

INTRODUCTION TO GRADUATE SCHOOL Skills for Scholarly Success

Political Science 590, Fall 2025
Portland State University

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Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00-3:00, in person
or via [Zoom](#), or by appointment

Description

This course introduces students to the graduate environment and culture of academia. Designed for the first quarter of graduate study, course content focuses on developing essential skills for success in graduate-level education, such as: how to read academic literature, note-taking and seminar norms, and understanding the prospectus requirement. It also covers the skills necessary for navigating the often-competing demands on graduate students' time, and begins to develop an academic toolkit that will serve them throughout their career.

Learning Objectives

The general objective of this course is to prepare students for a graduate education. To that end, we work with students on clarifying expectations for graduate-level work, introducing them to academic culture and norms, and discussing resources at both the university and department level. At the conclusion of the course, students should:

- be familiar with the schedule, pace, and requirements of the MS program;
- understand the expectations for participation in graduate seminars;
- be able to read academic literature quickly and efficiently;
- be comfortable with several library and internet resources for finding relevant academic literature;
- have a strong grasp of what a thesis, or any other substantial research paper should look like; and
- feel welcomed and supported in academia and the PSU graduate student community.

Assignments and Assessment

Assigned readings can be retrieved via the [Millar Library website](#) or are available online. If no link provided for the course reading, log into the library and search the online holdings. Searching by the title of the article (in quotes) is usually the most efficient.

Students will be required to keep a “learning journal” to facilitate reflection and discussion. After each class session, students will write a 1-2 page (double-spaced) entry. Each entry should serve a dual purpose: first, as a place to write down the knowledge gained about the department, university, political science profession, or academia as a whole; second, as a place for reflection on related challenges, experiences, or plans related to the discussion during that class session. For example, after the first class session (the “welcome to grad school” session), students should write about the various resources on campus that seem particularly valuable to them. Next, they should reflect on the process and value of forming a community. They could, for instance, consider if there are existing campus groups that they could join, or if they might form a monthly group meeting of the cohort. They might reflect on what could be gained from building a community, both from the perspective of personal well-being and as beneficial for career advancement, as well as any personal reluctance they might have to joining a community.

This course will be graded Pass/Fail, based on the following two methods of assessment:

- (1) The learning journals are to be submitted three times during the term (weeks 3, 6, and 10) and will be evaluated as "pass" if the student has made a good faith effort to reflect and engage.
- (2) Attendance and active participation in weekly class sessions is required.

Discussion and Assistance

During the regularly scheduled class sessions, there will be plenty of opportunities to ask questions and to engage in discussion. If in addition, you would like to engage in asynchronous discussion, I have set up a separate online Class Discussion forum for that. Feel free to post comments or questions on any topic related to graduate school or academic life that might arise during the term.

You are always welcome to discuss matters with me. If you want to talk during my office hours, there is no need for an appointment; just show up in person or via Zoom. If you want to set up an appointment for a different time, send me email and we'll get something scheduled.

I am also happy to field briefer questions by email, as well as anything having to do with the logistics of the course itself. I can also try to help with technical questions regarding Canvas, but I am no expert and I often find myself turning such questions back to students in the course, especially because what I see in Canvas as the instructor is not what you see as the student. We always manage to figure things out, though.

Conduct, Courtesy, and Student Resources

Academic dishonesty. Students are responsible for being familiar with the PSU [Code of Student Conduct and Responsibility](#), especially the section concerning academic misconduct -- that is, plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty. If you are unsure of the definition or consequences of academic misconduct, please consult with me.

Use of Generative AI tools. The use of tools which check and correct your own writing (built-in spelling and grammar checkers or third-party tools like Grammarly) is different from artificial intelligence (AI) tools that generate content or structure in response to your prompting (like ChatGPT). In your work for this course, use of the first sort of tool is encouraged, while use of the second sort of tool is strongly discouraged. The use of generative AI tools to write entire learning journal entries is not permitted. If you do use generative AI tools to write or inform any part of a journal entry, you must acknowledge this in an appendix to the paper. For example: "I used the following set of prompts to instruct ChatGPT to generate a draft of Paragraph 3." Failure to do this is [academic misconduct](#).

Discrimination. PSU's policies require faculty members to report any instance of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or other forms of prohibited discrimination. If you would rather share information about these experiences with an employee who does not have these reporting responsibilities and can keep the information confidential, please contact a confidential advocate (503.725.5672 or [online](#)) or another confidential employee listed on the sexual misconduct resource [webpage](#).

