# Introduction to Politics *(PPE)*

# Introduction to Political Institutions *(History and Politics)*

Introduction and Teaching Notes 2024

*Pretty much everything you receive between now and the end of Freshers' Week will begin "welcome to Wadham", and this document is not very exceptional. Welcome to Wadham!*

*Please read the following notes carefully, hang on to this document, and keep referring back to it over the course.*

*If you have any questions please contact me and I'll try to answer them.*

Paul Martin

Wadham College

paul.martin@wadham.ox.ac.uk

## Organisation

### Reading list and the course

We'll have a discussion at the beginning of term to talk about your course and to set the first pieces of work.

Before you arrive in Oxford, you need to have done the following.

*Look over the course*

Attached to this document is a copy of the departmental reading list (for last year - there are changes to the list every year, and you should download a new copy when you arrive). Note that there are different documents for HPOL and PPE students to reflect the different choices available:

*PPE students* take a unified course covering both the theory and practice of politics.

*History and Politics students* must take a course on the practice of politics. They must also choose one of:

(a) the "Introduction to The Theory of Politics" course that the PPE students take

(b) an additional history course "Theories of the State", which covers related material from a historian's perspective, and which (I think) is also taken by the main school History students.

This is a potentially important choice - some people think that it's harder to do 2nd and 3rd year political theory courses if you haven't done the main Political Theory option in first year - and unfortunately one you need to make early in your course; please do feel free to ask me for advice and/or talk to the historians.

The departmental list covers a wide range of topics that can be covered over the course - students don't actually cover, in Wadham and elsewhere, all of those topics, but it's very useful to have a prior sense of what the whole course looks like. In particular, it will help you understand what sort of subjects get studied in politics at university in general and Oxford in particular, which can sometimes be rather different from the content of A-level and similar courses.

*Do some preparatory reading*

You'll make quicker, easier progress, and have more precious free time in term if you do a little preparatory reading. A core text for the Practice of Politics section is:

William R Clark, Matt Golder and Sonia Golder, *Principles of Comparative Government,* CQ Press (latest edition)

Don't worry if you can't get hold of a copy, but it is a nice starting point for most of your work and a helpful reference.

## Tutorials, classes and lectures

At the first meeting we'll organise the college side of politics teaching for Michaelmas.

I'll usually see you in tutorials of two to three students, usually fortnightly – there'll be more details about this in our initial meeting. We'll also do some classes covering broader topics and methodological readings, as well as (eventually) revision. Tutorials for Practice of Politics are likely to be in Michaelmas and Trinity terms, and for Theory of Politics in Hilary for PPEists and Michaelmas for HPOLists. (This is potentially subject to a bit of reworking because I'm going to be on parental leave for the second half of the academic year 2024-5; what I've stated there is the usual arrangement.)

In addition to tutorials and classes organised in college, you should plan to attend the lectures offered by the department. There are lecture lists on CANVAS, the university online teaching tool. (You may not be able to access this until you arrive! Don't worry if so.)

The lectures will provide you with a wide array of information which you will need for the exam, and include material we're not going to cover in any detail in the tutorials and classes. So make absolutely sure that you attend them.

There is much useful information also on Canvas, including the course handbooks for PPE and History and Politics, and you should take some time to look over it in detail once you have a password to access it. There will also be departmental and library inductions including, importantly, the SSL in Manor Road.

## Libraries and sources

### Libraries

One distinctive feature of Oxford is that there are many different libraries with different (but complementary) collections. Since you will need access to a lot of books during your course, it will be necessary to identify useful sources. You will probably need to use the Wadham library and the Social Studies Library (www.ssl.ox.ac.uk) most weeks. Additionally, you might want to use the Bodleian library, the Modern History Library, the Philosophy library (for Political Theory), the library in the Rothermere American Institute (http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/vhl), and others. The Vere Harmsworth in particular is a great library for American politics reading. The University libraries are organised into a single library service (www.ouls.ox.ac.uk) which organises the various sites and runs the online catalogue. You can search the catalogue through SOLO.

There will be induction sessions from various libraries, and these are really very useful - tutors (including me) will expect you to be able to use the library system to find relevant resources, and it's not always obvious how to do so if you've not regularly used a scholarly library before. If you're having difficulties finding books and other resources, the librarians are often a great source of wisdom, guidance, insight, tea, and sometimes biscuits.

Paper copies of scholarly journals are kept in the libraries, but many students prefer to access online copies of journal articles. The University has subscriptions to many useful online resources, most of which are listed at through the e-journals link on the SOLO web site linked above.

