some educationally valuable forms of assessment and return to traditional unseen examinations, where cheating is much more difficult.

*Your work should be original in the sense that you have thought for yourself about the topic, and come to your own conclusions, which you express in your own words.*

## Oral presentations

Many books on study skills pay insufficient attention to formal oral presentations, and oral communication skills in general, partly perhaps because in the past these were not very important for successful performance on a degree course. The neglect of skills of oral communication has unhappily long been a feature of higher education in many countries. Formal classification has frequently depended entirely on skills of written communication in both examinations and in-course assessments. Interviews or 'vivas', where used, were often perfunctory, with significant implications only for very marginal and exceptional cases.

However, in many universities students have long been expected to give brief oral presentations in seminars. Seminars or classes, as we have seen, are supposed to require active student participation, rather than the one-way communication of more formal lectures. Yet whether because students have not completed the necessary preparatory work, or because they are nervous of criticism, it can be difficult to create a genuine dialogue and the seminar can degenerate into a mini-lecture by the tutor. One way of preventing this is to give particular students the task of introducing topics through a short presentation. That at least ensures that the designated students make a contribution to proceedings. However, as Dunleavy (1986: 171) largely accurately observed of the time he was writing:

There are relatively few class teachers who make a concerted effort to help students give more effective oral presentations. Consequently students often approach 'giving a paper' by mumbling their way through a complete essay, or talking very loosely around a set of disorganized notes.

This situation may not have been transformed everywhere, but the major advance many of us have noticed in student skills in recent years is in the quality of oral presentations. This has been aided by a number of developments.



- › **Improved guidance by institutions and tutors.** Commonly, detailed advice on general oral communication skills is provided to students in booklets or online by institutions, and this is often supplemented by more specific advice in course or module guides or handbooks. Some institutions go further and provide specialist tuition, which may involve, for example, video recordings and group analysis and discussion of student performance.
- › **The formal assessment of some oral presentations as part of the overall package of student assessment.** Some tutors have been reluctant to assess presentations in this way, as they argue that marks are too arbitrary and subjective. Those with experience of such assessments argue they are no more subjective than essay marking. Normally the assessment criteria provided to students include both communication skills and content. They may feature a grid of aspects to be measured, which can also help tutors to evaluate how far the various criteria have been fulfilled. (Some tutors build in an element of peer assessment, which can work well.) The formal assessment of oral presentations has motivated students to develop their skills and has often led to a massive improvement in student performance. The skills acquired can be of immense benefit to graduates in the world of work.
- › **The provision of accompanying handouts by students to support their presentation.** The circulation of material for the rest of the seminar group can provide a focus for seminar discussion. The material may take the form of notes on the presentation, a reading list, and perhaps questions for discussion. One easy way of doing this is to provide a print-out of PowerPoint slides (see below).
- › **Improved technology.** Once the only equipment most students (and their tutors) used was chalk on blackboard or overhead projector transparencies. Now lecture and seminar rooms are commonly equipped with a range of sophisticated equipment enabling easy access of a wide range of audio-visual material, internet websites, and computer packages, most notably PowerPoint. The availability of such technology does not guarantee good presentations. PowerPoint presentations can look and sound impressive, but perhaps the main advantage of the package is getting students to talk to bullet points (as they could once do using cards), instead of simply reading a script. Whatever assessment criteria are used, good presentation skills should never be allowed to compensate for weak content.

- › **Feedback.** Constructive feedback from tutors and fellow students can lead to steady improvement in performance in oral presentations.
- › **Emulation.** A few good presentations can soon raise the general standard of what is considered acceptable.

*Very few people find speaking in public easy. You may find some comfort in the knowledge that some outstanding political orators and effective political communicators had to overcome early failure.*

Some students fear oral presentations, and the need to perform in front of tutors and fellow students. They can be particularly difficult for students from some cultural backgrounds. These fears are worth striving to overcome, because the skills of confident oral communication are so valuable. Very few people find speaking in public easy. As a politics student you may find some comfort in the knowledge that some outstanding political orators and effective political communicators had to overcome early failure and sometimes significant speech impediments. You should pay particular heed to any advice supplied by your course and institution. However, the following guidance may be useful.

