

# Houston Community College

# Government Curriculum Guide

# 2006

The 2006 version of the Government Department Curriculum Guide is based upon the fine work of previous curriculum guides written in 1990 by Dr. Neal Tannahill and updated in 1997 by Dr. Cammy Shay and Mark Tiller. The following faculty members have dedicated themselves to completing this 2006 revision and update.

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## Textbook Issues

As of Fall 2006, different colleges within the HCC system use different texts. Thus, it is important for adjuncts who may teach at more than one college within the system to prepare using the textbooks that have been chosen at each college.

## Course Divisions

HCCS divides the material in Government 2301 and 2302 in the following manner: *Note 1: Please take care that when you plan your semester, you do not short Texas government or local government.*

**Government 2301:** Political Science, TX & US Constitutions,

US/TX Political Culture, Public Opinion, Media, TX/US Participation, TX/US Parties and Elections, Federalism, Local Government

**Government 2302:** Branches of National and Texas Government;

US/TX Economic, Budgetary, and Regulatory Policies; Civil Rights; Civil Liberties; Criminal Justice; and Foreign and Defense Policies

*If you teach at other community colleges, they may break up the two courses differently ( e.g.. they may teach the civil liberties chapter in 2301 instead of 2302 like HCCS does). Please make sure that you cover the proper topics in each course according to HCCS divisions.*

## **Sample Plans for Government 2301**

### *PLAN ONE:*

Unit One: Political Science, Ideology, U.S. Political Culture, U.S. Constitution

Unit Two: Media; Opinion; Participation, Parties, Elections (TX and US)

Unit Three: Federalism, Texas Political Culture, Texas Constitution, Local Government

### *PLAN TWO:*

Unit One: Political Science, TX & US Constitutions

Unit Two: US/TX Political Culture and Participation; Public Opinion, Media, Unit Three: Parties and Elections (TX and US)

Unit Four: Federalism, Local Government

### *PLAN THREE:*

Unit One: Political Science, Ideology, and Political Culture

Unit Two: Texas and U.S. Constitutions, Federalism

Unit Three: Media; Opinion; Participation, Parties and Elections (TX and US)

Unit Four: Local Government

## **Sample Plans for Government 2302**

### *PLAN ONE:*

Unit One: The Branches of National and State Government

Unit Two: Economic, US/TX Budgetary Policies, and Regulatory Policies

Unit Three: Civil Rights, Civil Liberties, Criminal Justice, and Foreign and Defense Policies

### *PLAN TWO:*

Unit One: The U.S. Branches of Government

Unit Two: The Texas Branches of Government and TX Budgetary Policy

Unit Three: Civil Rights, Civil Liberties Policies, Criminal Justice

Unit Four: Regulatory, Economic, US Budgetary Policies, Foreign and Defense Policies

### *PLAN THREE:*

Unit One: The Judicial Branch, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Policies

Unit Two: The Legislative Branch, Economic, Budget, and Regulatory Policy (US and TX)

Unit Three: The Executive Branch and Bureaucracy, Foreign and Defense Policy

# **The Syllabus**

Instructors should give a syllabus to their students on the first day of class. If you cannot do this, give at least a simple information sheet of some kind to substitute until next class, and assure the students that you will distribute the syllabus next class. This syllabus helps set the tone for the class and is a contract between the instructor and the

student. If you absolutely have to make modifications in your syllabus during the semester, you must clearly inform the students (preferably in writing) of any changes made. Normally, you should limit changes to minor corrections of errors (e.g., typos) and things that are beyond your control (e.g., calendar changes due to school closings).

The syllabus is possibly the most important thing you create to determine the outcome of your class—therefore, consider carefully the following suggestions and words of advice. In the generic syllabus that follows, blue italicized comments are meant to be guidance; non-italicized portions are suggested wording. If you use this syllabus, you need to incorporate your own assignments, special projects, classroom policies, etc.

Finally, give a copy of your syllabus to your chair. If you are new or if you intend to make major changes, submit your syllabus before classes begin so that your chair has time to review it. The chair may wish to discuss mistakes, potential problems/conflicts, policy issues, or local college rules. If there is a conflict between this generic syllabus and your local departmental rules, you should adhere to the latter.

Government 230x: CRN xxxx (semester)

HCC-college, campus, room, time

INSTRUCTOR: (your name)

PHONE #: Consult with your chair—you do not have to give your private phone number to students. If your chair allows you to give a departmental or campus number, please tell them not to call for minor reasons, such as absence excuses or information already stated in their syllabi.

E-MAIL ADDRESS: If you are adjunct, consult with your chair—

some chairs may require use of HCCS accounts; others may encourage you to use your own email accounts or leave the decision to you.

**OFFICE HOURS:** (office building and number; hours)

Full-time instructors are required to hold office hours. If you are adjunct, consult with your chair—you should have some regular time and place set aside for students to contact you. In most cases students will meet with you before and after class—consider where on campus you might conveniently meet with students for longer meetings. It is generally a bad idea to meet students off campus.

**WEBSITES:** List the departmental website at a minimum. You may also wish to list other relevant websites of the college, and your own Learning Web page if you have one.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** Government 230x is one of two courses designed to introduce students to the politics of government in America at the national, state, and local levels. This course is fully transferable to other colleges and universities.

**TEXTS:** Consult your chair and list required textbooks below, e.g.:

These books can be purchased from local college bookstores. Both books are also used for GOVT 230x. (*note: 230x=the other government class*) Study guides are not required, but are available in the bookstores for student purchase. Some instructors recommend the guide for students lacking strong backgrounds in the social sciences.

*(You may wish to include the following or a similar statement, depending upon your textbooks and methods.)* The learning objectives, sample questions, key terms, etc. included in most textbooks offer a good study guide. Learning objectives, outlines, and questions will help you to identify the chapter's main themes. Key terms, meanwhile, are found at the end of each chapter. These are

vocabulary words. Although it is not necessary to memorize a definition, it is important to be able to define each term in your own words and to be able to identify its significance in the context of the chapter.

**Outside Readings-** No textbook can begin to cover everything that is relevant and current in politics. When choosing supplemental readings from the e-Reader or your own sources, consider readings and exercises which enhance YOUR teaching style and meet the needs of YOUR students. Tell students how you are going to use these outside readings. Some instructors assign readings to bolster text materials, and quiz and/or test on the articles just as they do on the textbooks. Other instructors require students to read selected pieces to prepare for class activities and exercises. Still other instructors use outside readings for homework assignments. At any rate, your students need and deserve the variety of thought and writing styles that come from reading outside the textbook.

**DISABILITIES:** Any student with a documented disability (e.g., physical, learning, psychiatric, vision, hearing, etc.) who needs to arrange reasonable accommodations must contact the Disability Service Office (*name of counselor, at 713-718-xxxx*) at the beginning of each semester. Faculty are authorized to provide only the accommodations requested by the Disability Support Services Office.

You **must** include this statement (or something **very** similar) somewhere in your syllabus. The intent is to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and remind disabled students that help (“reasonable accommodations”) is available to them. Should a student contact you, there are special ADA counselors available to assist both you and the student. If the student has not yet met with the Disability Services staff you should refer the student to them for a formal “Letter of Accommodation” (which they will later present to

you). Do not provide exceptional accommodations (things you do not provide to all students) to students without their paperwork—all students must be treated equally **unless** they have their paperwork. Check with your department chair if you have any questions.

**GRADING:** Establish your own grading scale, along with a full description of the your formula (weights assigned to tests, quizzes, assignments, etc.) for deriving student grades, keeping in mind that students should have a number of opportunities to earn their final grade. (HCC requires that **at least four** component grades make up the final grade.) The HCC Government Discipline **mandates** that **at least 25%** of a student's grade be earned through **written work**, whether as essays and short answers on tests or by homework and/or papers. Be **clear** (you may wish to specify to the first decimal point) as to what constitutes an A, B, C, etc. in your class, e.g.:

A = 100 - 90

B = 89.9 - 80

C = 79.9 - 70

D = 69.9 - 60

F = 59.9 - 0

Be advised that vague comments about using your judgment to round up grades for good participation will be interpreted as an entitlement by some students, and in some cases, will inspire grade appeals. (While grading participation is not prohibited, it is an inherently subjective process of limited utility that is fraught with problems, so consult with your chair if you wish to do this.)

If you allow extra-credit work, take care that it is far more challenging than the regular work, or students will focus on it instead. It should not substitute for the regular curriculum and should not be a way for

students who do not study to magically pass the course anyway. (After all, if a student does not have time to adequately study the regular material, why should he or she take on additional tasks?) Remember, extra-credit is optional, and should not be a reward for poor performance. If used at all, it is better reserved for exceptionally hard working students who want to ensure their high grade. As a general rule, do not give extra credit opportunities to only one student or only students who ask. Extra credit, if offered, should be offered to everyone in the class. If you think you might want to give extra credit work, it is best to plan the project before the semester begins. This prevents you from feeling pressured by students to provide too much extra credit work.

You must note assignments or projects in your syllabus that will constitute some portion of the students' final grade. Unless you are not able to do so or wish to remain flexible, you should consider including the actual assignment in your syllabus rather than passing it out separately later. Finally, don't forget to specify policies/penalties regarding assignments turned in late.

**TESTING:** Establish the number, value, content, and general format of your tests. There should be at least three major tests, and most tests should contain a writing component. Remember that **at least 25%** of the student's grade must be determined by **written work**.

Consider using brief pop (or daily) quizzes over assigned readings. Quizzes not only tend to keep the students more disciplined and make class discussions more productive, but when given promptly at the beginning of the class, they usually act to diminish tardiness and focus the students' minds quickly on the subject matter of the day. They also act as good feedback and can reveal which students are at risk of failing.

Make-up policies should be established in this section of your syllabus. If you intend on requiring excuses for make-ups, keep in

mind that you will often be punishing honest students while rewarding those who are adept at concocting unverifiable excuses and using scanners to fake documents. Do not tell the students that missed tests must be excused or the makeup will be harder than the regular test unless you are willing to require explanations and judge each student's excuse for truthfulness and credibility—an onerous task.

**RESEARCH/ PROJECTS/ SPECIAL ASSIGNMENTS:** Students should be required to do some form of research or writing outside the classroom. This can be in the form of homework assignments, original research, book reviews, etc. In designing an assignment, take measures that will reduce or eliminate the possibility of student plagiarism. The more specific and structured your assignment is, the less likely you will have to deal with plagiarism. Talk to your department chair for advice regarding this.

**ATTENDANCE:** You should come to class. It is my experience that students with good attendance records usually do well in the course. The college provides that students may be dropped after missing more than six hours of class time. I do not wish to drop anyone who is making a good faith effort to succeed in the course. If it appears to me, however, that you have stopped attending, I **MAY** drop you because the alternative is to give you an F. Please **keep me informed** if you are having problems that are affecting your attendance and I will do my best to work with you. If you decide you must drop the course, please fill out the appropriate form in the college office on campus—**do not assume that I will or will not withdraw you**. The last day you can drop is (date).

You may wish to revise the above statement. The key word in the above statement is “may.” If you say you “will” withdraw the student, you will be **obligated** to do so no matter what the circumstance. If you say you “will not,” you **cannot**, so consider your policy carefully. You may wish to discuss this with your department chair.

Whatever your policy, some students will be unhappy that you did or did not withdraw them—because most instructors withdraw students who stop attending, students tend to assume they will be withdrawn and get upset if you assign them an F. However, some actually would rather receive an F, since it means their student visa status, scholarship, or health insurance will not be jeopardized, because these things generally require full-time enrollment. The key is to make your policy very clear and remind them as the drop date looms—and then stick to your stated policy.

**NOTICE:** (*mandatory statement*) As of Fall 2006, students who take a course for the third time or more will face significant tuition/fee increases at HCC and other Texas public colleges and universities. If you are considering course withdrawal because you are not earning passing grades, confer with your instructor/counselor as early as possible about your study habits, reading and writing homework, test-taking skills, attendance, course participation, and opportunities for tutoring or other assistance that might be available.

**TARDINESS/LEAVING EARLY:** HCCS does not have a formal policy regarding tardiness, although your syllabus can establish one. For example, you may choose to make three tardies/leaves equal to one absence. Of course, this only matters if you intend to withdraw or directly penalize students for absences. If you establish a penalty, you **must** clearly state the policy in your syllabus, and enforce it strictly, which can be difficult, since you will need to interrupt your lecture to carefully note each occasion.

**SCHOLASTIC DISHONESTY:** If you are caught committing scholastic dishonesty in any way, you will receive an F for the course; I do not negotiate “second chances.” Please seek me out for help if you are having problems, rather than resort to something that will tarnish your record.

You may wish to reword the preceding entirely, and you may wish to

have a different penalty—but whatever it is, define it clearly, and consider carefully the consequence. Don't make a rule that you are unwilling or unable to enforce consistently. Also, consider that if you say the student will get a zero on that portion only of the course, that may be an ineffective deterrent in some cases.