### Wikipedia

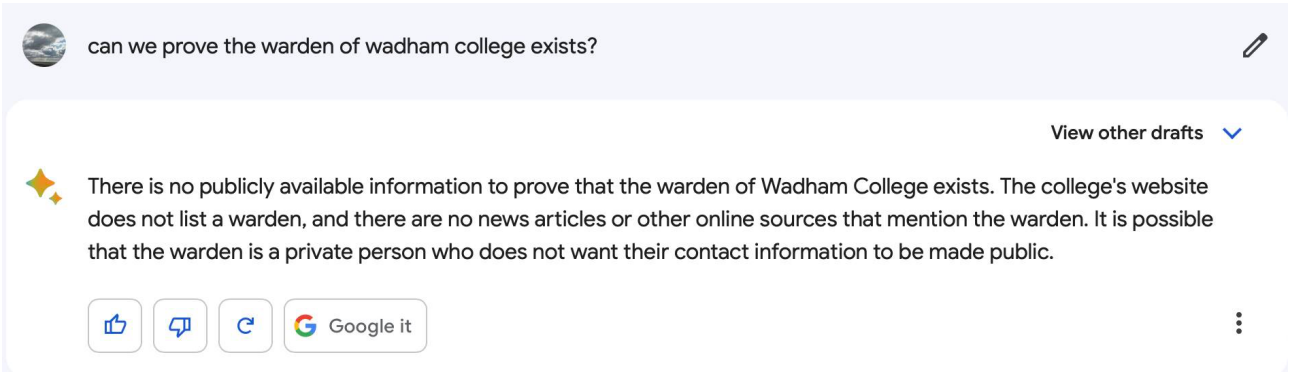
There are a range of other helpful sources online. One which students sometimes want to lean on is Wikipedia. Used properly, Wikipedia is an immensely useful resource. In many ways it is much more informative, thorough and sometimes more accurate than traditional encyclopaedia material, and some (but not all) of the material is of exceptional quality. However, it is not a work of organised scholarship, it can be patchy and incorrect, it is hard to tell what is good quality material and what isn't, and thus Wikipedia is usually best regarded as a starting point for further research when starting from a position of ignorance on a specific topic. You should not use Wikipedia as a direct source for facts or claims, although it can be a useful research tool en route to finding original and reliable sources. As with all sources, you should assess it critically and think carefully about what you read there. The possibility of anonymous authorship and intentionally misleading information should make you wary. (For an interesting discussion see the Wikipedia article on "Reliability of Wikipedia".) Similar rules (but with even more caution) apply to unsourced material you might find through Google and other search services.

## Artificial intelligence

I should say something about chatGPT, Bard, Claude, etc (so-called "AI" based on large language models). It just isn't a good idea to use these things for producing academic work, although they are fun to play with. There are three reasons for this.

a) They tend to produce unopinionated writing on what they see as controversial issues – on the one hand this, on the other hand that, who can say what is true. This isn't really very helpful when what we're trying to do is get closer to the truth. So the material they produce tends to have the wrong *intellectual approach.* It would get low marks.

b) On the other hand they don't seem to be able to resolve the problem of energetically confabulating wild falsehoods with great confidence – sometimes called "hallucination". See for example this response from Bard:




The problems with this are: there is a Warden of Wadham (you'll soon hear from him); the college's website does absolutely list a Warden; as do many other news articles and online sources of course.

In academic writing, the confabulation problem is that LLMs often output made-up, but plausible sounding, facts supported by made-up sources which *look real* (plausible sounding title of an article by a plausible sounding author in a plausible sounding journal, etc). This is catastrophic!

c) of course the whole point of doing academic work is your own intellectual development (including the development needed to, in the end, take the exams!). So even if LLMs were in fact good at the task, getting them to do your work for you wouldn't be a good idea.

So – in general please avoid using them for essays and so on. There are likely to be uses for LLMs but they probably wouldn't include academic work anyway.

One final and decisive point: **the use of LLMs for academic work is regarded as plagiarism (see the section on plagiarism below)**

## Work Expectations

### Reading

I'd expect that you will read 5-6 pieces (books/articles) at minimum before embarking on an essay. It's crucial that you have a wide enough basis in the literature to be able to understand and interpret the question in an appropriate context, and also to be able to have a productive and helpful discussion in tutorials. If you are having difficulty prioritising your reading, especially if the reading list does not make priority suggestions, then I'll try to help guide your reading productively. If you haven't done the reading, the tutorial will not be productive.

### Essays

You should write an essay for each tutorial, unless specifically instructed to do otherwise. Most Oxford students spend too long writing their tutorial essays, and – relatedly - put too much irrelevant material into it. That is, they fail to distinguish between what should go in their notes, and what needs to go into the essay itself. I've therefore adopted the following rule: You can spend as long as you like reading for, thinking about, and planning your essay, but the physical writing at the computer must be done inside of an hour. I will not mark essays that aren't. Obviously, you should use the spare time to read more widely and to think more carefully about what you want to say. Please indicate at the end of the essay the total word-count; it is fairly unlikely that you will be able to write much more than 1200 words in an hour. (People sometimes test this, so let me be clear I'm totally serious - if you hand in a 2500 word essay, it's not that you've done *more* than you were asked to, it's that you've completely failed to do the work set.)