- › Research the topic for your presentation thoroughly, until you feel *in command of your material*. The gaps in your own understanding may only become clear when you need to explain something to others (as any teacher will tell you).
- › In your preparation, remember that an oral presentation is a very *different form of communication* from an essay, and requires different skills. You will be speaking to an audience, and you must consider their needs.
- › Do not plan simply to read out an essay, but organize your talk around a clear framework with *headings and bullet points*, using cards, overhead projector transparencies or PowerPoint slides. The delivery may be less fluent than if you read every word from a full script, but will appear more natural, and be easier for your audience to follow, especially if the key points are on screen.
- › Do not overload your presentation with *too much detail*. Concentrate on the main points to get across. Further supporting facts and figures may be best circulated in an accompanying handout (see page 45).
- › Check whether you are expected to circulate copies of material to the seminar group either in advance, or on the day, and *follow any guidance that is provided*. It may form part of any assessment.
- › Even if the circulation of such material is not required, you may still find it useful. It may help your audience to gain more from the presentation and aid subsequent discussion.
- › You may gain credit for *effective use of technology* (e.g. PowerPoint slides, brief illustrative video or other supporting material), but try to ensure that you are not too dependent on it. Make sure any equipment you need is available and that you know how to use it. (If your seminar room lacks relevant facilities you may be able to book out relevant equipment – check well in advance.)
- › *Rehearse* your presentation, preferably in front of a friend, and, if possible, in the room you will be using. Check *speed and timing*. You may need to make changes to keep to a recommended time. Most student presentations are too long rather than too short.
- › When your presentation has to be delivered, *take your time*. Most nervous speakers are far too fast. Remember that you can normally count on a sympathetic audience who have either suffered a similar ordeal themselves already or have it to come.
- › Begin by explaining what the presentation is about and how you have decided to tackle it.
- › Throughout, hold your head up, make eye contact and *speak directly to your audience*. Try to appear confident even if you do feel it.
- › Try to build to an effective conclusion. You may want to finish by suggesting *questions for further discussion* in the seminar. You may earn further credit if you manage to stimulate a lively debate among your fellow students, and can respond to points they make. (This may be an explicit criterion for assessment.)

### Group oral presentations

Oral presentations can be made by individuals or by a group of students. Sometimes the latter is almost obligatory if seminar groups are large and the number of weeks for presentations is limited. The style of presentation for group presentations may not be very different from individual presentations, particularly if those in the group simply parcel up the topic between them, and do not meet to discuss the presentation again until

the day arrives. Thus the 'group' presentation will simply involve a series of individual presentations, often involving different styles, and poor overall organization, with some overlapping material and other important aspects omitted. It may be far too long. This is not how a group presentation should ideally be organized.

Ideally, all students in the group should meet several times to prepare the presentation and exchange ideas on content and communication, culminating in a full rehearsal to check order, timing, technology and overall cohesion, allowing time for any changes that appear necessary. Admittedly, such meetings are not easy to organize, particularly for part-time students, but the advantages of full group cooperation are potentially huge. You will learn from each other, and soon appreciate the benefits of teamwork. You may each bring special skills to the group. You may divide up the work on the basis of content, with a series of individual contributions forming a coherent whole. In that case someone must provide an introduction, explaining who is responsible for what and the order of proceedings. You may have a more integrated presentation, involving an alternation of speakers, as in some television news programmes.

Depending on the assessment criteria, if the presentation is assessed, you may be able to specialize on tasks rather than content, playing to the strengths of individuals. Thus you may give the bulk of the speaking to confident oral communicators, allowing others to concentrate largely on research, devising useful accompanying material or managing the technology. You may need to explain how you divided up the work in this case, to make it clear that everyone participated.

## Group projects

A group oral presentation and/or a group written report may form the culmination of a more extended group project, where a small number of students (say three to five) work on a particular topic over a period of months. This can be an extremely rewarding and enjoyable learning experience. There are many important educational and vocational advantages to be derived from such group work. In many occupations interpersonal skills and the ability to work effectively as part of a team are crucial.

However, getting everyone to participate and contribute a fair share of work can be a problem in any group project. This can be a particularly difficult if groups have been arbitrarily drawn up by tutors from lists of student names, and you have had no say in your colleagues. However, even if you are allowed some choice of your own group members, you may still find that you are let down by your best friend. Thus students may find themselves obliged to work with others who rarely attend or have low commitment. This can be a particular bone of contention when group performance is formally assessed, and all members of the group are normally given the same grade.