You may wish to define the term, using the following HCCS definition or a summary thereof: “Scholastic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating on a test, plagiarism, and collusion. Cheating on a test includes copying from another student's test paper; using, during a test, materials not authorized by the person giving the test; collaborating with another student during a test without authority; knowingly using, buying, selling, stealing, transporting, or soliciting in whole or part the contents of an unadministered test; or bribing another person to obtain a test that is to be administered. ‘Plagiarism’ means the appropriation of another's work and the unacknowledged incorporation of that work in one's own written work for credit. ‘Collusion’ means the unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing written work offered for credit.”

*You may wish to additionally use this:* In simplified terms, cheating is: (1) taking unchanged passages (or slightly edited) from another person's writing and portraying them as one's own; (2) submitting a paper that includes paraphrases of another person's writing without giving credit; (3) having someone else write your paper for you; (4) copying or using another person's work during in-class writing or testing; and (5) the unauthorized use of electronic devices during in-class writing or testing. Keep in mind also that whether you are cheating or not, not following testing or writing rules properly, such as communicating with your neighbor or using a cell phone during a test will be construed as cheating. This is not an exhaustive list of the forms of scholastic dishonesty. If you are in doubt, consult your instructor.

**STUDENT DISCIPLINE:** Adult behavior is expected. Disruptive

behavior/ activities, which interfere with teaching and /or learning will not be tolerated, and may result in an administrative withdrawal without refund. *This statement or something very similar provides important support for the rare case in which you must remove a disruptive student.*

**CELL PHONES AND OTHER ELECTRONIC DEVICES:** You may also wish to include a statement expressing your electronics (incl. cell phones) policy. As of this writing, HCC has no common policy regarding this. For example, at HCC-NW, the default policy is that devices are to be turned off completely (reinforced by signs in all classrooms), although instructors may set more lenient policies at their discretion, sometimes for classroom activities or note taking. Consult your chair for local college or departmental policy.

**CORE CURRICULUM:** *(The Vice Chancellor of Instruction's office requested that all syllabi include a statement about core curriculum and exemplary educational objectives. The following is one example of this:)* Social Sciences comprise at least 15 semester hours of each student's core curriculum. Essential to the learning process in the social sciences disciplines are at least six basic intellectual competencies. These include:

--**READING** at the college level, meaning having the ability to analyze and interpret a variety of printed materials— books, articles, and documents.

--**WRITING** at the college level, meaning having the ability to produce clear, correct, and coherent prose, adapted to purpose, occasion, and audience. This includes not only grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but the writing process itself.

--**SPEAKING** effectively, meaning oral communication in clear, coherent, and persuasive language appropriate to purpose, occasion, and audience.

--**LISTENING** at the college level, meaning the ability to analyze and interpret various forms of spoken communication.

--**CRITICAL THINKING**, embracing methods for applying both qualitative and quantitative skills analytically and creatively to the subject matter in order to evaluate arguments, solve problems, and construct alternative strategies.

--**COMPUTER LITERACY**, meaning having the ability to use computer-based technology in communicating, solving problems, and acquiring information. Students should also be able to evaluate the limits, problems, and possibilities associated with the use of present and future technologies.

The following are HCCS's stated **exemplary educational objectives** for its social sciences core.

--To employ the appropriate methods, technologies, and data that social and behavioral scientists use to investigate the human condition.

--To examine social institutions and processes across a range of historical periods, social structures, and cultures.

--To use and critique alternative explanatory systems or theories.

--To develop and communicate alternative explanations or solutions for contemporary social issues.

--To analyze the effects of historical, social, political, economic, cultural, and global forces on the subject of study.

--To comprehend the origins and evolution of the U.S. and Texas political systems, with a focus on the growth of political institutions, the constitutions of the U.S. and Texas, federalism, civil liberties, and human rights.

- To understand the evolution and current role of the U.S. in the world.
- To differentiate and analyze historical evidence (documentary and statistical) and differing points of view.
- To recognize and apply reasonable criteria for the acceptability of historical evidence and social research.
- To analyze, critically assess, and develop creative solutions to public policy problems.
- To recognize and assume one's responsibility as a citizen in a democratic society by learning to think for oneself, by engaging in public discourse, and by obtaining information through the news media and other appropriate information sources about politics and public policy.
- To identify and understand differences and commonalties with diverse cultures.

**COURSE CALENDAR:** Your calendar should tell the students when and what to read and study. Remember that **all appropriate textbook chapters** must be assigned. If possible, give your students daily (at least weekly) reading assignments, since students tend to put off assignments when they are assigned for a whole unit at a time. Of course, daily (per class) reading assignments are essential if you intend to use pop quizzes over the assigned readings.

Tests, holidays, the withdrawal deadline, and assignment due dates should also be on the calendar. The more you put in your calendar, the less reliant you will be on verbal or on-board announcements, which can lead to misunderstandings.

The Final Exam **must** be scheduled for the day and time dictated by HCCS in the semester's class schedule. (The time may vary by thirty

minutes from the normal meeting time, so it's a good idea to note the actual time on your syllabus.) It may be comprehensive or over the last unit alone. Alternatively, it may be comprehensive with a special emphasis on the last (untested) unit.

**OTHER INFORMATION:** You may also wish to list and describe student clubs, tutoring, labs, web resources, student services, WebCT or other Internet teaching platforms information if applicable, etc.

## Discipline/Departmental Standards

Academic standards are important to the Government Discipline of Houston Community College. The discipline stresses the importance of providing solid, college-level courses for our students. We also believe that we owe it to our students to prepare them to be informed citizens and participants in the political process.

Today, it is more important than ever that we maintain high standards in our classes. As tuition increases at the four-year universities, more and more of our students are on a traditional academic track, taking courses from us in anticipation of later transferring credits to a senior university. We have an obligation to prepare these students to take upper-level courses. Moreover, all of our students must pass competency tests before they can graduate or move on to upper-level work. Our students' future academic advancement as well as our reputation as an institution of higher learning may depend upon the quality of work we demand in our courses.

## Defining Standards

What standard is appropriate for a sophomore level college course? Although precise definitions must be left to the judgment of individual instructors, the Government Discipline believes there is an overall

frame of reference in which we can all work. In general, an appropriate college standard requires students to master a substantial proportion (at least 70 percent) of the course material as set forth in the course curriculum guide, the course goals and objectives, and the textbooks. To receive a grade of A, students should master at least 90 percent of the material.

It is easier to say what falls short of an appropriate college standard than to say precisely what one is. Exams that require little knowledge and/or reward poor performance hardly meet the standard. For example, one semester a government instructor gave a final exam consisting entirely of questions asked on earlier tests. The maximum possible score on the test was 125 plus a possible ten bonus points for class participation. To make an A, a student needed a raw score of only 90. Consequently, a student who received all ten bonus points could afford to miss 45 out of 125 possible test points and still make an A on the final. So much for academic standards. It's hardly any wonder that almost all of this instructor's students made A's and B's in the course.

A class that fails to cover the curriculum also falls below an acceptable standard. Survey courses must survey the field. Otherwise our students won't be prepared for more advanced work.

## **Maintaining/Upgrading Standards**

Instructors can take concrete steps to maintain/upgrade academic standards in their courses by evaluating their policies in testing, grading, extra credit awards, and writing requirements. We should test on the full spectrum of material covered in the class and the assigned readings. Questions should vary in difficulty from elementary to sophisticated. Unless a test is unusually difficult (determined beforehand on the basis of some objective criteria rather than after the fact on the basis of student performance), we should grade on the standard grading scale.

Extra credit/bonus awards should be reasonable and should reflect academic achievement. Quantity should not substitute for quality. Students who are not passing tests should not be able to pass the class with extra credit. Extra credit should be a small amount which helps students push themselves up just a little bit into the next grading category. Allowing students to resubmit poor work may be acceptable if it results in better work. Two D papers, however, should not be the equivalent of one C paper.

Few instructors would try to justify extra credit for mere attendance, but extra credit for class participation that is awarded automatically or almost automatically to nearly everyone in the class is no better. If you give credit for participation, having an organized, objective plan for evaluating student performance is crucial. Think through your plan—will students who are shy or culturally predisposed toward passivity get D's and F's?

It is also important that students be required to demonstrate reasonable competence in their written work. Competence includes both the content and form of the writing. Some instructors take the position that they should grade students on content rather than form, reasoning that they are not English instructors. However, students must learn to communicate ideas clearly and effectively. Any student who claims to understand the material but is unable to express the knowledge on paper doesn't really know the material. Consequently, written assignments should be graded at least in part on the quality of the writing.

Avoid doing the work of the course for the students. Giving the students outlines of your notes or of the chapters tells students that they don't have to do the work themselves. Notetaking is an important skill—it teaches students to prioritize information and see connections in what they write down.

## **Cushioning the Blow**

Unfortunately, many of our students may not be prepared to measure up to college work. How can we implement higher standards without dramatically increasing failure/dropout rates? Here are a few suggestions.

First, identify students who lack basic skills and encourage them to take developmental courses before they tackle courses that require fairly good reading and writing skills. One instructor has students complete a short written assignment the first day of class and then encourages those who are deficient to take developmental English courses such as English 0300. This is an area where we need to work closely with counselors.

Second, prepare your students psychologically to work and to achieve. The instructor that predicts on the first day of class that 20 percent of the students will fail and another 40 percent will drop out is programming students for failure. Instead, tell your students that you expect them to work and to achieve, but that you will help them to succeed. Let them know that you will help them. Suppose you assign a term paper. Tell them you expect a good paper, but also tell them that you will spend some time explaining how to go about preparing the paper.

Finally, go the extra mile to teach your students how to take notes, how to study, how to write essay exams - in general, how to succeed at college by really trying. For example, one instructor gives her students a handout on taking notes. Other instructors make presentations on writing essay exams.

## **Conclusion: The Good Guy/Bay Guy Syndrome**

Are high standards anti-student? No one enjoys assigning low grades to students. The truth is, of course, that high standards are pro-student. Social promotions, watered-down courses, and grade inflation benefit no one - not the educational system, not the students, and not society.

Moreover, serious students admire and respect demanding instructors far more than a teacher they consider a soft touch. In the final analysis, then, the real good guys are instructors who are tough but fair. When we demand high standards from our students, when we guide, them to achieve those goals, and when we hold them accountable for their successes and failures, we are serving their long-term interests as well as those of the college and society. After all, isn't that the goal of the community college?

## Testing and Grading

Here are some tips on how you can maintain academic standards without alienating your students.

§Test on written materials in the textbooks and added readings in addition to classroom material. Otherwise, students get wise and quit reading outside of class. When this happens, they aren't exposed to a sufficient amount of information to master the subject satisfactorily.

§Identify what you think is important for your students to know. Do this for their reading as well as in-class material. This can be accomplished in many different ways: outlines, the repetition of important points, quizzes, comprehensive study guides, etc. Be careful that you are not crossing the line and doing the students' work for them (ie. giving outlines and notes over chapters or lectures).

§Test students on the material that you think is important. The ability to memorize minutia is not a skill that we want to stress.

Instead, ask students to explain the basic concepts that you have identified as significant. Students can hardly complain about

tests that focus on material that you have previously stressed as being very salient (through the use of outlines, the repetition of important points, quizzes, comprehensive study guides, etc.).

§Ask questions that require students to go beyond rote

memorization. For example, “Suppose you have been hired to manage Joe Brown’s 2008 republican presidential campaign.

How

would you change your candidate’s message as he moves from campaigning in primary states to campaigning in caucus states?”

**§Don't use true/false questions on major exams.** Since students get half right just by guessing, these are not good for distinguishing performance.

§Don't use questions from the instructor's manuals without thinking about them first. Not every question may fit your teaching style.

§Don't be a critical parent. Praise students for good performance and give suggestions on good study techniques, but don't scold students for being lazy. What good does it do?

§Throw out test questions that in retrospect seem unclear. Test knowledge, not how well students can decipher question intent.

**§Don't curve grades unless you think a test is flawed.** Even then, I think it is better to discard poor questions than to curve everything. In general, grade curving is grade inflation.

§Give students useful feedback on tests. Exams are learning

tools. Use them to teach by showing students not only what they did wrong, but how they can improve. On essay questions and papers, clearly explain the basis of a grade. It is also good to identify both strengths and weaknesses in a paper.

§Don't write sarcastic comments on tests. You are not anonymously reviewing someone's research for an academic journal.

§Nonetheless, be direct. If a paper is poorly organized, say "this paper is poorly organized." Then, elaborate on that statement, showing how it could have been done more clearly.

