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Summer 2018

Reading Political Science

PS/IR101Z: Introduction to International Relations

We don't just want you to learn the theories we introduce to you in class. We want you think about these theories like a scientist. We want you to be skeptical, and we want you to evaluate the readings on logical and empirical grounds. So, when you are doing the reading, here are some useful steps to follow and questions to ask.

1. Identify the **Dependent Variable**. What is the ***outcome*** or ***phenomenon*** the author is trying to explain?

    - Measurement: What kind of variable is this? What values can this variable take on?

    - Validity: Does the measure adequately capture the variable's concept? Is any useful information lost by the use of this measure?

    - Reliability: Imagine that you and your classmates were separately assigning cases to the variable. How likely is it that you would all arrive at the same classification?

2. Identify the **Independent Variable**. What does the author argue ***explains*** the differences in the outcome of interest?

    - Ask yourself about measurement, validity and reliability like you did above.

3. Identify the author's hypothesis and connecting logic. How does the author propose the independent variable ***relates*** to the dependent variable?

    - Assumptions: What assumptions does the author make when hypothesizing the relationship above? Be aware that authors are not often explicit about what those assumptions are. How valid are those assumptions? If changed, how would the conclusion change?

    - Intermediary Factors: Are there any important variables that come between the IV and the DV?

4. Evaluate the evidence. What evidence does the author provide to ***support*** of his or her argument?

    - What are the strengths and weakness of the evidence presented? Are there parts of the evidence that is not consistent with the author's arguments?

    - What other evidence would you want to see to be convinced of the author's argument? What do you think about the decision to exclude that evidence?

    - Is this evidence exclusively in support of the author's argument? Could it be used in support of another argument? Bonus: How would you test that argument?