There is what economists call a 'free rider' problem. There is an understandable reluctance to complain to tutors about the work of fellow students (and of course there may sometimes be a serious problem inhibiting their full involvement). Yet students may feel that their marks have been unfairly dragged down by others failing to pull their weight. This is one reason that some tutors as well as students object to group assessment. It is not always fair. However, as long as it does not involve too large a share of the total marks for the module or subject, the educational benefits of group work may be considered to outweigh some of the difficulties for the fair assessment of individuals.

## Dissertations and long essays

Some politics courses require or allow students to undertake, as part of their studies, a more substantial and sustained individual piece of work that might be called a long essay, or a dissertation. The difference between these terms is not just one of length (a long essay might commonly involve 5000 to 6000 words, an undergraduate dissertation around 10,000 to 12,000). A long essay is, as the name implies, a more extended, in-depth investigation of a topic than can be achieved in a standard essay of 1000 to 2000 words.

A dissertation normally involves some original research. Students select their own topic within broad parameters, conduct a literature search and choose a research question that they can proceed to test against evidence they collect and analyse. They are often provided with some instruction on research methods, and given sometimes quite detailed advice on the whole dissertation process and criteria for assessment. Commonly, students are required to submit a dissertation proposal for approval, and are then assigned a dissertation tutor, who should (but may not) have some expertise in the topic selected. From then on, they are largely on their own, apart from occasional brief meetings with their tutor.

Some students find the dissertation the most interesting and rewarding part of their whole politics course. With some it sparks an interest that determines their choice of career, or leads on to further postgraduate study. Yet for others the dissertation is a nightmare. They may not understand what is required of them, or lack the organization and self-discipline needed for the sustained commitment required. Sometimes they either do not seek, or fail to obtain, appropriate advice from the tutor assigned to them. Because it normally carries a substantial weighing in overall assessment, an excellent long essay or dissertation can raise a final degree classification, but a poor one can lead to failure. If you have a choice whether to undertake a dissertation, you need to weigh the potential costs and benefits very carefully.

*Some students find the dissertation the most interesting and rewarding part of their whole politics course.*

Because not all undergraduate politics degrees involve a dissertation or long essay, and then not until the latter stages of the course, it seems unnecessary to provide extensive advice here. Moreover, aims and assessment criteria can vary significantly between institutions. You should therefore concentrate first on any specific advice given on your course, from dissertation handbooks and course tutors, because it is they who will be measuring your performance. There are also a number of excellent books on dissertations and social science methods (for example, Watson, 1987; Bell, 1993; Howard and Sharp, 1993; Denscombe, 1998). However, you may bear in mind the following points.

- › Choose your topic with care. Choose something that interests you, as you may be involved with it for a year or more.
- › You need a manageable research question, which can be tested against evidence (including both primary and secondary data) that you can collect and analyse within a clear theoretical framework.
- › Do not be over-ambitious. Major national or international issues can be difficult to research. It is easy enough to obtain secondary data (information already in the public domain), but you need to think how you can provide some additional value involving primary data that you have generated yourself. You might consider a contentious local political issue. It is often easier to obtain information from local pressure groups, local politicians and local media than their national equivalents.