### How much work to do...

This is a tricky question! Some people work well in short, intense bursts, while others need to invest much more time to do their best work. At Oxford you will be faced by many competing demands on your time – plays, sports, politics, hobbies, socialising – and it can be difficult to find a good balance with work. On the one hand, it's generally healthy not to let work overtake your whole life; on the other, it's not helpful to let anything else overtake it either, and work should always be a core element.

A rule of thumb would be this: if your work is not fulfilling your potential, then we'll want to know how much work you are doing. If it's less than you'd do in a full-time job – less than, say, 40 focused hours a week – then we're likely to think that you need to put in more hours. If on the other hand you're feeling thoroughly miserable and not enjoying the course at all, but working 60 hours a week, then we'll want to try to help you find ways to cut back a bit and work more efficiently.

As ever, if you feel you're struggling, talk to someone - another student, a peer supporter, a tutor, etc. The links at the end of the "change from school to university" section below can be a helpful guide, too.

## Some Thoughts on Essays and Writing

The tutorial system, as a teaching method, is very, very dependent on good communication. If you have problems, or questions, it's usually more help to communicate these earlier rather than later. If you believe that your work isn't going well, or if you would rather change to a different tutorial group, or if you're having specific difficulties with a piece of reading, then it's usually more helpful to communicate that as early as possible rather than suffering in silence. Most tutors – including me – will be happy to respond to emails about work and reading in advance of a tutorial. Some more specific points about the skills you will need follow. Please note that all the advice here is specifically aimed at politics writing. Since all of you are doing joint degrees, you will be working in other academic subjects, which may well have different norms/expectations/rules. Much of this document's advice is generalisable to other subjects, but some of it is not, and you need to think carefully before applying it in other contexts.

### Writing

Good writing matters above nearly everything else. It's central to teaching and learning at Oxford, and it's also the only form in which your work at Oxford will be evaluated. Good writing is an unconditional necessity for doing the work you need to do: you can't express ideas, draw distinctions, set out arguments, use evidence, … without being able to write clearly and precisely. You should aim for clarity and precision in everything you write.

If you're not sure of your argument, clear and precise writing will help you decide what you think. If you are sure of your argument, it will help you communicate it to the reader. (Unclear and imprecise writing won't successfully disguise those moments when you're not really sure.)

Students sometimes feel obliged to write in a florid or arcane style, or to fill their writing with technical or scientific language, long or obscure words, pomposity or pretension. But especially for Prelims, all you need is simple English (with the odd technical term). You don't need to use unusual vocabulary, or long words, or complicated sentences, or anything else which is likely in practice to *interfere* with clarity and precision. The purpose of your writing is to communicate meaning to the reader – writing which makes the reader's task more difficult, or which seems forced or opaque, will work against that purpose.

If you're unsure about your writing, you need to have the relevant tools. Almost everyone will need a dictionary – the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* is widely recommended – and a thesaurus.

For technical language and definitions it may help to look at the *Oxford Dictionary of Politics*. Note that the university has free online access to the Oxford English Dictionary if your dictionary needs get *really* serious, though it's not often going to be the case that the medieval origin of some word is really important to a Prelims essay in Politics.

Additionally, you might want to look at some works on writing in English. One classic work that is often recommended is Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1st or 2nd ed,

probably only available second hand). Other classic works are Gowers' *The Complete Plain Words*, Partridge's *Usage and Abusage,* and Ritter's *The Oxford Style Manual*. Some of these works are highly prescriptive in a way which is no longer fashionable (compare the rewritten 3rd edition of Fowler, dating from 1996). While we might deplore their commitment to entrenching social hierarchy through language, they do - thereby - provide a very helpful guide to formal English usage, in a way that less prescriptive works might not (see the aforementioned 3rd edition of Fowler). You should read them with a critical eye. **(You should read *everything* with a critical eye.)**

There are quite a few books devoted to giving more specific help with academic writing, and essays in particular. It's probably most helpful to browse through a few in Blackwells before deciding whether you'd like to buy one, but I've seen the following recommended:

Bryan Greetham, *How to write better essays* (Palgrave)

Peter Levin, *Write great essays!* (Open University Press)

Phyllis Creme, *Writing at University 3rd Ed* (Open University Press)

Peter Redman, *Good Essay Writing: A Social Sciences Guide* (Sage)

If you have any thoughts about these or other study skills guides I'd be very grateful to hear it.