§Structure essay questions to make grading more rigorous and more objective. Consider the following question:

*The case of McCulloch v. Maryland is the most important judicial decision dealing with the federal system. Write an essay on the case structured as follows:*

- a) *trace the historical background of the case; (2 pts.)*
- b) *outline the constitutional issues raised by the case; (2 pts)*
- c) *explain the Supreme Court's ruling in the case; (3 pts) and*
- d) *discuss the importance of the ruling for policymaking and the federal system. (3pts.)*

The question clearly tells the student what you expect and identifies

the values you assign to each aspect of the essay. When you grade

the essay, you can credit the student with points insofar as each

section of the answer is well done. This manner of essay question

writing also makes grading easier for you and reduces student

complaints.

§Vary the difficulty of test questions from the most basic to the relatively sophisticated. An A student is not a student who knows 90 percent of basic, elementary ideas, but rather one who can go beyond the basics to a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the material.

§Don't be defensive if students question grades or a particular test question. Listen to their point of view, and then do what is fair. Be professional and you can prevent disputes from becoming personal.

§Emphasize that you want students to succeed and to do well in the sense that you want them to learn. Keep in mind that education is not an adversarial process. Instead, we are working with our students to help them master material and to learn to think.

## **Critical Thinking**

Students in Government courses at Houston Community College are expected to do more than simply memorize facts and figures about the world of politics, and our instructors are committed helping our students do just that. Facts are useful and necessary if one is to be politically literate, but students must be able to apply the concepts they learn to concrete situations. Ideally they would be able to explain and evaluate relationships among political actors, events and ideas. In short, in addition to exposing students to facts and concepts about politics, part of our mission is to teach students to think.

In order to get students to think beyond simple memorization, instructors must ask them questions that require thought while they are in the classroom, completing written assignments and exams. The following is a guide useful for developing critical-thinking questions

while teaching:

**KNOWLEDGE**—Requires students to identify and recall information

Who, what, when, where, how? Describe.

**COMPREHENSION**—Organization and selection of facts and ideas

Retell in your own words.

**APPLICATION**—Use of facts, rules, and principles

How is \_\_\_\_\_ an example of \_\_\_\_\_?

How is \_\_\_\_\_ related to \_\_\_\_\_?

Why is \_\_\_\_\_ significant?

**ANALYSIS**—Separation of a whole into component parts

What are the parts or features of \_\_\_\_\_?

Classify \_\_\_\_\_ according to \_\_\_\_\_?

How does \_\_\_\_\_ compare/contrast with \_\_\_\_\_?

What evidence can you list for \_\_\_\_\_?

**SYNTHESIS**—Combination of ideas to form a new whole

What would you predict/infer from \_\_\_\_\_?

What ideas can you add to \_\_\_\_\_?

How would you create/design a new \_\_\_\_\_?

What might happen if you combined \_\_\_\_\_?

What solutions would you suggest for \_\_\_\_\_?

EVALUATION—Development of opinions, judgments, or decisions

Do you agree \_\_\_\_\_?

What do you think about \_\_\_\_\_?

What is the most important \_\_\_\_\_?

How would you decide about \_\_\_\_\_?

What criteria would you use to assess \_\_\_\_\_?

Again, to ensure that students have the opportunity to develop critical-thinking skills instructors must be sure to ask these types of questions not only in class but on exams and in assignments as well. Asking these types of questions only in class but not in exams or assignments will result in students focusing only on memorization. Equally ineffective, and perhaps unfair, would be to ask students to answer these types of questions on exams or in other graded work without having first practiced the skills they require during classroom meetings.

The following are two websites with additional information related to teaching critical thinking:

<http://www.criticalthinking.org/>

<http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/itl/graphics/main.html>

## **Service Learning in HCCS Government Courses**

## Service Learning in Political Science

*Source: The American Political Science Association*

The development of service learning programs is becoming more common in today's classroom. By actively participating in service experiences that are directly related to political science courses, students are applying the political knowledge and skills they gain in the classroom and learning first hand the importance of civic engagement. This site has been developed to help faculty and administrators better understand the role service learning can play in university setting.

### Resources

- [Syllabi](#)
- [Toolkit for Service Learning in Political Science](#)
- [Articles and Books](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Funding and Awards](#)
- [Service Learning Programs in Colleges and Universities](#)
- [Political Scientists Active in Service Learning](#)
- [Organizations and Online Resources](#)

APSA's initiatives on service learning were supported, in part, by a grant from Campus Compact with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts.

APSA's online resources are available at:  
[http://www.apsanet.org/section\\_246.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/section_246.cfm)

### Frequently Asked Questions

#### 1. What is "service learning"?

*Service-learning is a partnership between academic institutions and communities. In contrast to traditional course-based projects that primarily use the community to exemplify a classroom principle, this reciprocal agreement allows communities to identify the needs that the student will fulfill. Instructors then structure the classroom materials around this service experience.*

*Reflection upon the service project is key to this transfer of practical experience to classroom learning. Reflection, facilitated by the classroom instructor, distinguishes service-learning from other hands-on initiatives such as volunteering or internships in which a systematic analysis and application of the service experience may not occur. Through this practice-to-theory format, service-learning engages students with hands-on learning techniques that are then supported with classroom theory.*

*In its departure from the traditional lecture formats that characterize today's "academic culture," service-learning often meets resistance. Consequently, it is important that institutions support and recognize instructors who accept the challenge of integrating their classrooms into service initiatives.*

Digested from Edward Zlotkowski's "Pedagogy and Engagement" in Robert G. Bringle, et. al, *Colleges and Universities as Citizens*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999, p. 96-120.

Because service-learning is associated with promoting a strong sense civic responsibility and efficacy, it is especially relevant for Political Science. By actively participating in service experiences that are directly related to their political science courses, students are applying the political knowledge and skills they gain in the classroom and learning first hand the importance of civic engagement.

## **2. How does service-learning differ from traditional community service projects or internships?**

Devoted to connecting academic learning to real world service experience, service-learning moves beyond traditional volunteer or internship initiatives. While volunteer projects provide a necessary and worthwhile community service, they typically offer few structured opportunities to reflect upon and draw academic conclusions from service work. On the other hand, though internships provide a strong academic framework, serving the community is rarely their priority. Service-learning addresses these deficiencies by combining the service of volunteerism with the academic focus of internships to create an experience both enriching in its service application and edifying in its scholarly reflection.

The September 2000 issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics* features a symposium on service learning in political science. This collection of essays addresses current research on how service learning affects civic outcomes, effects of community service and service learning on political attitudes, how the concept of "public work" can enrich the service learning experiences of faculty and students, and engaging students the study of politics and power through service.

There is considerable literature on "service learning" versus "community service" or "traditional internships." If you would like to learn more about this, consult *Experiencing Citizenship: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in Political Science* by Richard M. Battistoni and William E. Hudson ([American Association of Higher Education](#), 1997, ISBN 1-56377-007-5, ) and *Education for Civic Engagement in Democracy: Service Learning and Other Promising Practices* edited by Sheilah Mann and John J. Patrick (Eric Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2000, ISBN 0-941339-50-5).

### **3. What is the benefit of service learning in political science?**

There is evidence that service learning increase students' enthusiasm for course materials, efficacy, and sense of social and civic

responsibility. Service learning is also associated with academic retention and with greater student confidence in the material they have learned. APSA has collected several [resources](#) that provide detailed and varied assessments of the impact of service learning.

#### **4. How do you organize a service learning course?**

There are many effective ways to organize a service learning course. View [sample syllabi](#) from political science faculty who are actively conducting service learning courses on their campuses. This collection of syllabi represent several methods of structuring service learning courses. There are also exemplary [political science service learning programs](#) at colleges, universities and community colleges throughout the country. In addition, [national service learning organizations](#) offer resources which will help you organize a service learning course.

The American Association for Higher Education and the National Society for Experiential Education maintain a list of [institutions which are models of good practice in service learning](#).

The [Carolina Center for Public Service](#) and its APPLS Service Learning Program (Assisting People in Planning Learning Experiences in Service) is a good example of how to organize a service learning program and offers ideas on how to seek support for starting and sustaining a program. While this is a university-wide program and enjoys extensive community support, you may be able to apply the same themes and procedures within your department.

#### **Sample of Service Learning Syllabus Statement**

The service learning objectives of the course are:

(1) to promote an understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of the study of American Government and community service, including the influence of social, cultural, political, economic,

and religious factors in community life;

(2) to develop an awareness and responsibility concerning the common good and just relationships in the larger society;

(3) to explore the links between citizen education and service learning, including an examination of what does "service" mean, should people do service, why do people serve, and what is the relationship of service and the educational process;

(4) to introduce the key ideas, concepts, and themes that undergird the Public Policy and Community Service major; and

(5) to strengthen students' analytical, written, oral, and leadership skills.

### **Service Learning Partner Sites**

These and other HCCS Service Learning online resources are available at:

[http://www.hccs.edu/system/Instructional\\_Services/serLrning/serLrning.html](http://www.hccs.edu/system/Instructional_Services/serLrning/serLrning.html)

## **Encouraging Student Writing\***

Writing matters. Effective use of writing assignments helps students

to learn the course materials, promote analytical thinking, and develop communication skills. Through writing assignments, students interested in political science learn to be quantitative (use research statistics) as well as qualitative (use of observations), and an appreciation for the work of authorities in the discipline. Thus, students can relate writing assignments to the work that political scientists do and be prepared for the demands associated with studying in the field. *Please note the Government Department requires that 25% of the course grade comes from written work.*

Many students come to college with limited writing experiences. There is some familiarity with the mechanics of writing, but often students are unprepared to do writing assignments associated specifically with the social sciences. Professors must be committed to assisting students encountering these new cognitive tasks. Professors must make certain that students understand the professors' purposes and expectations and then show students how to go about their tasks. Below are some suggestions for designing writing assignments that will motivate students.

1. Write clear and precise essay questions.
2. Provide clear guidelines explaining your expectations for research papers. Teach students about research-- how to integrate primary or secondary material, cite sources, and evaluate the credibility of what they read. Identify the particular style that you want students to use in preparing their research papers.
3. Prepare an actual written assignment in which you give clear, precise details of what you want rather than verbal directions or a few lines scribbled on the chalkboard.

4. Take steps to prevent plagiarism. Define plagiarism clearly and thoroughly in your syllabus. Write assignments that are original, current and specific so that students cannot find exact information to copy. Consider having students prepare in advance but do the actual writing in class.
5. The best assignments are those in which students conceptualize something of interest to them. Explicitly linking an assignment to the goals of the course will help students see its value. You must confirm that an assignment is a way of learning the material, not just busy work.
6. Familiarize students with research tools in the social sciences. Today students use the Internet for much of their research, but professors must teach them how to access useful, credible sources.
7. Help student organize the information for their assignments. Discuss strategies for revising, editing, and proofreading drafts of their papers.
8. Provide opportunities for students to ask questions throughout the duration of an assignment. Allow five minutes for questions at the beginning of class, or time for one-on-one consultations during office hours, or e-mail responses to electronically submitted questions.
9. As you schedule due dates, consider the real-world contexts in which students live. The best writing assignment can fall through if due the same day as a major exam or scheduled over times when the library is closed.

10. HCC has many non-native speakers of English. They face

some unique challenges when writing in the social

sciences. Professors also have unique problems when reading, commenting on and grading their papers.

Counselors can acquaint students with the necessary resources available to help them.

11. Students with documented disabilities face and present special challenges. ADA counselors can assist with providing help to these students.

12. Constructive feedback guides and motivates students to do

more effective writing and learning about the course topics.

Developing a grading grid and making that available with the assignment can help students write more proficiently.

It follows from these suggestions that writing as a tool can help to improve the student's learning experience. Professors, therefore, need to pay greater attention to the role of writing in the discipline and take concrete steps to make writing assignments an integral part of their course requirements.

\* This essay is based on information taken from an essay by Neal Tannahill and *Writing Across the Curriculum*.

## Using Technology

## **Introduction:**

In recent years we have seen a revolution in the ease with which technology can be included in pedagogy. Innovations include, effective and widespread Internet capabilities, the installation of wireless systems on most campuses, and the advancement of DVD technology to allow instructors to create their own video collections.

It is easy to become enamored with these new technological capabilities but it is essential to remember that they can never replace effective teaching as the number one tool for facilitating student success. If used properly, they can make that task easier or enhance its effectiveness but if that basis is not there technology can easily become a monumental waste of valuable classroom time. For instance, merely running a video in class does not in and of itself constitute teaching. Using short video clips as a basis for subsequent discussion, on the other hand, can be a very effective tool for bringing the relevancy of a subject home to the students and stimulating them in a way that lecture often misses.

We can break down the effectiveness of technology enhancements into three basic areas and evaluate the appropriateness of a particular technology in meeting that need. Those areas are (in no particular order): 1) Classroom presentation, 2) Classroom logistics, and 3) Additional learning opportunities. Using these criteria, let's look at various technological enhancements.