- › For a dissertation you will commonly be required to submit a dissertation brief for approval (some of the marks may be set aside for this). This is a significant but necessary hurdle that may save you from investing time and energy in a flawed undertaking.
- › Set aside time each week to work on your dissertation or long essay. Because the final submission date seems a long time ahead, there is always the temptation to neglect it while you attend to more immediate and pressing demands.
- › Maintain contact with your tutor. Commonly those students who have most need of a tutor's advice make least use of it. Tutors may lack the time and energy to chase up students who fail to make or keep appointments.
- › Make and file usable notes as you go. You will depend on them later.
- › Start a bibliography file immediately, adding entries as you go along. This saves time and trouble later, searching for references you have failed to record. Sometimes a proportion of the final mark is given for references and bibliography. Often it is the first thing a marker looks at. Make sure your referencing meets the course requirements and looks suitably impressive. You may need to distinguish between primary and secondary sources.
- › Preferably do not leave all the 'writing up' to a frenzied few weeks at the end of the process. You can compile a first draft of some of the material, perhaps the first chapter and a literature search, relatively early. You can always revise later, but it is comforting to have a few thousand words 'in the bank'.
- › A dissertation normally requires some original empirical research (although some institutions allow a purely theoretical dissertation). Select your research methods with care. Commonly you will be required to explain and justify them.
- › Students often choose to do a questionnaire survey, and this is certainly an option, but unless the questions are carefully selected, framed and tested, and a substantial representative sample of the target audience obtained, the results may be virtually worthless, even if they are attractively presented.
- › One alternative is to conduct a small number of semi-structured interviews with, for example, local party or pressure group activists, public officials or elected councillors. Such interviews need courteous initial contacts and careful advance planning. Prepare your questions and discuss them with your tutor, but be ready to diverge from your script if the occasion demands. Note-taking can be difficult. If you can, persuade interviewees to let you tape the interviews.
- › Whatever you choose to do, try to ensure that your own empirical research reflects your earlier theoretic framework, and that the whole dissertation hangs together.
- › Leave plenty of time for revising, proofreading and printing. Once students had to pay to have their work professionally typed. Now word processing makes it easy to produce your own professional-looking copy, with time and care. But note that spelling, grammar, typographical and other mistakes lose marks. Persuade a friend or relation to help with the proofreading – they may spot slips that you miss.
- › Acknowledge any help you have received from tutors, interviewees or other advisers. This is not just courtesy. It can draw attention to some of the work you have done for the dissertation, and may impress examiners.
- › Obey all instructions on length, format, number of copies and submission arrangements to the letter.
- › Make sure that at the end of the process you have a copy of the dissertation to keep. It

is not just a souvenir of your time on the course. It is an important example of the work you have undertaken, and may on occasion be useful to impress potential employers, or admission tutors for postgraduate study.

## Tackling examinations

Once nearly all the assessment for a university degree consisted of unseen examinations. Among the rare exceptions were assessed dissertations, and sometimes an interview or viva. But otherwise grades and classes of degree were determined by performance in a series of examinations over a week or two at the end of the final year. This particularly rewarded students who revised effectively and were skilled at writing essays under severe time pressure, although students with other important skills who had worked assiduously throughout the course did not always secure the results they deserved.

Today there are often a variety of types of assessment that count towards the final degree. These may include traditional essays and other forms of written assignment submitted over the years, and sometimes assessed oral presentations and group projects. A dissertation or long essay still takes a key place in some degree programmes (see previous headings, above). These various types of assessment test a far wider range of skills than unseen examinations and are in general fairer to students, particularly those who have worked steadily and keenly throughout the course. Indeed, in some institutions unseen examinations have become relatively rare. However, skilfully devised examinations assess not only, or principally, knowledge, but insight and understanding. Most politics examinations still involve a choice of essays, and these test the ability to structure relevant and coherent answers to specific questions under time pressure. They also make plagiarism difficult (one reason for a return to traditional examinations in some universities).

*Most politics examinations still involve a choice of essays, and these test the ability to structure relevant and coherent answers.*

## Preparing for an examination

The prospect of examinations can provoke apprehension or terror, even among conscientious students, who fear they may not be able to do themselves justice. However, good preparation can take some of the worry out of exams. The following advice largely assumes that you are tackling the traditional unseen essay-based examinations. For other types of examinations follow the specific recommendations and advice of your tutors and look at past papers.

- Draw up a sensible revision schedule, well in advance of the exams, allowing plenty of time for sleep and recreation, and keep to it. Avoid relying on last-minute revision.
- Get hold of copies of past papers. These may be supplied on your course, or they may be available in libraries. It is important to 'know the enemy', and become familiar with the structure of the paper and type of questions.
- On many modules you will not need to revise all topics. If, for example, you are required to answer four questions from ten that roughly cover the syllabus, revising six major topics should normally be enough to ensure that you can answer four decent questions.
- Equip yourself to answer any conceivable question on your chosen topics. (You need a margin for safety in choosing topics, because sometimes a major topic may not come

up at all, or appears in a form that you had not anticipated, and cannot immediately see how to answer.)

