College of the Canyons
Political Science 150: Introduction to American Government and Politics
Fall 2015 (Sections 17154, 17155)
Orientation Letter for Online Classes

Instructor: Phil Gussin
Office: PCOH-222
Email: Phil.Gussin@canyons.edu
Phone: 1-661-362-3708

Important Note: If you do not have the patience, maturity, and focus necessary to read the Orientation Letter and Syllabus carefully, this is NOT the right class for you.

This course is completely online. All material related to the class is located on the class webpage which can be accessed using Blackboard. To access the class webpage, you must first log on at: http://bb9.canyons.edu. Your username is your seven digit Student ID number. Your password is: student. When you log on to Blackboard, you will see a link to POLISCI 150 listed under “My Courses” on the right hand side of the screen. To access the class webpage, click on the link.

When I designed this course, I wanted students to experience something similar to what happens in a face-to-face class. To do that, I videotaped all of my lectures in ten-minute segments. When I was done, there were over 100 videos on a variety of subjects related to American and California government. In many online classes, students do a lot of reading and then take an exam. In my class, you still have to read a textbook but you MUST watch the lecture videos. Simply reading the textbook will not get the job done. And if you’re thinking, “I’ll just google stuff,” you’re mistaken.

Last semester, a couple of students thought they were very clever and decided to answer the essay questions on my exams using information from sources other than my lectures. I guess they were hoping I wouldn’t notice. They were wrong. Two students wound up with D’s in the class. Two other students copied information directly from the internet. Both of those students got an “F” in the class and I reported him to the Dean of Students for plagiarism.

Having said all of that, if you take a look at my ratings on www.ratemyprofessors.com, you’ll see that many students think I’m fairly entertaining. If you click here, you’ll see the lecture videos aren’t horrendously boring, even for people who dreaded the idea of taking a political science course. I recorded some of the videos during actual lectures. I recorded others in different spots around campus. For example, I recorded some of them while standing next to the large College of the Canyons sign on Rockwell Canyon Road and I recorded some of them when I was sitting in my house, backyard, or garden.

Along with the lectures videos, there is a required textbook that can be purchased at the COC Bookstore. It is a custom book, published specifically for College of the Canyons. You should have the textbook by the first day of class. The textbook includes two books in one:

We The People by Ginsberg, et. al. & Governing California by Anagnoson, et. al.
ISBN: 9780393137903
In the remainder of this Orientation Letter, I describe the structure of the class and what you’ll see when you access the class webpage towards the beginning of the semester.

On the class webpage, you’ll find a number of tabs on the left hand side of the page. The tabs include the Orientation Letter (which you’re reading), Lecture Videos, Lecture Videos (closed captioned), Lecture Notes, Reading Questions and Quizzes, Exams, Study Guides, and Discussion Boards. I describe the contents of each of these tabs below. It’ll make more sense once you have access to the class webpage.

**Homepage:** The Homepage collects a lot of information in one place, most of which is not necessary. For our purposes, here’s what you need to remember: **DO NOT rely on the Homepage to determine when your work is due.** The due dates for Quizzes, Exams, and Discussion Boards are on the syllabus. They are the only due dates that matter.

**Announcements:** Periodically, I will post messages to the entire class on the Announcements page. Blackboard will notify you when an announcement is posted.

**Orientation Letter:** You are reading the orientation letter. If you read it carefully and make sure you understand the structure of the class, you’ll have a much better chance of being successful.

**Lecture Videos:** As noted above, you will be watching videos of me giving my regular lectures. By the time you’re done watching the videos, you will have seen my wife, my incredible garden, how I react to bees, a campfire lecture, and other things. You will also learn a great deal about American and California government.

As I have noted previously, you cannot do well in this class without viewing the lecture videos. As you will see, 80% of the points you can earn on the exams are based on the information presented in the lecture videos. So while other classes encourage and reward students for doing outside research, this class does not. In fact, it discourages outside research. If your answers to the essay questions reflect a good understanding of the material in the textbook or any source other than my lectures, I will assume you did not watch the lecture videos and grade you accordingly. So be advised! You MUST watch the lecture videos in order to do well in this class. And you must use the examples I present in the lecture videos when explaining the concepts.