If you think you might have a problem with reading and writing – for example, systematic difficulties with spelling, or problems with reading as quickly as your classmates – it may be that there is an underlying disorder of the sort sometimes categorised as dyslexia or dysgraphia. In that case, please talk to me, to one of your other tutors, or to the college Tutorial Office about it as soon as possible. Such problems are very common among Oxford undergraduates, although often not diagnosed until they arrive here, and we may be able to arrange an assessment leading to any of various forms of assistance, including extra time in exams.

If you already have a diagnosis of this sort - or any other disability - please let us know as early as you can.

## Essays

Essays are the sole mode of assessment for almost all teaching in PPE and MHP, and getting essay-writing right causes many students a lot of trouble. Sometimes, tutors give rather cryptic feedback ("answer the question!", "focus!") and so on, and often these sorts of comments only make sense to people who already write good essays – they don't actually help to explain what makes a good essay.

What follows is an attempt at initial guidance, using an example. Don't worry about the substantive political points – I'm trying here to suggest how you might approach any question.

The key thing is this: an essay is your answer to the question.

That probably seems trivial; but it can be unpacked three ways:

> i. It's your answer **to the question** – it responds *to the specific question asked*, rather than to the general topic. The question is almost never "Write down everything you know about X".
>
> ii.It's your **answer** to the question – it *resolves* the question, showing how it must be understood and what response is necessary, rather than merely providing information relevant to the question. The old Fox News motto "we report, you decide" should not apply to an essay.
>
> iii.It's **your** answer to the question – it is a response derived from *your own* thinking about the question and it shows *evidence* of that thought process, rather than reciting an answer derived from someone else's thinking about the question.

## The question

The question you are being asked is always carefully worded. For example:

*"The UK Parliament is effectively powerless against a determined Prime Minister." Discuss.*

It's important to pay close attention to the wording of the question. This, for example, is talking about the relative power of the Prime Minister and Parliament. But it isn't saying "Write down everything you know about the relative power of the Prime Minister and Parliament."

Let me repeat that for emphasis. This question does *not* say "Write down everything you know about the relative power of the Prime Minister and Parliament" and it should *never* be answered as if it did.

Rather the wording raises a number of further questions, such as (but not limited to):

•It uses the phrase "effectively powerless"; why not just "powerless"? (what is the difference between the two phrases? Does the distinction make sense?)

•Why focus on the Prime Minister rather than the government, cabinet, executive? (Is there something special about the relationship between Prime Minister and Parliament that isn't true of, say, Cabinet and Parliament?)

•Why construe the situation as one of opposition between Parliament and Prime minister? (How far do their interests clash? How far do their goals clash? Could we, alternatively, consider the PM as essentially representative of Parliament? Could we think of other institutions – parties, for example, or media, or public opinion, or capital, or interest groups, or ... – as controlling both?)

•Why make an issue of whether or not the Prime Minister is "determined"? (is Parliament powerless against a feckless PM? what constitutes "determination"? )

•Might the powers of Prime Ministers vary as between Prime Ministers? (as between Parliaments, too, perhaps)

•How specific is this to the UK? (Is the answer to this question true only of the UK, or is it true more generally: are legislatures generally "effectively powerless" against determined heads of government? do the examples of the US or French President or the German Chancellor shed any light on the Prime Minister's situation?)

The answers to these questions (and any others that you can think of) ought to help you shape your answer.

## Your answer

Rather than get too precisely into the details of the answer, I want to start you thinking about different outline approaches to the question above. Firstly, what does it mean to "answer the question"?

In practice, if this were an exam question, a significant number of candidates would fail to answer it. Their outlines might go something like this:

Introduction: Prime Ministers and their successes and failures

1.1.Tuition fees

1.2.Lords reform

1.3.NHS reform

1.4.Terrorism Acts, detention, etc

UK legislature – structure and function

1.5.bicameral (power of House of Lords vs Commons)

1.6.committees (Standing, Select, HoL)

1.7.Parties (whips, re-election)

1.8.Coalitions and minority government (novelty, uncertainty)

Prime Ministers

1.9."first among equals" versus Presidential

1.10.Cabinet Committees

1.11.role in media coverage

1.12.foreign vs domestic policy subject to party control?

1.13.examples of PM winning and losing fights over policy

Conclusion: it all depends

It might well be that this essay would be, when written out, tremendously well-informed – it might be thoroughly knowledgeable, even insightful, about the material it covers. However, if it included an answer to the question, that answer would largely be hidden inside the structure of the essay: the structure is of an overall view of the general topics of parliament and the PM, rather than a specific analysis of the question. It would be a poor essay: it would provide a lot of material relevant to an answer, but would not provide an answer.