- Be wary of question spotting, in the way gamblers pick ‘winners’ on past ‘form’. Do not assume that a topic is bound to come up, or not to come up, on past trends. By all means take note of apparent tips by lecturers and tutors, but do not rely on them.
- Revise *actively*, not passively. Do not spend hour re-reading lecture notes and textbooks, and hoping that some of it will stick. (It usually does not!) Instead engage your mind and *practise outline answers* to past questions. When you find difficulty in answering a specific question, go back to books and notes to fill in gaps in your knowledge and understanding. The key to good exam performance is *technique*, and technique can be improved by practice in drafting answers to specific questions.
- When practising outline answers, think carefully about *what the question requires* and how it can best be tackled. Look at key words in the question. You might need to *define* terms, or make *distinctions* between different interpretations of concepts, models or relationships. There may be different legitimate approaches to answering the question. You might consider the pros and cons of each.
- Whatever approach you choose, you will need a *structured argument that answers the specific question set* (and not the question you might have preferred).
- For a short examination essay, think in terms of around five to seven paragraphs, each dealing with a specific point, with appropriate supporting evidence. This should form the basis of your essay plan. Too many short disconnected paragraphs give the impression of random thoughts rather than structured argument. The lack of any paragraphs suggests poor organization.
- Avoid ‘cramming’ – learning as many facts and figures as you can. Your grades and final result will depend not on how much you know, but how much knowledge and understanding you can apply in the limited time available to answer specific questions effectively.
- Even so, some limited rote learning can be useful. Learn key facts, dates, statistics, short quotations that you might be able to use to support your arguments.
- Make sure you can spell important proper names and key concepts, particularly if your spelling is weak. Misspelling key terms, such as ‘bureaucracy’, gives a bad impression. There is no ‘spellcheck’ to help you, and you will not want to waste valuable time checking dictionaries, even if they are allowed.

### Coping with the examination

- Make sure you know the time and place of the exam, and allow ample time to get there. Last-minute panics and late arrivals will not help you to do your best.
- Make sure you have all you need, including spare writing implements, and any material you are allowed to bring in. If there is anything that appears unsatisfactory about the exam conditions (e.g. wobbly desk or chair, poor lighting, stuffy room, clock not visible, absence of material that should be supplied), inform the invigilator.
- Check the instructions on the exam paper (which should normally be familiar if you have studied past papers). If anything is not clear, ask.
- Where you have a choice of questions to answer, go through the paper quickly and put a cross against any question you think you cannot answer and a question mark against those you can. Then choose which of the possible questions you think you can

answer most effectively, and decide the order in which you will tackle them. You will probably want to answer the questions on which you are most confident first, but it may be sensible to choose a final answer (when you might be short of time) on a topic on which you are fairly confident you can produce an effective brief answer.

- › If there are too many crosses against questions, do not panic. Go back and review them again. You may have been put off by unfamiliar wording, or a quotation you did not recognize. Think again about what specific questions might require.
- › Do a brief plan – perhaps just five or six points (or even just key words) to be developed into paragraphs. If you have revised as suggested, you will have plenty of practice in planning answers. Sometimes students think there is insufficient time to plan answers in exams. It is even more important to plan in exams than in course work, when you may have time to start afresh, if you feel you are going astray. In an exam you have no time for false starts and second attempts.
- › Do not waste time with ‘setting the scene’ or ‘introductory’ paragraphs. You may begin with a brief ‘signpost’ paragraph indicating how you are proposing to answer the question set, then get on with it.
- › The key advice is to *answer the question set*, not the question you would have preferred, or one you have already answered in course work or in your revision. This is simple advice, repeatedly given, but still frequently ignored. There is no point in trying to impress an examiner with knowledge that is not asked for and is irrelevant to the question set.
- › Include relevant facts, references, quotations you are sure of. Do not guess when you are not sure. A wrong date, inaccurate statistic or misquotation gives a worse impression than an absence of supporting detail.
- › If, as is commonly the case, all questions carry equal marks, make sure you answer the number of questions required. The extra time given to fewer answers is most unlikely to provide marks to compensate for those you have lost by failing to answer a whole question.
- › If you are desperately short of time for a final answer, resort to note form. This will almost certainly earn you more credit than an elegantly written introductory paragraph or two that fails to get to grips with the question.
- › If you finish early, use the precious time left to read through your answers. Imagine your final grade is in the balance and that each mistake corrected earns you an extra mark. When you are writing fast, careless slips can change the sense completely (for example a missed negative) or give a very bad impression (such as a date a century out). More importantly you may realize you have left out a key aspect of a question. A late insertion (with clear directions as to where it should go) might make all the difference.
- › When an exam is over, forget about it and concentrate on the next one. Do not waste time and peace of mind on inquests (at least, unless and until you might be required to do it again, when an honest reappraisal of your past preparation and performance may help you improve).