**Lecture Notes:** For each lecture, there is a matching set of lecture notes. When you watch the lecture videos, you should have the notes readily available. As you will see, there are numerous blank spaces in the notes for you to fill in during the lectures. When I grade your exams, I look specifically to see if your answers include the information that should have been included in the blank spaces. So when you watch the videos, you have to pay attention and take good notes.

Within the lecture notes, I indicate when one video ends and the next one begins. For example, at the beginning of the lecture notes on Assessing Democracy, you will see the following notation: Assessing Democracy.01. That indicates the point at which the first video
begins. A little farther down in the lecture notes, you will see: Assessing Democracy.02. That refers to point at which the second video begins. These notations will allow you to determine where you are in the lecture notes at any given time. So, if you get tired of watching me, you can take a break and know exactly where you are in the lecture notes. If this seems unclear, it will make more sense once you open the lecture notes and begin looking at the videos.

**Reading Questions & Quizzes:** For every chapter in the book that you will be reading, I have compiled a set of twenty-five multiple choice questions. I refer to them as the “Reading Questions” since the questions pertain to the readings, not the lectures. You can access the reading questions by clicking on the link. You should have a copy of the Reading Questions with you before you begin reading the assigned chapter. As you read the chapter, you should be able to answer the questions in order. (If you find a question that is not in order, please email me and let me know the proper order). If you are unsure about the answer to one of the Reading Questions, you can post a question on the Reading Questions Discussion Board. The rules for posting such questions are described below in the section on Participation. Be sure to read it carefully. Once you’re confident in your answers, you are ready to take the quiz.

The quiz is directly below the link to the Reading Questions. For example, the link to the quiz for Chapter 1 is directly below the link to the Reading Questions for Chapter 1. To take the quiz, just click on the link. Be sure to have the answers to the Reading Questions close by when you do. You have twenty minutes to complete each quiz! And once you click on the link, the clock starts ticking and can’t be stopped.

For each quiz, Blackboard will randomly select ten of the twenty-five Reading Questions. You get two attempts on every quiz and Blackboard only records your highest score. So even if you get all ten questions right, there are at least two good reasons to take it a second time. First, since Blackboard is highly unlikely to randomly select the same ten questions, taking the quiz a second time will give you an opportunity to see whether your answers are correct. Second, since Blackboard records your highest score, it cannot hurt your grade to take it a second time.

**Study Guides:** There are two study guides, one for each exam. I strongly encourage you to complete the study guides before each exam. They will come in very handy when answering essay questions on the exams. One of the things you’re going to find is that the questions on the Study Guide are very similar to the questions on the exams. So if you’ve done an excellent job of answering the questions on the study guide, you’re going to be in a good position to do well on the exam.

**Exams:** There are two exams. To take an exam, click on the link. The due dates for the exams are listed in the Course Schedule on the syllabus. Each exam includes twenty multiple-choice questions, selected at random from the Reading Questions (2 points each), three short essays (20 points each), and two longer essays (50 points each). You have ninety minutes to complete each exam, so be sure to pace yourself. Once you click on the exam, you cannot stop it and you cannot go backwards. You have to answer the questions in the order they are presented. The exam will be available for twenty-four hours. You MUST complete the exam within the twenty-four hour period. The essay questions on the exams are very
similar to the questions on the study guide. If you do a good job on the study guide and provide complete, structured, and detailed answers, it should help you on the exams. And, more importantly, it makes it very easy for me to grade!