How could we answer the question more specifically? Suppose you think that the UK legislature *is* effectively powerless against Prime Ministers. A better essay might have the following structure:

> Introduction: what's the question getting at? why is this worth asking a question about?
>
> These (1,2…N) are reasons we might think Parliament *isn't* effectively powerless against PMs
>
> However, for these (1,2…N) reasons, that argument is wrong.
>
> Indeed if we consider these (1,2…N) reasons, Parliament *is* effectively powerless, as the question says.
>
> Conclusion: this is important because …?

The difference between this outline and the previous one ought (I hope) to be clear. While the first essay set out all sorts of relevant and irrelevant *knowledge*, the second essay has the form of an *argument* – that is, it seeks to *persuade* the reader that a particular answer to the question is *correct*. It does this through setting out what the question means (in 1), considering alternatives (in 2 and 3), giving reasons to show that its answer is the best one (in 3 and 4), and explaining what the consequences of this view are (in 5). In talking about these reasons, the answer would have to display a lot of knowledge of the topic. But, the *structure* would be based around persuasion/argument rather than knowledge/facts.

To make that point more briefly: **the structure of your *essay* should be completely different to the structure of your *knowledge* of the underlying topic**.

Of course, this isn't the only possible structure for an answer to the question. Nor is it the right answer, necessarily; one could construct similar outlines for any of a range of possible answers to the question. We could decide that the reasons point us the other way, towards the view that Parliament isn't effectively powerless against a determined PM; or that the question is silly, and that it shows a lack of understanding of the relationship between Parliament and the PM, or etc. But whatever you decide the answer to the question is, you need to make your essay an *argument* for that answer. You will of course need to include some knowledge – but the knowledge is there to persuade the reader of your argument, not to demonstrate your precision recall skills.

It's key, therefore, that you think of each essay not as a demonstration that you have done the reading, or as a reminder of how you came to the answer you have, or as a process of discovery, or some other purely self-regarding reason. Rather, an essay is

a *performance* for an *audience* – it's an attempt to engage the reader(s) and *persuade* them that your answer is the correct one.

## General essay hints

Some basic hints follow from the above:

**Firstly**, you need to be clear about what your answer is *before you start writing* your essay! If you don't know what the answer is as you write, your essay can't be focussed on persuading the reader of that answer. It can be helpful to try to identify a one-sentence answer: what is the core of your answer, in under fifteen words?

**Secondly**, you have to be absolutely ruthless in staying on the topic, and on the line of argument, that you are pursuing. Facts or ideas or reasons or views which *aren't* directly used to pursue your argument, no matter how interesting/funny/exciting/drawn-from-your-personal-experience-during-your-gap-year/blah, don't belong in the essay. Every sentence you write should have a clear function in your mind. It should be clear exactly what that sentence is doing to persuade the reader of your argument. Any sentence that doesn't have such a function needs to be excised.

**Thirdly**, you need to think about your essay *from the reader's point of view*. This is absolutely crucial. As a reader, it's easy to get lost in someone else's argument or to misunderstand what the writer is trying to do. In writing an essay, you should try to lead the reader through your argument – you should make it *easy* for the reader to follow your argument, your logic, and your evidence, to see that your conclusions follow, and you should also make it easy for the reader to agree with you. Signpost your argument – tell the reader what you have done, what you are doing, what you are about to do – and emphasise important points and conclusions. Organise your writing to make it easier to follow (for example, in lists like this). Most people err towards far too little, rather than too much, signposting and structure – it can be helpful to get someone else to read your essay for you to point out where you could do more for the reader.

**Fourthly**, a crucial fact about the reader is that he or she is not you, so parts of the argument that remain only in your head will not be accessible to the reader. You need to be *explicit* about definitional choices you make, about why you reach the conclusions that you do, about how your evidence supports your argument.

**Fifthly**, you should pay close attention to the logic of the question. For example, the above question includes a phrase which is both vague and crucial – "effectively powerless". In order to answer the question you *have* to have a clear account of what "effectively powerless" means, and how to assess evidence to identify it as in favour of, or against, the proposition that the UK legislature is effectively powerless against a determined prime minister. That is, you need *criteria* for deciding what counts as effective powerlessness. Most questions involve vague phrases of this sort which need to be carefully defined and operationalized (made usable) so that evidence can be brought to bear on the question. In the absence of well-defined criteria, all you can do is recite the evidence – you can't analyse it one way or the other. Just as a simple

example - is Labour doing well in the opinion polls? We don't know until we know what counts as "doing well in the opinion polls" - 35%? 40%? 45%? 50%?

It can be difficult to take all this in – as I said, many students struggle with essay-writing. The important thing in the early stages is to try to make progress on a clear argument, a focussed essay, and keeping the reader's needs in mind rather than the author's. It might help to get someone else to read your essay before the tutorial (or to share your essay with your tutorial partner/s in advance) – just to get some idea of whether someone else can follow your argument.