*Be aware that not all campuses have the same technological infrastructure as of Fall2006. Also, don't assume that off-campus locations such as high schools where Dual Credit courses are taught will have any technology unless you pack it in yourself.*

## **Technologies:**

1. Internet

- a. Classroom presentation – The chief advantage of the Internet as a part of classroom lecture is the ability to present “live” information. Examples include:
  - i. Breaking news – There are any number of “news aggregators” that present news in a live fashion. One method is to set up a Yahoo, Netscape, or other service that offers RSS (really simple syndication) feeds from the major newspapers and wire services. This way breaking news stories that are relevant to the class can be presented as a point of discussion for that lecture. These can be loaded prior to class if your classroom does not provide Internet access.
  - ii. Informational sites – For some lectures there are excellent public resources available on the Internet. One example would be [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org) which tracks campaign contributions. This site can used to demonstrate the effects of campaign reform legislation as well as the incumbency advantage when it comes to raising money. It can be searched by legislator or candidate name (Federal government only) and can be a very effective visual teaching tool. Other sites offer similar opportunities. Internet access in the classroom (wireless or otherwise) is required to be able to do this.
  - iii. Learning Objects – Learning Objects are applets (mini applications) that simulate some aspect of the subject being taught. The best repository for them is [www.merlot.org](http://www.merlot.org). Right now the political science offerings are fairly limited but new ones are being added every day and so it is likely their collection in this area will improve. Some of these are downloadable so can be run without classroom Internet access.
- b. Classroom logistics – Having a class website on The Learning Web can greatly enhance communications with students.
  - i. Handouts, syllabi, and supplemental readings can all be

posted on this site and allow 7/24 access to students and eliminates the problem of students losing handouts. Be aware of the copyright restrictions on posting copyrighted material on your site. The FAIR USE portion, as of now, requires that students only have access to the material in a given semester and that only portions of copyrighted items be posted (same basic deal as Xeroxing materials). (A good primer on copyright law is at

<http://www.utsystem.edu/ogc/intellectualproperty/cprtindx.htm>.) It is recommended that some sort of password-protection be added for copyrighted readings – either using WebCT or a separate page.

- ii. A Learning Web page can also be used for classroom announcements and assignments
  - c. Additional Learning Opportunities – Many departments offer research pages that provide links for students seeking additional information for the purposes of research papers or just plain curiosity. The Northwest College site is: <http://nwc.hccs.edu/govt/resources/research.html>
2. Hybrid Courses and DE Courses
- a. The use of WebCT or other technologies can provide a useful addendum to an in-person course. This is called a Hybrid course where a portion of instruction can be done online. Many of the features discussed in point 1 above can be incorporated into a WebCT course with the assistance of your local Curriculum Innovation Center (CIC).
  - b. Classroom Logistics – Online testing for both Hybrid and DE courses is available via WebCT. Be aware that the problems of cheating and plagiarism are a particular concern when using this feature and assignments should be constructed accordingly. When used properly, however, online testing can free up valuable classroom time for lecture and other activities.
  - c. Distance Education is a fully online course with little or no

- classroom interaction. WebCT is generally used as a platform for this medium.
3. “Clickers” – One of the latest innovations to emerge in the classroom environment is the use of interactive “clickers.” These remotes allow real time feedback from the students to gauge comprehension and take surveys of classroom opinion.
    - a. Classroom Presentation – “Clickers” can add a new element and make the students feel like they are real part of the presentation through the use of interactive surveys.
    - b. Classroom Logistics – Instant feedback on comprehension can let the instructor know what is working and what is not in his or her presentation of the material
    - c. Additional Learning Opportunities – It is conceivable that clickers could be used to develop interactive activities in class although that aspect of their use has been relatively unexplored as of right now.
  4. DVD technology –It is important to remember that DVDs should be used to enhance lecture and discussion and not as a substitute for lecture and discussion.
    - a. Classroom Presentation
      - i. Short clips such as campaign ads, scenes from relevant films, or news items can often be used to enhance the presentation of lecture by illustrating in a visual way the application of a particular point. Sources for these videos include the Internet Archive <http://www.archive.org/> as well as textbook publishers, many of whom have recently started assembling DVDs of clips. Many of these clips can be compiled, edited, and burned into custom collections using CIC or library resources. Be sure to check the relevant copyright restrictions before doing this. (See <http://www.utsystem.edu/ogc/intellectualproperty/cprtindx.htm>.)
      - ii. DVDs offer significant advantages over videotape in the classroom environment. It’s easy to use parts of longer films since DVDs don’t have to be rewound for every

- class. Using many computer applications, bookmarks can be made to immediately go to any part of a film.
- iii. DVDs often offer supplements that can be used in a lecture setting.
  - b. Classroom Logistics – Since many different film clips can be stored on one DVD disc, this significantly reduces the materials the instructor needs to bring to class.
5. Presentation Software – Presentation software can be a useful tool in integrating lecture materials but instructors should always be aware that there is a potential when using this tool to vastly oversimplify issues. Also, instructors find that students focus solely on the visual presentation of the slides and tune out the instructor's lecture over the material. Often, the information on the slides is the only things students write down in class notes. Consider using the slides for the audiovisual elements (charts, graphs, film clips) that enhance the instructor's lecture.
- a. Classroom Presentation – Programs such as PowerPoint or Keynote can add and integrate audiovisual elements into a seamless presentation and, as such, may improve student attentiveness unless overused
  - b. Classroom Logistics – PowerPoint and Keynote provide a more dynamic and effective presentation than traditional overheads and, as such, provide an attractive replacement for that technology. Since items are stored on disc, it is much easier to keep up with them than a stack of overheads.

***Technology can bring spice and relevancy to many discussions about government. At the same time, care must always be taken so that the technology does not overshadow the material that should still come from traditional sources such as books and instructor presentation.***

## **Effective Classroom Management**

Behavior problems are relatively rare in college classrooms, but

when they do arise the learning environment can be seriously compromised. There is no single, best approach to creating a positive learning environment in the classroom because the styles of professors vary greatly. There are numerous possible causes of disruption. College policy offers some remedy for difficult situations. However, preventing formal adjudication of conflicts is usually possible.

## **Problems That Might Arise**

One benefit of teaching at the college level is that disruptive behavior is relatively rare compared to the problems that K-12 teachers face daily. Most students understand that they may be expelled from classes and from the school much more easily than was the case in high school. Moreover, the typical college student is more motivated to learn than what might be the case in lower grades. With well-considered classroom management techniques, most problems can be prevented. However, not all students have been socialized into the norms of college culture. Many community college students are the first in their family to attend college. Many are very young, have poorly developed strategies for coping with stress, and are less than serious about their studies. Less frequently, we may encounter students with serious psychological problems. In cases involving psychological problems, it is important to involve your college's disability support office since the support personnel have experience dealing with students with psychological challenges. It is impossible to always predict what behavior problems we will have to deal with, but the following list suggests some likely ones:

- arriving late and leaving early
- sleeping, "spacing out," or listening to music in class
- side talking during lecture
- monopolizing discussions
- aggressively challenging the instructor
- making sexist, racist, or other uncivil comments

- cheating, collusion, and plagiarism
- threatening language or violent behavior

## **Prevention**

The best prevention is clear communication of expectations. Students will learn that expectations are not identical from class to class. Some professors will be offended by behaviors that are tolerated by other professors. One way to communicate expectations is with a syllabus statement of the code of conduct that is expected. The syllabus statement should respect the dignity and the civil rights of the adult student, and should comply with HCC policy. (An example of such a statement is: *"Adult behavior is expected. Disruptive behavior/activities that interfere with teaching and/or learning will not be tolerated, and may result in an administrative withdrawal without refund."*)

Beyond these limitations, however, it is reasonable to include a detailed description of appropriate and inappropriate conduct. Addressing students with courtesy and respect will go a long way toward preventing disruptive behavior. Most students will be able to conform to rules, even if they do not agree with them, if the tone and tenor of the professor are civil and respectful. Listening patiently to complaints is crucial. Most students with complaints want most of all to feel they have been heard, even if the resolution is not to their liking. It is helpful to be on the lookout for signs of discomfort with the classroom environment so that potential troubles can be handled before they manifest as open conflict. If penalties are associated with particular behaviors, these should be in accordance with college policy and should be spelled out clearly in writing.

## **Remedies**

Usually, it is not a good idea to address the behavior of individual

students by calling them down publicly. Avoid chiding or arguing with the student or debating the student's behavior in the presence of the other students. A private conversation is enough in most cases to get a student on track. If the situation is particularly uncomfortable for the professor -- such as addressing sexually suggestive behavior or dealing with a student who is physically intimidating -- a private e-mail (so that there is a written record) or meeting with a third party present (i.e. counselor, other faculty member) may be the best alternative. It is very important to apply penalties consistently. For example, if the syllabus states that cheating results in failure, there should be no backing down from this rule.

When problems persist after one or more private communications, you may wish to enlist the help of student services and request that the student visits a counselor. Department chairs should also be consulted so that they will be aware of the problem and so that they can also offer assistance.

A few cautionary notes are warranted here: You may remove a person **for the duration of that particular lecture** if you have first asked/warned/pleaded with them to change their disruptive behavior to no avail (they can return the next day). If the student does not obey your request that they leave the classroom, you should remain calm and summon security. You may remove a student for the day if they are disrupting the class, however, **you don't have the direct authority to permanently remove a student**—at least not without **"due process."** In this case, *due process* primarily means documenting the behavior and giving the student a chance to respond to your observations. When writing a complaint about the student's behavior, stick to **observable facts**. Depersonalize--refer to the student's behavior, not the student. Explain why the behavior is interfering with **"effective classroom management"** or the **"effective learning process."** Do not use exclamation marks or all-capitals-words, do not draw conclusions about intent or future possibilities, and don't speculate about what you suspect but have no

evidence. Do include documentary data such as times/dates/etc. When writing, consider that what you write might be used one day as evidence in a civil case, so make it clear that your interest is teaching/learning effectiveness, fairness, equity, etc.--and not your opinion, comfort level, or personal style. In consultation with the department chair, it might be decided to refer students to the Dean of Student Development for formal adjudication. A code of conduct with disciplinary procedures are described in the HCC Student Handbook chapter titled "Student Life" (which can be read online at <http://www.hccs.edu/students/handbook/HandbookHome2.html>).

If a situation grows threatening or violent, do not hesitate to call the campus police. Dispatch is available 24 hours per day by calling (713) 718-8888. Of course, dialing 911 is always an option.

## Resources

For more tips about classroom management, the following Internet resources are recommended:

- Manatee Community College Resource Page  
<http://www.mccfl.edu/pages/1389.asp>
- Arizona State University Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence  
<http://clte.asu.edu/teachingresources/teaching/>
- University of Michigan Center for Research on Teaching and Learning  
<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/Incivility.html>

## Hints for Productive Discussions

Class discussions are helpful teaching and learning tools. The best discussions are those that require students to prepare answers to specific questions. Giving study topics or questions to students in advance will give them an opportunity to study issues and to prepare thoughtful comments. Class discussions tend to work badly when instructors simply say, “Read Chapter X and be prepared to discuss it.”

Discussions over video/DVD material will improve if you provide the students with a list of points to consider while they are watching the film.

Current events discussions are also helpful when they are used correctly. Don't assume that your students have been following the news because they probably haven't. Give them a specific current events assignment. Be careful: Students perceive current events discussions that are not tied into the curriculum to be a waste of time (and they are right).

When using discussions as teaching tools, limit personal stories unless they tie directly into course material. If you talk about your weekend activities, etc., the students will consider it a waste of time. Likewise, be cautious about expressing personal political views too much. Students literally think you will grade them more harshly if you and they disagree politically.

Simulations, while requiring a great deal of preparation on the part of the instructor, are popular with students. They also serve to connect the curriculum to the student's world. In conducting simulations, realize that students often fail to grasp the purpose of the group exercise. Be sure to debrief after an exercise to ensure students understand its learning goal.

Finally, students generally dislike group projects.! *Workers* and *slackers* end up sharing the same credit. On the other hand, since group work projects are widely used in the “real world”, well-designed activities that anticipate student concerns are worth your effort.

## Sample Assignments

### Government 2301

#### 1) U.S. is older than ever according to 2000 Census

<http://www.iog.wayne.edu/transitions/articles/8.6.01.2.59PM.html>

As you learn about the “graying of America” consider our operative definition of politics (“the process for determining who gets what, when, and how”). You are expected to discuss your own understanding of the policy implications of this important demographic trend.

- How do you think the aging of American will impact public policymaking?
- What policies will dominate the national political agenda in the next ten years?
- What kinds of competition for policies do you anticipate in the next ten years?