When I teach a topic, I use the same approach. I usually begin with a definition of the topic or concept. Often times, the definition doesn’t make sense because it’s introducing new concepts. So the next thing I do is elaborate on the definition. I will go through the definition piece by piece and explain it. Lastly, to ensure that you fully understand it, I will provide some examples of the concept. When you are taking the exams, you should follow the same approach. Your answers should – in most cases – begin with a clear definition, followed by an elaboration or explanation of the definition, followed by an example. And be sure the example demonstrates your understanding of the concept.

Discussion Boards: There are four Discussion Boards. I will base your participation grade, in large part, on your contributions to the discussion boards. Make sure you understand – and contribute to – each one.

1. Administrative Questions Discussion Board: If you have any questions pertaining to the structure or organization of the course, post them on this Discussion Board. If you do not receive a quick response, email me and let me know you that you have posted a question.

2. Lecture Discussion Board: After you view an entire set of lecture videos, you are expected to post something that includes four components:
   a. Identify at least one new or interesting thing you learned from the lecture.
   b. Identify at least one thing you previously believed that the lecture confirmed.
   c. Identify at least one thing you previously believed that you either no longer believe or have come to doubt.
   d. Include any questions about material in the lecture that you did not understand or would like to have clarified. If you don’t have any questions, you can write, “I do not have any questions.”

3. Current Events Discussion Board: I will periodically post questions about current events and ask you to comment. Students must respond to a minimum of six Current Event questions. Students may also post their own questions on the Current Events Discussion Boards.

4. Reading Questions Discussion Board: If you are not sure if your answer to one of the Reading Questions is correct, you can earn participation points by posting a question about it. However, you may not simply ask fellow students to provide you with the correct answer. You must identify the answer you believe is correct and provide your reasoning. Therefore, you should not post questions like, “What is the answer to Question 3 in Chapter 1?” or “Is ‘D’ the correct answer for Question 3 in Chapter 1? If you want to ask about Question 3 in Chapter 1, you should explain which answer(s) you think is correct and why. Students can also earn participation points by responding to questions. However, responses cannot simply identify the correct answer. For example, you should not post answers like, “The correct answer for Question 3 is D.” You must explain why a
particular answer is correct. Alternatively, you can answer the question by directing the student to the place in the book that answers the question. I will delegate all comments that fail to meet these guidelines and they will NOT count towards your participation grade.

**My Grades:** This section of Blackboard allows you to check on your grades. For the purposes of the exams, if you click on the numerical score, you can also see my comments on your exams. I encourage you to look over my comments after each exam. Hopefully, they will provide you with clues on what you can do to improve your grade on the next exam. If you have any questions about my comments, feel free to email me.

*Note: If a student is close to the next highest grade and has a high participation score (i.e., 95% or better), I will often give them the higher grade. If a student is close to the next highest grade and has a low participation score, I have never given them the higher grade.*

**Are you still reading?** In order to avoid having me drop you from the class, students must complete the Syllabus Quiz by clicking on “Reading Questions and Quizzes.” You MUST take the quiz as many times as necessary until you get 100%. I reserve the right to drop any student who fails to complete the Syllabus Quiz on time. Additionally, I reserve the right to drop any student who goes for more than one week without logging on to the class webpage.

It is important to understand that this online course is not easy. In fact, I think this class is more demanding than my face-to-face courses. To do well in this class, students must be computer and internet savvy. This class requires students to be comfortable in an online blue environment. Perhaps most importantly, to do well in this class you must be disciplined enough to view over 100 lecture videos. This can be challenging for new and returning students. Distance Learning has created a comprehensive list of Computer Skills Tutorials that may be useful in developing the necessary skills.

If you have any additional questions, feel free to e-mail me at phil.gussin@canyons.edu. Please allow me a few days to respond. If I don’t get back to you within a few days, feel free to send a reminder. I hope you enjoy the course. Good luck.

If you did not read this Orientation Letter very carefully and skimmed down to the bottom to see how it ended, this class is NOT right for you. I recommend that you drop it. Seriously.

*Phil Gussin PhD*
*Political Science Department*
*Office: Pico Canyon Hall 222*
*Email: phil.gussin@canyons.edu*