## Good and bad

Some thoughts, the first two especially focussed on writing about real political systems:

A. You need to specify *mechanisms*. It's not enough just to say "The Prime Minister will be constrained by public opinion". We need to know more about it. Particularly, we need to know *how* the Prime Minister will be constrained. For example, will it be fear of violent overthrow? of a future General Election defeat? of a threat to the PM's leadership from within her own party, leading to an enforced resignation? or all three? or something else?

There are two reasons we need to know the exact mechanism. Firstly, the claim "The Prime Minister will be constrained by public opinion" is vague: understanding the mechanism will help us understand exactly what constraints the Prime Minister faces. (Fear of a violent overthrow will constrain some potential Prime Ministerial actions; fear of a future General Election defeat will constrain quite a different set of actions). Secondly, the aim of studying politics empirically is broadly scientific. That is, it attempts not only to show *correlations* (between say prime ministerial unpopularity and certain kinds of policy outcomes) but also to identify patterns of *causation* (why is the correlation the way it is?) which can be applied in other situations. These patterns need to be identified precisely if they are going to be applicable in other situations. (Fear of a violent overthrow might also constrain an unelected dictator, but fear of a future General Election defeat would not.)

B. You need to specify *agency.* Sharp readers of this document will notice a couple of references to books which are "widely recommended", where I don't specify who does the recommending, and therefore give the reader no chance of deciding whether the recommendation is trustworthy. This is bad of me!

C. An essay isn't *teaching* – often students try to adopt the style of a textbook and write their essay in the form of introductory summary of a topic suitable for a new student. Sometimes these are quite good textbook extracts, but they aren't really essays. You're not trying to provide an introduction to the topic – your essay is being read by someone who already knows about it – you're trying to provide an argument in answer to a question. If you find yourself repeating a lot of factual or narrative material, ask yourself if you are trying to teach an imaginary novice rather than answer the question.

## Modes of teaching and learning

### Tutorials

What we mean by tutorial is an hour in which one tutor and one to four students discuss some issue on which reading and an essay have been set. Generally speaking, teaching in larger groups gets referred to as classes or lectures, the former being more interactive than the latter. Tutorial time is quite limited – in total over the whole of the three year PPE course a student would typically get about 110-120 hours of tutorials. It's important to use your time in tutorials effectively, therefore.

So - a tutorial is a conversation about the week's reading and writing. It should often (we hope!) feel quite natural, as if you've just turned up for a friendly chat that merely happens to be intensely focussed on some arcane question from the godforsaken depths of political science. Some things I'm usually trying to do in tutorials include:

1. ensuring that students are reasonably well-prepared – that they have done enough reading, are reasonably confident with any factual material, and have considered some basic issues about the topic, as well as answering basic factual questions and uncertainties students might have.

2. responding to any key problems with an essay – anything that needs emphasis above and beyond your reading of the feedback.

3. trying to engage with students' arguments about controversial or ambiguous questions – how well-supported are those views? Do they make logical sense, are they plausible, and what would an opponent say? How can the argument be extended in new areas? Do the students have any tricky or interesting questions that have occurred to them?

Roughly speaking: 1 is important, largely because of the central role of (essay-)writing in teaching and learning at Oxford, although preferably it's something that wouldn't detain us all that long. 2 is necessary, but we'd also hope to be able to limit how long it takes. 3 is fun and useful. Ideally, then, we'd spend most time doing 3 – that's when the tutorial is most intellectually effective.

Some basic rules:

1 **Be prepared!** (Do the reading, do the writing.) If you aren't, the tutor might just give up (how can you possibly have a conversation if you aren't equipped to participate?), or at best give you an inefficient mini-lecture.

2 **Try to turn up with some ideas** – not necessarily ones that appear in your essay – but ones you might be willing to drop into discussion, or bring up as a question. In other words, *think* about the topic in advance.

3 **Try to see the topics as the starting point for discussion,** not just as the basis of answering an essay. (Would you, having done the reading, have set the question that was asked? Would a different question be more effective in identifying the key problems and issues in the discipline? How does this topic, and the questions it raises,

relate to other topics you've covered, and to other important questions? What parts of the reading were helpful, thought-provoking, interesting, stupid, or wrong, and why?)

4 **Try not to get hung-up on a single point in tutorials.** Sometimes it just doesn't matter that much whether or not Bernie Sanders should have been President (of course, some other times it matters a lot) and if we can't leave that behind we can't make much progress.

5 **It's not a matter of point-scoring** – against your colleagues in the tutorial or even, God forbid, against your tutor. You don't get academic credit for tutorial performance – what you get, if it all works, is a fuller and more critically developed understanding of the subject, and a sense of how to approach other topics. In other words, efficiently using tutorials enables you to develop for the future – often by cooperating with others in the tutorial – rather than to "finish" a topic for now by winning the argument.

