

How to Study Political Theory

- **No highlighters!** Mark up your books, but use a pencil instead of a highlighter so you can jot down notes in the margins or on sticky notes, mark key passages, summarize arguments in your own words, etc.
- **Eliminate distractions.** In this busy world, we all have to multitask sometimes. Reading political theory, however, is not one of those times. Find a quiet space where you can read without distractions. Don't answer your phone, don't text or email, don't check your Facebook page, don't watch TV. Just clear your head, focus, and read.
- **Take notes.** After every reading assignment write down its main argument, its strengths and its weaknesses. Note what its best "big idea" or concept is. Taking notes will help you understand a text, especially difficult ones.
- **Think big.** The purpose of political theory is to ask big questions in order to get a grip on the big picture: Are politics and morality incompatible? Why have societies premised on the equality of humans produced so much inequality? How has a century of unparalleled progress also been a century of unparalleled butchery? etc. The purpose of theory is to ask and answer these kinds of questions. Your goal is to ask and answer them as well, using the texts to help you.
- **Don't get bogged down in the details.** If a text is hard to understand, don't go crazy trying to understand every sentence or paragraph. Get the main idea of a passage and move on. Ask about the difficult passages in class. If you can't get the main idea of a reading assignment, even after taking notes, ask about it in class.
- **Discuss the texts with others.** You will be surprised at the different interpretations your fellow students will have of the same text. Your understanding of the text—even a text you think you fully understand—will be greatly improved by talking over these interpretations. Use class time, informal meetings, bulletin boards, and email to discuss the texts. Of course, I am always happy to discuss them with you, too.
- **Bring questions to class.** If you don't understand a passage or even the main argument of a text, don't sit silent. Ask about it in class. Chances are other students have the same question—or they might have an answer. If you understand a text but have a question about its larger political significance, ask that, too. Asking questions always provokes discussion about a text, and therefore helps you understand.
- **Confusion is okay.** If you read something the first time and think you understand it but then you go to class and everything gets confusing, it's a sign of development, not ignorance. You're starting to go beneath the surface of the text. You're reading it *critically*. (If you don't get it after we discuss it, then let me know and I'll go over it again.)
- **Comprehension must come before critique.** You need to understand an argument before critiquing it.
- **Education is uncomfortable.** It makes you think about new things, challenges old beliefs, forces you to reevaluate the world, and makes you do work you ordinarily wouldn't do. But remember, there is a payoff. You are learning how to think, read, write, and speak critically. You are becoming "mature," as Kant would say. You are on your way to leading the examined life.