Disabilities. If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the [Disability Resource Center](#) to schedule an appointment and initiate a conversation about reasonable accommodations. The [PSU CARES](#) Team, hosted by the Dean of Student Life, is available to consult with you regarding any issues of students in distress, including sexual misconduct.

Technology in the classroom. Because they are distracting to others, cell phones may not be used during lecture and should be silenced at the start of class. Laptops and tablets may be used to take notes, but not for email, web browsing, or social media. Electronic devices may not be used to photograph, video, or stream course lectures or discussion, but lectures may be audio recorded with permission of the instructor.

COURSE CALENDAR AND READING

30 Sep Welcome to Graduate School

Welcome to the community of scholars! The university provides many resources for new students. But one of the most important survival skills in graduate school is to discover and develop your social support structures within the scholarly community.

Reading

- Thomas M. Carsey, [Tom's Comments](#): *Advice about Graduate School, Finding a Job, Reaching Tenure in Political Science and other Social Sciences, and All of the Steps in Between* (Last compiled: 7 September 2020), chap. 5, "Making it Through the First Year."

7 Oct **Degree Path and Course Plan**
There's a rule for that! And a form. And a deadline. You've been inserted into a very large organization -- into a program within a department within a college within a university. Let's figure out how to stay on top of all the rules and regulations for graduate study at PSU.

Reading

- [Master of Science in Political Science: Student Handbook](#), September 2025

14 Oct **Classroom Expectations and Etiquette**
Class time in a graduate seminar is generally an interactive learning experience. How to prepare for that? Do instructors have certain expectations for graduate-level questions and comments? Many graduate courses at PSU are cross-listed with undergraduate courses. How to navigate those discussions?

Reading

- Zachary Shore, *Grad School Essentials: A Crash Course in Scholarly Skills* (University of California Press, 2016), chaps. 2, 4.

Guest: Richard Clucas, political science internship program director

21 Oct **Advising, Resources, Opportunities**
Few public universities are flush with cash, and even fewer of the urban ones are. PSU is no exception. But there are resources and opportunities available for those who seek them out. We'll talk about some of these, and also about where to turn for advice when you've got ideas but are unsure about how to pursue them.

Reading

- Jessica McCrory Calarco, *A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum* (Princeton University Press, 2020), chap. 3.

28 Oct **Academic Literature**
Two of the biggest challenges when conducting a review of the academic literature: (1) too little has been written; (2) too much has been written. We'll discuss resources and strategies for locating scholarship relevant to a particular topic and identifying the best and most influential work when there's so much out there.

Reading

- Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Doing a Literature Review." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39, 1 (January 2006): 127-132.
- [Political Science Subject Guide: Literature Reviews](#), Yale University Library

Guest: Catherine Davenport, Zotero workshop, ML 170

4 Nov **Time Management**

You've heard the horror stories about the life of a graduate student. Maybe you've experienced it. Grad school isn't easy, nor should it be. But you shouldn't let it keep you from the other pleasures of life. Be more than your graduate program!

Reading

- Calarco, *A Field Guide to Grad School*, chap. 5.

Guest: Meaghan Lingo, Center for Public Service

18 Nov **What is a Research Prospectus?**

A master's thesis, or any other substantial research paper, is a real grind, perhaps even a flop, when the topic is not well-conceived and the methodology poorly planned. Academic research often encounters unexpected difficulties, but preparing and defending a research prospectus is the best way to keep these to a minimum.

Reading

- Carsey, [Tom's Comments](#), chap. 3, "Deciding What to Study."

25 Nov **What is a Thesis?**

If you are pursuing the thesis track, your master's thesis will be the crowning achievement in this program and will document your expertise on some question of interest to political scientists. It will represent an original contribution to knowledge in our discipline. At your thesis defense, you tie it all up with a bow.

Reading

- Calarco, *A Field Guide to Grad School*, chap. 7.

Guest: 2nd-year graduate student TBA

2 Dec

What's Next?

Von Moltke said that the battle plan never survives first contact with the enemy. Well, an oral presentation plan rarely survives past slide #3. Let's talk about conferences and other quirky aspects of scholarly life. These shared experiences socialize us as academics and professionals.

Reading

- Carsey, [Tom's Comments](#), chap. 10, "Professional Conferences."

This syllabus is available on Canvas and online at web.pdx.edu/~kinsella/ps590f25.pdf and all course materials can be linked from this address. Last updated: 28 September 2025.