#### 2) [Textbook debate in Texas over sex education](#)

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5469437/>

I would like you discuss your understanding of textbook policymaking in Texas and how different forces shape decisions that

are made. There is plenty of controversy involved in sex education politics, so take a look at what different sides are saying.

- What do you think about the role of the State Board of Education in textbook adoption decisions?
- Should the larger public play a role in formulating textbook selection decisions?
- In your opinion, is abstinence only sex education sufficient?
- Does the state government have a responsibility to inform young people about birth control and safer sex options?

### **3) Latino politicians gain clout in US**

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0519/p01s01-uspo.html>

Let's discuss your own understanding of the recent elections of Latinos to public office in the United States.

- What factors account for the steady increase in the numbers of Latino elected officials?
- How are Latino candidates perceived by other racial and ethnic groups in the electorate?
- Do you agree or disagree that Villaraigosa's win (in the recent Los Angeles mayoral election) is meaningful to Hispanics coast to coast as a political model to emulate?

### **4) Article Reviews**

#### **a) Young Voters and the 2004 Election**

[http://www.vanishingvoter.org/2004\\_Releases.shtml](http://www.vanishingvoter.org/2004_Releases.shtml)

#### **b) Toward Constitutional Democracy around the World: An American Perspective**

<http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itdhr/0304/ijde/howard.htm>

### **c) The Parties March Toward Extinction?: Whether they win or lose in 2004, the mainstream political parties must change or die**

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5591533/>

## **Overview of the Article Review Assignment**

You will have an opportunity to read and review an important article describing changes in election participation in 2004 or the American Constitution. Please read the article carefully as its contents help direct us in the study of political participation this semester. You will be responsible for writing a review of the article following the format described below. You must write in your own words and though you can share ideas with your classmates, you must submit your own individual work. There is a severe penalty for collusion and/or plagiarism.

## **Article Review Format**

Your article review will be organized into four paragraphs and *must* include the following elements:

- **What general subject matter is discussed in the article?**
- **What point does author make in the article?**
- **What have you learned from reading this article?**
- **How does this knowledge relate to what you are learning in class?**

To do this exercise well, *you must spend some time thinking* about the material presented in the article. Your writing must be clear and precise. **You must write in your own words - do not use quotes and do not paraphrase from the article.** As a new political scientist, you

should write your first two paragraphs from an empirical (value-free) perspective. To do this well, you should set aside your own biases and opinions and relate the required material in a scholarly and thoughtful paper. In the third and fourth paragraphs you should relate your own learning from and opinions about the article (normative perspective).

## 5) Political Ideology

We are studying the role of political culture in the shaping of American and Texas politics. One reflection of political culture is the extent of differing beliefs about the purpose and role of government in society. A deeply held system of beliefs about the purpose and role of government constitutes a *political ideology*. As you have learned, Americans and Texans share some common “core values” (like attachment to democracy, a strong preference for capitalism, and ideals like freedom, equality, and justice), which narrows the extent of ideological variation in the population. But Americans do have ideological preferences. Have you ever wondered what your political ideology might be? Have you ever assessed your own political beliefs? In this exercise, you will explore the important concept of political ideology by taking **The Political Compass Test** and writing about your findings.

Go to:

<http://www.politicalcompass.org/>

Read the main page of the website and when done, click on “click here to start.” You will be asked dozens of questions that attempt to assess your personal political philosophy by gauging your views on how you see the country and the world, your attitude about the economy, your social values, how you see the wider society, religion, and sexual relations. Plan on spending several minutes answering the questions. The more honest your answers, the more accurate the results.

Read **About The Political Compass** carefully. The discussion about assessing both economic and social dimensions of political beliefs is important. Be sure you understand the terms Left (communism), Right (neo-liberalism), Authoritarian (fascism), and Libertarian (anarchism). Look carefully at your “result.” Think about what it means. Then scroll all the way to the bottom of the page to see how you compare with other people in the world.

Next, click on the **US Election 2004** and look at where John Kerry and George Bush fall on the chart. Are you surprised?

I recognize that the questions are simplistic and your personal political philosophy may vary from the “result” you get from the test. But do take it and consider what your result means

You will write up a one page paper in which you explain your personal political philosophy using the terms from The Political Compass **and** how you think you acquired it. What did you learn from taking this test?

## **6) a)Federal/State Relations**

American federal/state relations in recent years have been strained by issues like a terminally-ill patient’s right to die (Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act) and the use of cannabis for treating certain medical conditions (several states have legalized the use of “medical marijuana”). I want you to explore the issue of cannabis as medicine in light of the concepts of federalism you are learning.

*(It is very important that you do not get too emotionally attached either in favor of or opposition to the use of cannabis for medical treatment. This exercise really is a means for you to explore how you feel about the relative exercise of power by the federal government and the state governments in the United States.)*

### Step 1

Click on this link to access information about the pros and cons of medical marijuana.

<http://medicalmarijuanaprocon.org/>

In the website you will find the most recent information about the June 6, 2005, United States Supreme Court ruling against states that had legalized the use of medical marijuana. Read about the Court's decision and its use of the Interstate Commerce Clause as the basis of its majority opinion. Then, from the homepage, scroll down the Medical marijuana Issues information until you see **Legal Issues**. Under **Legal Issues**, click on **General Legal Issues**. Under **Questions**, click on and read the following:

- How many states have favorable medical marijuana laws?
- What are some of the pro/con arguments made before U.S. courts about medical marijuana's legal status?
- Does a state's medical marijuana laws put that state in violation of federal drug law?

Of course, you are free to navigate the full website, but remember, I want you to focus on the relationship between the federal and state governments when writing your paper.

## Step 2

Be sure you understand the constitutional and legal arguments on both sides of the medical marijuana debate. Then prepare a one page essay in your own words in which you *defend either the rights of the people of the states to pass and implement medicinal marijuana laws or the federal government's power over the states to enforce the federal ban on marijuana*. I want you to work into your essay your understanding of the constitutional basis of federalism, as described in Tannahill's *American Government* textbook (see especially pages 69 – 77). You need to be clear in voice and use of words in order to defend your

position.

## 6) b) Federal/State Relations

American federal-state relations in recent years have been strained by issues like a terminally-ill patient's right to die (Oregon's Death with Dignity Act) and the use of cannabis for treating certain medical conditions (ten states have legalized the use of "medical marijuana"). I want you to explore the issue of euthanasia (the right to die) in light of the concepts of federalism you are learning in Module 2.

*(It is very important that you do not get too emotionally attached either in favor of or opposition to the right of individuals with terminal illnesses to die. This exercise really is a means for you to explore how you feel about the relative exercise of power by the federal government and the state governments in the United States.)*

### Step 1

Click on this link to access information about the Oregon Death with dignity Act and the federal government's efforts to block the state from using it:

<http://www.alternet.org/rights/31588/>

Then go to a website developed by an organization that advocates for the Oregon law:

<http://www.deathwithdignity.org/>

- o Scroll through the information provided in the website, especially the coverage of stories under "News Updates." I'd like you to read the following:
- o "New Poll: 70% of Californians Support Assisted Dying"
- o "Little Change in Oregon Physician-Aided Deaths."

- "Link to Dignity Efforts in Other States"
- "Pew Findings: Strong Public Support for Right to Die"

Of course, you are free to navigate the full website, but remember, I want you to focus on the relationship between the federal and state governments when writing your paper.

### Step 2

Be sure you understand the constitutional and legal arguments on both sides of the euthanasia debate. Then prepare a one page essay in your own words in which you *defend either the rights of the people of the states to pass and implement euthanasia laws or the federal government's power over the states to ban euthanasia*. I want you to work into your essay your understanding of the constitutional basis of federalism, as described in Tannahill's *American Government* textbook (see especially pages 69 – 77). You need to be clear in voice and use of words in order to defend your position.

## **7) Cumulative Voting**

In 1993, President Bill Clinton nominated Lani Guinier to serve as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. He revoked her nomination when Republican opponents criticized her published writings on the topic of voting rights.

Professor Guinier's ideas are provocative and they challenge the status quo. It is healthy for Americans to consider other election methods than the commonly used "winner-takes-all" system, like proportional representation and cumulative voting.

### Step 1

For background on cumulative voting, go to:

## “Tests of Political Fairness: The Case for Cumulative Voting”

<http://www.fairvote.org/reports/1993/guinier.html>

Be sure you understand how cumulative voting works and why Guinier advocates its use in elections.

### Step 2

Assume you live in a small home-rule city that has a four member city council plus a mayor. Below you will find hypothetical characteristics of ten individuals who want to serve on city council. As a voter using the cumulative voting method, you are to choose the individuals you want to win council elections. The candidate with the most votes will become mayor while the four other highest vote tallies will serve as council members.

Remember, city elections are nonpartisan. In this mayor-council form of city government utilizing cumulative voting, each council member and the mayor serves at-large and represents the whole of the community.

- Maria Alvarez – Cuban-American attorney with 23 years experience in the legal field.
- John Tucker – Anglo American businessman who started his own company five years ago.
- Frank Washington – African American incumbent member of city council with four years experience working in local government.
- Thomas Chung – Chinese American real-estate salesman who ran for city council last election but was defeated.
- Susan Jones – Anglo American retired school teacher.
- Yolanda Brooks – African American businesswoman who has owned companies that contract with the city government.
- Joseph Ramirez – Mexican American adjunct community college professor of political science who served as a school

board member for several years.

- Mark Smith – Anglo American incumbent city council member who would like to serve as mayor.
- Jeffrey Goldberg – Jewish American attorney who served on city council in the 1990's for two terms, then left to continue developing his law practice.
- Jenny Nguyen – Vietnamese American artist who is an activist in environmental and conservation interest groups.

The city you live in – Sunshine, Texas – is growing as a result of its proximity to a large metroplex. There are growing pains attending that growth. Traffic is congested going in and out of town, air pollution is more noticeable, crime is increasing. Sunshine, once a primarily Anglo community of 4,000 has become a multi-racial and multi-ethnic enclave of 62,00 in just fifteen years. Though residents aspire to “the great American Dream,” they differ in their perceptions of how government can protect and promote their interests.

### Step 3

You will prepare a one page paper in which you respond to these questions:

- Using cumulative voting, whom would you vote for and how many votes would each of your favorite candidates receive?
- Why did you choose to vote this way?
- What are the advantages of cumulative voting, from your perspective?
- What are possible down-sides of this voting method for a small city such as yours? What have you learned

## 8) "Where do you live??" "What property taxes do you pay?"

This project gives you an opportunity to explore the various entities of local government that affect your life. This will be original and unique research utilizing a variety of sources including some as basic as the telephone book, the internet and library. *Under no circumstances are you to telephone any government offices--if you need additional information, please go the office in person---violation of this rule will result in a zero for this project.* No two people will have the same results unless you live at the same address! (of course in that case only *one* of you can do this project).

*Every person in this class lives in the United States and in the State of Texas. If you work, you have federal income taxes deducted from your paycheck (usually). If you purchase items you pay sales tax to the State of Texas, and frequently to the city in which the item was purchased. Taxes are also collected from individuals based on the value their home, apartment, etc. If you own the home you pay the taxes directly. If you are a renter, you are indirectly paying the taxes through your landlord.*

*The focus of this project will be to discover the property taxing entities you live in and research a bit about the activities of some of those taxing entities.*

**STEP ONE Based on your home address, print out the taxing entities you live in and their various property tax rates.** This information can be found on the internet. If you live in Harris county, go to [www.hcad.org](http://www.hcad.org) If you live in Fort Bend, check [www.fbcad.org](http://www.fbcad.org) You could also visit the Tax Assessor-Collector (in Harris County) or the Central Appraisal District (in Fort Bend County). *Include a xerox copy of the property tax statement with your final report--feel free to white-out the appraised value of your property.*

**NOTE:** *If you live in an apartment you MAY not be able to find this information. I can give you an alternative if you check with me.*

**Caution:** *In some cases your school district will not be included in your initial research. EVERYONE lives in a school district, so you may need to check further. In other cases, you will need to do additional research to find out tax rates. Tax rates are readily available on the internet.*

**STEP TWO** Assume your house is valued at **EXACTLY \$100,000**. Figure the various taxes you pay and total them up (make the further assumption that there are no tax exemptions).

**STEP THREE** Write a two to three page typewritten analysis of a current (no earlier than 05/30/05) political problem facing **ONE** of the units of government that you live in.. Most of this information is readily available in local newspapers (Harris County residents should check with *Houston Chronicle and Houston Press* + neighborhood papers; Fort Bend County residents should check the *Fort Bend Star, Fort Bend Sun, and Herald-Coaster*. (All newspapers are online, but you must use your HCCS library card in order to access the Houston Chronicle database without paying a fee). *This analysis should include all appropriate citations including footnotes/endnotes and a bibliography of at least three different articles or sources.*

**II. Attend TWO meetings of the governing bodies of the local entities YOU LIVE IN.** County Commissioners Court, City Councils, and School Boards meet on a frequent basis.. Write descriptive essays of each of your visits including your personal opinion as well as factual events. Your report should include copies of the agenda for each meeting.