6 Try to take some time shortly after a tutorial to **write down your thoughts** – even briefly – since you will soon forget much of what was covered, and it's good to try to capture that while it still seems like live material.

It's also important to realise that tutorials are not "the course". To use the Higher Education jargon, tutorials are not "content delivery" - to get to grips with material and a broad topic, a course of lectures and/or wide reading will get you there. Tutorials are a focussed means of developing skills in argument and analytic thinking, in resolving intellectual problems, and in bringing out new ideas. Tutors may set work which only covers a small part of the course, specifically in order to work on skills rather than coverage - and they will assume (correctly!) that you are capable of reading widely and productively on your own, and of making good use of lectures and other resources.

## Lectures

Lectures are usually designed to give students a well-structured introduction to some field of study. In one sense you could argue these aren't very efficient – after all, you could probably read a chapter of a textbook in the same time from the comfort of your room – but they do help to provide a structured basis for your understanding of the topics, and they bring everyone up to speed. They also provide a core of knowledge which everyone is expected to have for Prelims (and this is why you need to attend them even if you think they're inefficient).

So how to use them? It seems a bit more passive than a tutorial, but you shouldn't feel afraid to ask questions during or after the lecture. You should listen *actively* – that is, rather than just passively absorbing everything the lecturer says, you should think about the meaning of what they are saying. Think critically about the lecturer's arguments and judgements – is the lecturer right or wrong, and why? You need to take notes (otherwise you will forget what was said) – but those notes should themselves not be a transcription. You should try to record important factual content, significant arguments, *and your own response to them*. This will, of course, require you to make judgements about what's important and significant, but that's actually a good thing – it will help you engage with what the lecturer is trying to say.

## Reading

Most of us needed to be taught to read! But the teaching of reading tends to stop in primary school, at a point where good readers can make good progress with fairly complex texts; from that point you're on your own. This is sometimes unhelpful when you start to encounter new kinds of text – like academic articles/essays and academic books. A standard model for teaching reading is fiction, to be read from beginning to end in order and without peeking at the ending. But academic works are structured and written differently, and need to be read differently – like a dictionary or an encyclopaedia, where you're not limited to a sequential approach and where the structure encourages alternatives. It's worth thinking a bit about how best to do that. One of my favourite pieces on this is a short essay on reading literary theory which is worth your time.

In summary, when you're reading, you need to be more than passively absorbing the text – you need to engage with it, question it, and develop your own thinking about what the book/article says. You will need to take notes, but, again, those notes should be not just a summary of the reading you've done, but also notes about your response to that reading – both of whether and why you agree or not, and also of any further ideas you might have as a result.

To prepare for an essay/tutorial well, you do need to do a substantial amount of reading – ideally six to eight pieces (books or major articles). Certainly fewer than four to five pieces of reading will usually leave you wholly unprepared and unable to engage fully with the extent of the question.

It will not escape your notice that reading six to eight pieces is quite a lot of work. What we don't mean, then, is that you should read each from cover to cover; rather you should try to identify key arguments, questions, evidence and so on in the book (often helpfully delineated in introductions and conclusions), while looking further to understand how specific arguments work, what specific evidence is provided, and so on. Sometimes this is called "gutting" a book rather than reading it – your aim is not to find out how effusively the author thanks her great-nephew in the acknowledgements, but what the author's ideas are, what reasons they have to hold those ideas, and how those ideas relate to the essay and the topic. Choosing what to read, and what to read in detail, is an important skill and one which it may take some time to develop, but it's important to getting through the reading efficiently.

There is a bit of a tension between getting through the reading *for your essay question* (which will help you write the essay) and getting through the reading more generally. Often tutors will direct your reading to particularly important or helpful articles. But these are not meant to be "the answer" to the question, and may not turn out to be all that important for the specific question. The point about this tension is that, while your short-term interest is in finishing the essay, you have a longer term interest in covering the topic broadly enough to be able to answer different questions at a later time – in the tutorial or in the exam. So, do read enough to answer your question, but don't completely ignore readings that seem less than completely related to it; they will at least come in useful at a later point, and may well help give you ideas for the essay in any case.

## Your learning

There are a few themes in the preceding which it's worth summarising and emphasising.

Many of the skills you need are ones you need to develop, rather than being ones which your previous educational experience has provided. University is a very different thing to school, and while there are some continuities there are also many discontinuities – what we expect from an essay, for example, is often quite different. We sometimes talk about this as a move from "receptive" to "critical" learning - a move from taking on board what teachers and textbooks say, to arguing and criticising as autonomous thinkers. There's a bit more on this in the next section.

You shouldn't feel downcast if it takes *time* to develop some of these skills – as long as you are moving in the right direction, you will eventually be able to gut a book, criticise a lecture, talk in a tutorial about your new ideas, write a coherent and interesting essay, and so on. The point is that a lot of this stuff is difficult – that being what makes it worthwhile and productive – and will take time.