# Government 2302

## 1)Congress Assignment -- How does Congress work?

Go to *Thomas*, the Library of Congress' website for congressional research: <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

Select a *specific* subject that interests you. Airport baggage screening, peanut farming, solar energy research, etc... (do not select a broad subject, such as "agriculture").

Run a subject or two through the search engine and examine the bills filed on that subject.

Each bill has a brief description, such as: 15 . To prohibit the possession or transfer of junk guns, also known as Saturday Night Specials. (Introduced in House)[H.R.3679.IH]

The parentheses identify the bill's stage in the legislative process. Find a bill that moved past the "Introduced..." stage. (Consult your textbook and class notes for the stages of a bill.)

Click on that bill, read it and use the information from the links at the top of the page to write a brief essay about that bill. Your essay must answer the following questions:

What is the bill number and title, and what does the bill propose to do?

Who is the author, and to what political party does he or she belong? (There may be more than one author)

To what committee(s) has it been referred?

Has it been referred to a subcommittee? Which one?

Has there been a hearing? If so, what happened?

Who seems to support the bill? Who's against it?

Where in the process is the bill now?

What is your opinion of this bill? If you were a Congressman or Senator, how would you vote? Do you think it will pass?

Submit this essay assignment using essay format requirements.

*Helpful Hint: Having trouble finding interesting bills? Here are a couple of sites that might help.*

Roll Call is an online, insider's newsletter about Congress:

<http://www.rollcall.com/>

The Hill is another Congress insiders newsletter geared more for Congressional staffers so there is a little more humor:

<http://www.hillnews.com/>

## 2) Presidency Assignment

One of the many responsibilities of the President involves issuing "executive orders." How is an executive order different from a law? What gives the President the power to issue such orders? What can be done by executive order?

Go to the President's website: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

Then, go to the link "executive orders." Select an executive order you find interesting (not the shortest one) and write a brief essay about the executive order. If you cannot complete the answers on executive orders, then you need to select another executive order. Your essay must include answers to the following questions:

1. What is the name/title of the executive order you selected?
2. By what authority is President Bush issuing this order?
3. What does the order do?

4. Do you agree or disagree?
5. How many executive orders has President Bush issued to date?
6. Explain the difference between an executive order and legislation.

See assignment guidelines for essay format requirements.

### **3)Federal Court Assignment**

Under constant interpretation by the federal courts, our Constitution and laws are revisited every day. The textbook discusses landmark Supreme Court, and some have a more dramatic effect on the Constitution and our lives than others do. Your assignment is to pick a Supreme Court case you find interesting from the current in which a decision was issued. Read the case and submit a brief essay:

1. The is the name of the case?
2. What the case was concerning?
3. What was the decision reached by the majority of the justices?
4. Were there any concurring and/or dissenting opinions? What were they?
5. What do you think about the outcome of this case?

Some resources:

[www.oyez.org](http://www.oyez.org)

<http://writ.news.findlaw.com/dorf/20021016.html>

<http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/index.html>

<http://www.supremecourtus.gov/>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/nation/courts/supremecourt/20022003>

See assignment guidelines for essay/assignment format.

#### 4) Criminal Justice Assignment

What happens to convicted criminals after they have "paid their debt to society?"

Go to the Texas Department of Public Safety's website:

<http://records.txdps.state.tx.us/>

You have to pay money to look at most of their criminal history records, but **the sex offender database is free** for anyone to search. Click on Sex Offender Search, and then scroll down to "Search An Area."

*Put in your zip code and see what you find.*

Write a short essay telling:

1. How many sex offenders live in your zip code? (If you do not have any, pick a friend or relative's zip code.)
2. What are some of the crimes they were convicted of committing? What were some of the victim's ages?
3. How do you feel about them living in your neighborhood?
4. What is your opinion about public access to criminal histories? What is your opinion if a criminal is reformed, and trying to live in peace?
5. Should this type of information be more easily available (for other crimes, for example DWI, speeding, dead beat parents) to help us protect ourselves? Or more difficult to access allowing former offenders reenter society?

You may remember from your earlier reading there are a couple of pending U.S. Supreme Court cases about this issue. Here's one:

<http://laws.findlaw.com/2nd/017561.html>

See assignment and essay guidelines for paper format.

### **5)Federal Bureaucracy Assignment**

Go to the EPA website at <http://www.epa.gov/>

Select menu item "where you live."

Select "search your community."

Then, enter your zip code.

Search all of the databases (air quality, hazardous waste, etc).

Print out one page of the results and type a brief one page essay on your findings. First, summarize your findings. Then, answer the following questions: Was this information different from what you expected? How? Has this information changed how you view environmental regulation in general?

### **6) Texas Legislature Assignment**

Texas has a biennial legislature, meaning that it meets every other year. Luckily for this class, it just finished a very interesting regular session!

Your assignment will be to examine some bills that were considered by the legislature this year and tell me all about them.

Go to the Texas Legislature's website:

<http://www.capitol.state.tx.us>

Spend a little time exploring around on the site. It is very well designed, and you can find out just about anything you want to know about what is going on in the House and Senate. Click on "Legislation," then click on "Bills by Subject," then "XXth Legislature" (the current one).

There is a General Subject Index and another index called Subject Headings. Try both of those and poke around until you find a subject or two that interests you. Find three (3) bills that interest you, including at least one that passed both houses of the legislature and one that did not.

Write a brief, 3-section paper that explains each bill, including:

The bill number and author

What the bill was supposed to do

What you think the author was trying to accomplish

To what committee(s) was the bill referred?

Did it have a hearing? Who testified for and against?

What happened to the bill?

What do you think about it? Would you have supported it?

See assignment and essay guidelines for format requirement.

## **ADDENDUM**

### **Succeeding in College**

#### **Preface:**

*The essay has two purposes. First, it offers advice to college students. Hopefully, this advice will help students succeed in their college education. Some of it may sound rather obvious to an experienced student, because it assumes almost nothing about the*

*student's prior preparation or familiarity with college. However, we instructors often realize (sometimes too late) that some of the things we assume, or take for granted, are not at all obvious to many students—especially new ones. So, this is my attempt to bridge that gap—take from it what is useful for you. Now I must confess to a second and more selfish purpose of this essay: As an instructor myself, I'd like to encourage students to follow these suggestions. Those who do so make my job so much more enjoyable! It is a pleasure to teach students who are responsible, self-motivated, mature, and hard working, and most of my colleagues feel the same.*

*R. Mark Tiller*

## **The Syllabus**

You have a right to receive a syllabus in each class. In rare circumstances, the instructor may not be able to distribute one on the first day. In such cases, the instructor will probably explain when or how it will be available.

Instructors often complain that students do not read (or even keep) their syllabi. This is partly because most instructors put a great deal of thought into the construction of their syllabi. They know that the syllabus fundamentally structures their class, much like a constitution structures a government. A well-made syllabus should tell you just about all of the most important rules of the course, including due dates, requirements, grading procedures, ways to contact your instructor, etc. In a sense, it is like a contract between you and your instructor, and binds both of you to a set of rules. When in doubt about anything in your course, consult the syllabus first. Please be advised: you are responsible for understanding the rules in the syllabus; if there is anything in it that is not clear or that you think might cause a problem, discuss it with your instructor as soon as possible—don't wait until the end of the semester and then say you

didn't understand. For example, failure to be aware of the instructor's attendance/withdrawal policy, scholastic dishonesty, homework deadlines, etc. may result in an F.

If you lose your syllabus, don't hesitate to ask your instructor for another copy—it's better to have to ask this than to do without. Even better, if the instructor has an HCCS Learning Web page (<http://learning.nwc.hccs.edu/>), you may be able to download it (make sure it is the correct one).

## **Classroom Conduct**

Adult behavior is the responsibility of all college students. Disorderly conduct in the classroom is not often a problem at HCCS. However, on rare occasions a student may be so disruptive that he or she distracts other students, the instructor, or both. If the instructor allows this to continue, the educational experience of the entire class suffers. In such a case, the instructor does have the right to remove the student from that class, and ultimately, request that Student Dean withdraw the disruptive student from the class permanently without refund.

So what constitutes *disruptive behavior*? Admittedly, some instructors are willing to tolerate more noise and disorder in the classroom than others. And sometimes there is a fine line between spirited debate that serves a useful educational purpose, and undisciplined chaos that wastes everyone's time. So how do you know you are being "disruptive"? Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, struggling to define obscenity in 1964, assured us: "I know it when I see it." This is probably truer for disruptive behavior—you will know it when you see it in the look on your instructor's face, or by the bothered glances of other classmates. Most instructors will also warn the offending student out loud or in writing, but don't depend upon this.

Students tend to unconsciously believe that they are only one

individual in a sea of faces; therefore, they often underestimate how visible their expressions, comments, movements, attentiveness, and mood are to the instructor. They may not realize that their behavior is disruptive. For example, a student may say, "But I was just quietly talking to my neighbor about the discussion we were all having." This may be true, but even if other students cannot hear that student, it is usually distracting to the instructor. It is not always an easy task to stand before a room of people and try to maintain their attention and interest for an hour or more. No instructor can perform at 100% when he or she feels that even one student is disinterested in the lecture. So, if you distract your instructor, you are ultimately infringing on the interests of all of your fellow classmates.

Finally, please be advised: It is the instructor's responsibility to maintain a positive learning environment in the classroom. Among other things, this means keeping the classroom free of intimidation, harassment, and discrimination. What to you may be playful teasing or a noble test of freedom of speech may be rude and insensitive to others. The bottom line is: Please be considerate of both your instructor and your fellow classmates.

## **Your Instructor**

Unless you know otherwise, you should probably call your instructor Professor \_\_\_\_, or Dr./Mr./Ms. if given on the syllabus. Some may be informal and want you to call them by their first name, but when in doubt, assume the title "professor."

HCCS is primarily a teaching institution, rather than a research-oriented university. This gives you one advantage that you often will not have at a university—a low teacher-to-student ratio, and teachers who are willing and able to give you considerably more time and help outside the classroom. So don't be shy about asking your instructor for help—most instructors love their field and enjoy discussing it with you, whether you just want to discuss it more, or have a specific

problem.

However, this does not mean that you can expect your instructor to do your work for you. It is still essentially your responsibility to teach yourself. So before you ask your instructor for help, try to think in advance about what kind of problem you are having. Avoid using your instructor as your personal counselor in matters not directly related to your education. In this regard, the college counselors are usually better equipped to help you or refer you to someone who can. Be prepared to share with the instructor your study methods and the notes you have taken. Identify problem areas in the course material and prepare questions for your instructor in advance. In other words, show your instructor you are serious by preparing for your meeting. Otherwise, your instructor may feel that you are just complaining and really just want to beg for a better grade.

Nor are instructors there to provide entertainment. Most instructors will make a serious effort at making a class exciting and intellectually stimulating, but they may resent the attitude that some students unfortunately have: namely, that class should be "fun." This doesn't mean that instructors aspire to deliver uninspired monotone lectures—they know that humor, entertaining anecdotes, and interesting activities may add a lot of value to the classroom. However, good instructors believe that education is serious business, and probably the most productive investment of time, energy, and money that students will ever make. Instructors that are not intellectually challenging and demanding are not helping you prepare for the rigors of upper-division courses or a successful career. By placing your comfort and pleasure above the acquisition of the skills and insights you will need in a competitive, fast-changing, information-based global economy, they betray both your interests and the interests of the country in general.

The ideal relationship between the instructor and student is based on *mutual respect* and an understanding of the *true duties* of each.

Ideally, the student appreciates the instructor's sophisticated understanding and love of the subject matter, the enthusiasm the instructor shares with the student, the empowerment the instructor gives a student through knowledge and skills-building, and the fairness and objectivity of the instructor's course. The instructor likewise respects the student's diligence, hard work, serious attitude, polite manners, maturity, responsibility, and willingness to grow by learning new material that is dear to the instructor's heart.

Remember that you and your classmates' positive and cooperative attitude cannot help but improve any class. Often the difference between a "great instructor" and a "terrible instructor" is at least in part due to the students' performance. It is much easier to be a good instructor when one's students are attentive, hard working, mature, and have a positive attitude. If the students' behavior suggests the opposite, the instructor may become frustrated, pessimistic, uninspired, and may even dread coming to the class. The bottom line is: *If you want a good instructor, be a good student.* The reverse is equally true.

Another important component of a good course is clear communication between the instructor and student. Pay close attention to the announcements your instructor makes at the beginning of the class. Read carefully the handouts you are given. Remember that your instructor does not always know what you need or prefer; for example, if you stop coming to class, do not assume that your instructor necessarily will or will not withdraw you--see the syllabus and talk to your instructor. If you cannot understand something, *ask!* If you have any disabilities or other special needs which will affect your ability to learn, inform your instructor; he or she will take appropriate steps to make reasonable accommodations and assist you.

Instructors often say, "There is no such thing as a stupid question." Well... that applies [sincerely] to questions about the course material—not to certain kinds of questions and comments you might

make about the instructor's class. There are some things you should *never* say to your instructor:

*"I missed class; did we do anything important?"*

Most instructors consider this a silly question and are usually tempted to say, "No, we just sat here wasting time as usual." Instead, first review your syllabus to see what you missed if possible, and to see what other resources might be available to you. After that, it is usually a good idea to ask another student for notes or comments about what happened that day (or several students—in case one missed something, the other may have got it). You may also wish to ask your instructor whether there were any handouts that you missed. After reviewing the other students' notes or any other materials, *then* ask your instructor for clarification or help.

*"This subject is boring to me."*

Regardless of your intent, this is insulting to your instructor. How would you feel if your instructor pronounced your interests boring? Furthermore, your instructor is likely to think you are not a very hardworking or thoughtful student if you make comments like this.

*"This course is not important or relevant to my major or career."*

This comment is likely to provoke a lecture from your instructor, since he or she is an expert on the many connections between this subject and other disciplines. In fact, those who see these connections and are able to establish fresh and innovative

approaches that borrow from other disciplines make many of the great breakthroughs in their fields.

*"I'm only taking this course to fulfill a requirement."*

If you think this requirement is unfair or without good reason, take it up with the state government, which created the core curriculum requirement. You can begin by explaining to these officials how public apathy and of the social sciences are excellent contributors to freedom, social justice, democracy, prosperity, and a healthy civic society.

*"Do you mind / Is it okay if I miss class next week?"*

Any good instructor will always “mind,” if he or she cares about the students’ success. And of course it is not “okay,” since you will miss course material. This doesn't mean the instructor does not understand that sometimes absences are unavoidable, and it doesn't mean he or she thinks you are guilty of a high crime. Just don't expect your instructor to endorse something that will definitely hurt your grade. All choices we make involve tradeoffs; as an adult, you will have to decide for yourself whether something else is more important than class. Try your best to schedule other things outside of class time to avoid penalizing yourself. Remember, it doesn't hurt your instructor—it hurts you.

*"Are your test questions going to be trick questions?"*

No instructor enjoys seeing their students get low grades. It is far more satisfying to see one's students succeeding and mastering the course material. What students sometimes label as “trick questions,” are [in

the professor's view] challenging questions whose answers cannot be easily guessed, i.e., questions that require students to study well.

*"What will the essay questions be?"*

A good examination is not supposed to be a test of the students' ability to memorize a particular answer in advance. Instead, it is a random sample of questions and problems used to gauge overall understanding of the entire material—which thereby motivates students to study. If an instructor wants students to study something in particular in preparation for the test, he or she will so inform them, whether or not they ask this question.

*"I understand all of the material—I just can't answer your questions."*

This comment means it is the instructor's fault. It is hard to imagine that other people who do not understand the material so well as does this student can answer the questions while he cannot! If the student has a legitimate concern about an actual question, then the student should ask about it instead—*specifically*.

*"I am an 'A' student, so I don't know why I'm making a 'F' in your class."*

Again, the implication is that it is the instructor's fault. Are there any other possible explanations or factors to consider, before leaping to this conclusion? Are other students in this class making good grades? How many courses has the student taken, and how rigorous were they? Is the student studying in the

same way he or she did in the other classes? Do students have different capabilities based on prior interest, motivation, and understanding of the material? Furthermore, shouldn't instructors give grades based on objective performance rather than students' expectations of the grade they should make?

***How do you contact your instructor outside of class hours? See the syllabus first; it should tell you what appropriate channels are available. If not, ask the instructor in class as soon as possible, so that you will know in advance of a problem that may arise. If the instructor is kind enough to give a home or cell phone number, please be considerate in return, by not calling excessively or at early or late hours.***

Instructors are human—they make mistakes, they have flaws. However, they are clearly in charge of their courses, so if you have a problem with the instructor's rules or procedures, politely discuss it with the instructor after class. Don't try to force the instructor to adapt to your preferences when he or she is trying to teach the day's lesson. You will be far more likely to get the result you want by respectful persuasion than confrontation, sarcasm, or hasty accusations. Similarly, when reviewing tests or other graded work, you certainly have a right to question the instructor's questions and grading standards, as long as you stick to the academic subject matter rather than your personal opinions. However, it is usually best to save lengthy discussions of your individual work or grade for after class. In this way, your instructor can safeguard your privacy and avoid spending too much of the class's time on your individual concern.

If you have a problem, should you complain about your instructor to his or her supervisor? You certainly have the right to do so, and in fact this sometimes serves a useful purpose by alerting supervisors and administrators to potential problems. However, remember that the most practical, responsible, mature, and fair thing to do is to first

discuss your concern with your instructor. If you instead assume the worst and immediately go over the instructor's head, you create a conflict where one did not necessarily have to exist. Many times disagreements are due to misunderstandings or miscommunications that are better resolved between the two of you, and usually *can* be resolved easily if each of you approach them respectfully and politely.

If you have already tried to speak with your instructor, but were not able to resolve the disagreement, then you may wish to go to the supervisor (usually, the department chair). It's best to make an appointment to meet in person. When discussing the problem, be careful to stick to the facts and do not exaggerate or embellish your complaint—the supervisor does not know you, so if you are found to be exaggerating about anything, this will undermine your credibility. Remember also that the supervisor will have to listen carefully to both your and the instructor's arguments, question each of you, and try to make judgments about what is in the best interests of the learning process. The supervisor will weigh a wide variety of factors, many of which you will be unaware of, in trying to discern what happened, what is best for all parties involved, and what is practical and reasonable.

It is reasonable to expect professional conduct from your instructor. It is reasonable to expect fairness, and to expect the instructor to adhere to the rules set in the syllabus and the rules of the institution. It is reasonable that those rules should be clear. It is reasonable that your learning environment be free of harassment, distractions, and discrimination. It is reasonable to expect your instructor to be knowledgeable about the subject matter, at least to the extent of being able to teach the lesson. On the other hand, you do not have to "like" your instructor personally or the teaching style of your instructor. It is not reasonable to expect your instructor to never make any kind of mistake or have perfect knowledge about every aspect of the subject. It is not reasonable to expect your instructor to change his or her methods of teaching, grading, etc. merely to meet your preferences or

circumstances, or to make exceptions in your case only. Importantly, it definitely is unreasonable to make your instructor responsible for your success and grade in the course. Ultimately, only you can teach yourself and only you can learn the material.

## **Tardies, Early Exits, and Absences**

It is very important that you come to class on time. If you are late, you may miss vital announcements, information about tests and assignments, important questions, and valuable introductory points that help explain the rest of the lecture. If your instructor gives you quizzes over your reading assignments, you will miss the quiz. You also interrupt the class, because when someone comes in late, everyone in class inevitably stops listening and fixates on them walking to their chair. Don't compound this by approaching the instructor while the lecture is in progress to ask a question that should have been asked before class. Instructors may have different comfort levels about coming up to turn in papers or ask for handouts after the class has already started—but in any case, bear in mind that your goal should be to avoid creating too much of a disruption.

Anyone living in Houston knows how absurd it would be to explain to one's boss that the roads were congested and made him or her late. Traffic congestion is a fact of life here, and you must compensate for it, just as you would in a professional job. Allow yourself plenty of time to get to school early. That way, if some unexpected event happens, you can still make it to class on time. On the usual occasions when you arrive early, you can use the time to review your notes, finish reading assignments, or otherwise prepare yourself for the class.

If for whatever reason you do arrive late to class, come in quietly and sit at chair closest to the door. For reasons explained above, try to avoid walking across the classroom in front of the instructor. Similarly, if you must leave early, sit as close as you can to the door

and make as quiet an exit as you can. It's a good idea to let your instructor know that you will have to leave early before class starts. At any rate, please understand that this *does* disrupt the lecture and your instructor cannot help but find it annoying. Most instructors will be very understanding if you have to leave early once or twice to make it to another scheduled appointment, but this does not mean you are free to drift in and out of the classroom on a regular basis when you think the lecture is not interesting enough for your tastes.

One of the most frustrating parts of teaching is listening to students who do not come to class regularly complain about how hard the tests are. Missing even just one lecture cannot help but knock many points off of your grade. For this reason, some instructors will withdraw you from their class automatically for absences (the instructor may count tardies or early exits as partial absences as well--see your syllabus). HCCS policy provides that students *may* (at the discretion of the instructor--see your syllabus) be dropped after missing more than six hours of class time. Although some individual instructors may have a specific policy regarding tests, HCCS policy does not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. This is because no matter how legitimate your reason might be, it does not change the fact that you were not there: you missed the lecture, the quiz, the participation, the experience, etc. Do not expect to excel in a class that you do not attend faithfully. When you miss class, you generally doom yourself.

If your work interferes with the class, you may wish to reconsider your priorities. If you try to take many classes and work many hours, you are voluntarily handicapping yourself, and should not expect your instructor to make exceptions for you. Who does not want to "have their cake and eat it too"? But by this logic, why not take 10 classes and work 60 hours a week, expecting your instructors (and employer) to be "understanding" of your shortcomings? Every student's abilities and every course's requirements are unique, but a general rule (as stated in the HCC student handbook) is that each three-hour course

you take will require about nine hours per week of home study, so don't overload yourself. It is far wiser to take two classes and pass them than to take five classes and withdraw or fail from three of them.

## **The Lecture**

Although most instructors like to use a variety of teaching methods, the most efficient use of time is usually the traditional lecture, so most of your classes will be lectures, usually with some time devoted to discussion of the lecture material. Therefore, a big part of your success in the course will be rooted in your ability to listen carefully to the lecture, participate in the discussions, and thoroughly take notes.

It never hurts to sit near the front and center, to keep yourself focused on the instructor. (In fact, my own personal research indicates that students who sit there make significantly higher grades.) Make sure to get enough sleep, so you can stay attentive—dozing during class is a waste of your time and intolerable to the instructor. Question your instructor during the lecture, rather than just passively listen. Answer the questions your instructor asks—this will help focus your mind, test your comprehension, and provide feedback to your instructor as to whether you are understanding the material.

It is a good idea to exchange phone numbers with some of your classmates. Thereafter, you will have an additional resource to call upon, which can be especially important if you miss class. If possible, tell your classmate in advance when you will miss a class so that they can take this into account when he or she is taking notes (and noting important announcements) that you will later photocopy. Be generous and helpful to your neighbors and they will likely want to return the favor.

As for note taking, read the syllabus and listen for your instructor's verbal advice about what kind of note taking may be most useful for that class. You may also wish to show your notes to your instructor

early in the semester and ask whether you are doing a good job. Generally, you should focus on concepts, ideas, issues, processes, applications, arguments, etc.—they are more important than dates, names, statistics, and trivia. In most cases, you need not write down examples that the instructor uses to illustrate a point—what is really more critical is the lesson illustrated by the example. It also helps to abbreviate frequently rather than to write out every comment in proper English, as long as the note is understandable. If you have properly done the assigned reading before the lecture, you will know what you need to write down and what is already clearly available in the text. Skip lines where the material is confusing, since you may wish to add to these comments later. Again, ask your instructor for guidance if you are unsure—instructors have different goals and methods, so it is sometimes a question worth asking.

One of the most common mistakes is to write down only what the instructor writes on the board. Although some instructors write on the board as a prompt for you to take notes, most do not—they write on the board because a word has an unfamiliar spelling, because they want to visually show something, because they want to make a point, or even for no particular consistent reason. Better clues of when you should note something are *pauses* (as the instructor waits for students to write), *dramatic prefaces* ("But the most important reason is..."), *numbered lists* ("The third cause is..."), and when the instructor literally tells you that something is very important. Finally, make note of unfamiliar terms. If you are embarrassed to ask the instructor what they mean, at least you can look them up later. Chances are others people are also wondering, so again, ask!

Another terrible mistake is to put your notebook up in the last five or ten minutes of the class in anticipation of the end of the lecture. Not only do you insult your instructor (are you in that much of a hurry to get out?) in order to save five seconds at the most, but you fail to take notes in the most critical part of most classes. Why? More times than not, your instructor will realize that time is running out, and start

cramming all of the most important additional material into the last few minutes. Often he or she may know that this material is crucial if you are to do well on the test. This is precisely when you should be most attentive, since the last few minutes are sometimes no-frills, important test information!

Finally, after taking notes, there is one more thing you can do to maximize their utility. Sometime during the day—*before you go to sleep that night*—take just a few minutes to review that day's class notes to clean them up, add further explanations, fill in gaps that you missed, reorganize, etc. If you are not sure about something from your notes, put a big question mark by it to help yourself remember to ask your instructor during the next class. If you follow these words of advice, your notes will be much more useful when you start studying for the test.