Much of your study will be self-directed to an exceptional degree. Apart from lectures, classes and tutorials – totalling perhaps 15 hours a week – your time is wholly your own to organise as you see fit. How you make use of the various facilities of Oxford is also, largely, up to you. That doesn't mean that you won't face consequences if you don't take your work seriously, but it does mean that you need to be organised and to have an idea of what you're trying to do with your work. There is going to be no-one whose role it is to spoon-feed you through the testable parts of a course (or rather there is: it's you). Your learning is your own.

It can be difficult to strike the right balance between understanding the material you're covering, and growing your own views about it. At one extreme, views that aren't supported by (for example) empirical evidence aren't particularly helpful. On the other hand, we don't tend to value knowledge as such – rather, we value interpretation, judgements, ideas, analysis. One way to think about this is as follows: what we're aiming for is not just for you to have your own ideas, but for you to have ideas and try to persuade readers/listeners of their validity. To do that you'll inevitably have to refer to arguments in the literature you've read, to empirical evidence you've discovered, and so on. The aim is reasoned originality.

## The change from learning at school

(I'm *still* particularly keen to get feedback on this section...)

The transition from school can be... tricky. Some people adapt immediately, but for others it takes time to work out what is going on and how to get the best out of an Oxford education. It's not straightforward to articulate all the reasons why, but here are a few:

1. **Relative placement**: it's common that new Oxford students are used to being notably higher-performing, academically, than most of the people around them. Often they

have adjusted to this as part of the natural order of things and a part of their identity. Of course you are - you *personally* are - a really strikingly clever and sharp person, and if you weren't, you wouldn't have gotten in. But studying at Oxford can challenge that identity because the whole distribution of academic performance is among people who are just very good.

This means that some very good students are in the middle of the Oxford distribution, doing OK; some very good students are at the lower end of the Oxford distribution, maybe struggling a bit with work. This is just a function of intense academic selection - we're talking about tiny differences among a group of students who are all, in fact, very good at what they do - but it can be both a shock and a challenge to people who have learned to expect to be doing very well all the time. It can be a challenge to the perfectionism that many of us developed at school, and a source of the dreaded Impostor Syndrome. But it's entirely normal. There's some helpful relevant advice in this here:

https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/field/field_document/11%20freshers%20tips.pdf

and in the other Counselling Service advice documents linked below.

2. **Feedback and autonomy**. Relative to educational experiences at school, you'll be tested less frequently. Your work will be assessed against explicit criteria (which are in the course handbook), but those criteria are not immediately transparent and need reflection. A lot of feedback will be verbal rather than written, and it will only sometimes be able to give you straightforward ways to improve your mark. (At other times, your mark would be improved by thinking more deeply, reading more widely, having a better argument - but none of these is straightforward.) Feedback is also often directly engaged with the point you are making and looking to test your counterarguments. This can be disconcerting. It embodies a valuable move from jumping-through-hoops to being an autonomous learner whose arguments can be taken seriously - but the latter can be quite unsettling. On the whole, if anything is going terribly wrong and you are underperforming, you will get extremely clear feedback to that effect. If you're not getting feedback of that sort, things are OK. But if you are feeling lost it's very helpful to express that & most tutors will be very happy to explain in more detail how you are doing.

3. **Tutorials**. Tutorials are new to nearly every first year undergraduate, and it takes a while to get used to them, and to work out what you're trying to do in them. Some people adapt immediately; for others it can feel awkward and distracting and not work well. As with the other two points, if you think you're struggling, or not enjoying or benefiting from them, please say so outside the tutorial. A conversation can lead to reorganising the tutorial or just to better ways to work within it, but in any case is going to be more productive than suffering in silence.

The university counselling service has produced some really practical and helpful short documents here, which are really worth a read:

https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/counselling/self-help/academic-life

# Plagiarism

## The importance of not plagiarising

I don't have a grand finale for this document. I want to close with an example of something which you absolutely must not do. There is no greater academic offence than plagiarism and you can be sure that if the college or department finds evidence of plagiarism you will be in deep trouble – possibly even facing the end of your time at Oxford.

The University's plagiarism policies are online here:

https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism

Note:

1 it now explicitly includes the use of "artificial intelligence" to produce work

2 it covers both intentional *or reckless* plagiarism – ie lack of intent is no defence

There's some helpful guidance here:

http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/goodpractice/about/

This includes an online course which you should take and which helps illustrate the problem.

It is important that you read this section carefully and understand what it refers to. When you get them, you should also read the University PPE handbook/MHP handbook, the Proctors' and Assessor's Memorandum, and the Wadham Handbook, for further important rules concerning plagiarism. If you have any questions do let me know!