Should you tape record a lecture? First, **always ask** your instructor for permission first, because they have a right to deny this. It can be a helpful way of dealing with a planned absence, by asking a classmate to record it for you. However, many instructors have doubts about how useful recording is—it is a passive activity that does not require the student to participate, think critically, discern critical information from interesting information, etc. Unless the student immediately then listens to the tapes, and transcribes them into notes, they will not be very valuable. Finally, most people tend to put off studying their tapes (thinking “I’ve got them”) until test time, so that they usually do not have enough time to listen to them anyway, and consequently have no useable notes.

## **The Textbooks**

Students are often embarrassed of their writing skills. Yet good writers have rarely taken many courses in "writing," per se. However, good writers are quite often good readers. Reading teaches you not only the subject matter of the text, but also how to write well.

Unfortunately, Americans seem to be reading less and less; many watch television exclusively. Reading is fuel for your brain! It equips you with the ability to solve problems and better your life. Teaching slaves to read was illegal because slaveholders correctly believed it was a liberating and empowering skill. Don't waste it.

It is very important to complete your reading assignments on time, i.e. before the subject matter is discussed in class. Students commonly think they do not need to read until shortly before the test, but this is a very inefficient way of doing it (it is also self-delusionary, since few will have time to catch up later). Keeping up with the reading is so much more *efficient* because if you do: you can participate meaningfully in class discussions, you can more clearly understand the lecture, you can take better notes during the lecture (since you know already what is in the book and what is not), you can note confusing parts of the reading in order to ask the instructor about them, and obviously, so you can do well on quizzes.

There is a difference between the way the typical A student and the C student uses the textbook. The C student simply *reads* the textbook. The A student *studies* it. How does one study the textbook? First, scan over your reading assignment. See what it is about; try to get the big picture. Second, carefully read through it, taking enough time to take notes and mark confusing parts for later examination. If possible, sit in a comfortable chair at a desk or table—your concentration will be more focused than if you are laying down, and you will be more likely to take notes. As for note taking, don't just copy definitions from the book; you already have them written down (in your book). Instead, create notes to yourself in your own words, without looking at the book. It doesn't matter that your words are not as elegant as the book's--what matters is that you can understand them. If you are having trouble making a note, read the material again, and try once more. This forces you to actively and creatively think and makes you much more likely to internalize the information. If you still cannot do it, make note of the problem area and bring it up with your instructor.

Next, look at the beginning and end of the chapters—often there are learning objectives, questions, key terms, etc.—if you cannot answer these questions and define these terms, you need to look back at the material. After finishing the assignment, there is a final step that can really help if you have the time. Read the assignment again--this time it will be much more understandable, and you will pick up more information from it that did not make sense to you the first time, much the same as you do when watching a movie for the second time.

Finally, you may choose to buy the study guides for this course that are available in the college bookstore. However, do not rely on study guides (or online supplementary materials) as a substitute for good reading and study of the texts. Summaries are sometimes oversimplified and rarely equip one to answer test questions. Sample questions may act as a good tool to judge your comprehension, but will not necessarily be the type of question your individual instructor asks. Nothing substitutes for serious and faithful study.

## **Written Assignments**

You already know what's coming here—don't procrastinate! A due date of April 10 on an assignment does not mean you should turn it in on April 10; it means you must turn it in by April 10 *at the latest*. Instructors are often very appreciative of early papers and projects. And what if you are sick or have car trouble on that day? If you are a procrastinator, write down a different due date a week or two earlier, and cross out the real due date so that you cannot read it! The difference between a mediocre paper and an excellent one is often that one extra week the author of the excellent paper had to revise, edit, or add to his or her paper.

Second, make your paper neat and well organized. In the business world, your proposal will be one of many competing for the attention of a potential business partner, customer, or client. You would not dream of submitting something sloppy and difficult to understand.

Similarly, your instructor will often be up late at night grading a pile of papers. He or she will not give you credit for writing that is not legible or understandable. Some instructors in courses other than English may choose to not specifically and directly penalize you for grammar, organization, or neatness—others will. However, all instructors will find it easier to assign a good grade to a neat paper that has been proofread and is well edited. If you have a problem in this area, face it head-on by practicing, seeking help, and taking remedial courses if necessary. Individual weaknesses that plague your ability to succeed—whatever they may be—will not go away on their own.

Third, be honest in your work. The risk of being caught cheating (committing *plagiarism* or *collusion*) far outweighs any benefit you think you are receiving (by cheating yourself out of an education, incidentally). According to HCCS policy, "Plagiarism means the appropriation of another's work and the unacknowledged incorporation of that work in one's own written work for credit. Collusion means the unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing written work offered for credit." In other words, cheating is: (1) taking unchanged passages (or slightly edited) from another person's writing and portraying them as one's own; (2) submitting a paper that includes paraphrases of another person's writing without giving credit; (3) having someone else write your paper for you; and (4) copying another person's work during in-class writing or testing. This is not an exhaustive list of the forms of cheating on written work. If you are in doubt, consult your instructor. The main two rules to remember are these: (1) Use quotation marks and attribute (reference) when using the exact words of another person. (2) When using another person's idea but not the exact words, express this idea in your own words, and attribute (reference) the author.

Finally, Texas law makes it a crime to profit from collusion. See the Texas Penal Code, Chapter 32, Section 32.50.

## Testing

Again, according to HCCS policy: "Cheating on a test includes copying from another student's test paper; using, during a test, materials not authorized by the person giving the test; collaborating with another student during a test without authority; knowingly using, buying, selling, stealing, transporting, or soliciting in whole or part the contents of an unadministered test; or bribing another person to obtain a test that is to be administered."

If you have followed the advice given under "The Textbooks" and are therefore not behind on your reading, you will not have to "cram" the night before the test. Your most intense studying should precede the class day before the test. That way, you will have identified any potential problem areas in advance, so that you can ask the instructor about them; if you wait until the night before the test, it will be too late. Furthermore, if you "cram," you won't get a good night's sleep before the test. Being relaxed and alert is a critical component of good test taking.

It is sometimes useful to form a study group, made up of students who can study together and exchange copies of one another's notes, and who can teach each other. This is not only good for the student being taught, but for the student-teacher as well, since to explain something, one must focus one's thoughts and make applications and illustrations. However, don't depend exclusively on a study group to pass the test, because they can easily degenerate into a socializing event if the members are not serious-minded and focused. Save your parties for after the test.

If you wish to create a study group, but are too shy to initiate one, request help. For example, you might ask your instructor to suggest during class that anyone wishing to form a group could meet after class in a certain corner of the room.

During the test itself, don't get hung up on a particular problem that

you cannot resolve. Skip it and go back to it later if you have time. Never leave any essay blank; partial credit is better than nothing. If you leave it blank you are telling your instructor that you know *absolutely nothing* about the subject, which is rarely the case. Pace yourself, making sure you always have at least some answer for all written questions. You can always go back to the question later to add detail when you know that you have the time. Be sure to carefully read the entire question, regardless of its format. Often students do not answer all parts of an essay question or do not read all of the possible answers on a multiple-choice question.

What will be on the tests? The instructor will make that clear to the extent that he or she believes is best—there is reasonable debate among instructors about how this question should be answered. Some believe in giving students a great deal of specific guidance about what to study; others believe that too much advice makes the students prepare memorized answers to specific questions while ignoring the great bulk of the material. Neither way is inherently more difficult or easier than the other; generally, the more specific an instructor is with advice about what to study, the more detail and mastery the instructor will expect on the test. Therefore, the advice the instructor gives is generally determined by the instructor's educational goals. Some will give out unit questions, objectives, and expectations. Some will give review sheets, some will review material in class or in extra meetings, and some will hold question and answer sessions. Others will do none of the above—this is up to the instructor, and again, dependent upon what they are trying to accomplish. There is no inherent “right” to a review or a review sheet, and getting one does not necessarily make the test easier.

Unless the instructor says otherwise, you should assume that test questions may come from the lectures, the textbooks, the discussions, the homework, etc., i.e., from any part of the course. The fact that something in the text was not discussed in class does not preclude it from being on the test. Similarly, something discussed in the class

that is not in the book may also be on the test.

In any case, try to anticipate test questions, especially ones that require lengthy written answers. You can organize your thoughts at home in a careful and comprehensive way that will prepare you well for both essay and multiple choice questions. However, do not spit out your prepared answer on the test without first examining carefully what exactly the question is asking. Look for key words: Do not rely on *examples* only when the question asks for *definitions*. Do not *describe* when asked to *critique*. Do not *summarize* the entire subject when the instructor wants you to *specify* one particular part in detail.

As for multiple choice, you can sometimes at least narrow down the choices, and then pick what you believe is the most plausible from the remainder. Don't be in such a hurry to finish that you forget to go back and check your answers to make sure you answered all of them (and that you keyed them properly if using a Scantron). Don't be afraid to change your answer if further consideration compels you—educational research suggests you are more likely to change from a bad answer to the correct one than from the correct one to a bad one.

Finally, remember that most instructors' test questions will *not* be designed to test simple recall of information. You should expect tests to consist primarily of **critical thinking** questions that test your ability to analyze, synthesize, and apply information.

## **Critical Thinking**

You will probably hear your instructor refer to “critical thinking.” Proponents use the term to emphasize what they believe to be a superior and more relevant style of teaching and learning—one in which the focus of education is the development of reasoning and judgment skills. They argue that today's global, technologically dependent, constantly changing economy has placed new demands on educators and their students. No longer does the American economy need massive numbers of relatively unskilled manufacturing workers

to fill assembly lines. The United States is a "post-industrial" economy—one that is increasingly specializing in higher-paying information and technology fields (genetics, computer science, systems analysis, medicine, engineering, finance, education, entertainment, resource management, consulting, etc.)

It is difficult to precisely define critical thinking because it has many specific interpretations, probably as many as there are different academic disciplines. It is probably easier to explain what it *is not*. It is not the passive absorption of the course material, without the questioning of assumptions and unproved claims regarding it. It is not about being able to associate particular terms with familiar-sounding words from a lecture or by remembering distinctive words from a textbook definition of a key term. It is not the kind of education that requires memorization of descriptive information. It does not highly value simple recall of data. It does not worship the collection of information for its own sake, if that knowledge is not used and applied to the real world.

No matter how proficient a student is at memorization, he or she will never be able to compete with even an obsolete computer, and the computer is far cheaper to maintain than an employee. Employers therefore are searching for employees that can do what a computer cannot do—*think*. Unfortunately, our schools have been slow to respond, still turning out graduates that are ready for the 1950s industrial economy. American grade schools often are less rigorous than those of our trade competitors, and demand little critical thinking from students. By the time students reach college, many are poorly prepared for the task. This, combined with the larger-than-ever numbers of students entering higher education today, has made the problem even more challenging for community colleges such as HCCS.

Nevertheless, it is a challenge that committed educators and serious students must meet. Whether a job or further study at a university

awaits you after HCCS, the most important thing you can acquire in our classes is an enhanced ability to think critically. If you want to have an exciting and well-paying career in today's economy, you must recognize that your education, in some form or another, will **never** end. Therefore, you must first learn *how to learn*; everything else is secondary. Data changes, and information must be updated, but every reasoning skill you develop will reward you forever.

By no means does this mean that we instructors consider it unimportant that you know that every state gets two U.S. senators, or that the U.S. government spent \$2.5 trillion dollars in 2005. Facts are important, and ignorance of fundamental information is crippling. However, consider for a moment something about which you personally know a lot of detailed information. Is this the case because you set down at a table and memorized it? Or is it because you have *used or analyzed* this information extensively? It is much easier to remember that about which you have thought deeply. Further, unless you have acquired critical thinking skills you may not be able to distinguish between accurate information and disinformation. The "truth" and the "simple facts" are not always so easily identified. Thus, the study of raw facts **must** be married with the study of critical thinking.

In conclusion, critical thinking is about the *use* of information rather than its recall. It is far more interesting, more relevant to your needs, and arguably even easier than is memorization. We all have the ability to think critically, and we all use these methods daily in our personal lives to make decisions.

## Conclusion

If you have taken the time to read all of the above material, it is probably an excellent indicator that you are the kind of student with the dedication necessary to succeed in college. If you take it to heart and practice it, you will give yourself in a real advantage over your

classmates. However, remember always that in the end, college is not about the grades you make, although they may serve as a rough indicator of your progress. Instead, your college education is about developing the skills, knowledge, traits, and habits that will make you successful in your career and in life in general. So seek out instructors who challenge and motivate you. A class in which you make a *C*, but learn so much, is better for you than a class in which you make a *B* but learn nothing. And if the class is easy, don't limit your study to what is necessary to make an *A*. In the final analysis, what you get out of college is what you put into it.