College of the Canyons
Introduction to American Government and Politics
Political Science 150
Orientation Letter for Online Classes

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

Important Note: Students who don’t take the time to read and understand the Orientation Letter and syllabus typically do very poorly in my class. If you don’t have the patience and focus necessary to read them both 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 POLSCI 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 they would experience if they took a face-to-face class. To do that, I videotaped all of my lectures. When I was done, there were over 100 videos (in ten-minute segments) on a variety of subjects related to American and California government. In many online classes, all you have to do is read the material the professor assigns. In order to do well in my class, you MUST watch the videos. Simply reading the textbook will not get the job done. And if you’re thinking, “I’ll just google the information,” you’re mistaken. Big time! If you’re going to take my class – and you want to get a decent grade – you MUST watch the lecture videos.

Two semesters ago, a couple of students thought they were very clever and decided to answer the questions on my tests using information from sources other than my lectures. I guess they were hoping I wouldn’t notice. They were wrong. I gave one student a “D.” The other student had copied information directly from another internet source. In his case, I gave him an “F” and 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 that the lecture videos aren’t horrendously boring. Some of them were recorded during actual lectures. Others were recorded around campus. Still others were recorded in my house or garden. In order to provide access to hearing impaired students, the lecture videos have been closed captioned.

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
The requirements for the course can be found in the syllabus. Unfortunately, you cannot access the class webpage until the first day of class – which means you cannot access the syllabus either. So, in the remainder of this Orientation Letter, I describe the structure of the class and what you’ll see when you can finally access the class webpage.

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.

**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 viewing videos of me giving my regular lectures. Some of the videos were recorded during actual on-campus lectures. Others were recorded at various locations around campus or at my home. By the time you’re done watching the videos, you will have seen my wife, my incredible garden, how I react to bees, me yelling at a student, and other things. Be sure to watch for the Campfire Lecture.

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 often encourage and reward students for doing outside research, this class does not. If your answers to the essay questions on the exams reflect a good understanding of the material in the textbook or any source of information other than my lectures, I will assume you did not watch – or understand – the lecture videos and will grade you accordingly. So be advised! You MUST watch the lecture videos in order to do well in this class. Must!

**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, I have left a number of blank spaces for you to fill in information presented during the lectures. After each lecture, all of the blank spaces should be filled in. *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, just as you would if you were sitting in a classroom. And remember to take good notes.*

Within the lecture notes, I indicate which video corresponds to each section of the lecture notes. For example, at the beginning of the lecture 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 lecture 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 lecture – a highly unlikely occurrence – 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 and 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 these as the “Reading Questions” since they are based on the readings, not the lectures. You should have the reading questions in front of you – either on your computer or printed out – *before* you begin reading the 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 an 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 will be found right 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. You get two attempts on every quiz and your highest score is recorded.

**Study Guides:** There are four 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 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 four 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), three short essays (10 points each), and two longer essays (25 points each). You have ninety minutes to complete each exam, so be sure to pace yourself. Once you click on the exam, it cannot be stopped. The exam will become 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 or topic. 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 three discussion boards. Your participation grade will be based entirely on your contributions to the discussion boards. Make sure you understand – and contribute to – each one.

1. **Lecture Discussion Board:** After you view an entire set of lecture videos, you are expected to post something that includes three components:
   a. It should identify at least one new and interesting thing you learned from the lecture. The more interesting and thoughtful the post, the more points you’ll receive. If it looks like you put little or no thought into your post, you will be graded accordingly.
   b. It should identify at least one thing you believed before the lecture that you either no longer believe or have come to doubt. If you go through an entire lecture and find nothing that challenges what you already believed, watch the lecture again. I have yet to meet a student who listened to an entire lecture and didn’t start to question something they used to believe.
   c. It should ask for clarification on some of the information presented in the lecture. You can ask about something that was not clear or about something that I did not specifically address.

Over the course of the semester, I will respond to some of your posts. If I ask you a question, you are expected to respond, just as you would if I asked you a question in a face-to-face class. So you will need to check the Discussion Board periodically.

2. **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.

3. **Reading Questions Discussion Board:** The Reading Questions Discussion Board allows students to ask questions specifically about the readings. 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 you think it’s correct. 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 where the answer can be found. Comments that fail to meet these guidelines will be deleted from the discussion board and will NOT count towards your participation grade.
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 being dropped from the class, students must complete the Syllabus Quiz posted on the class webpage. You can find the Syllabus Quiz by clicking on “Reading Questions and Quizzes.” You MUST take the quiz as many times as necessary until you get 100%. Students who fail to complete the Syllabus Quiz by the end of the first week of class will be dropped from the class. Additionally, if a student goes two weeks without logging on to the class webpage, they will be dropped from the class.

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 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 very carefully and skimmed down to the bottom to see how it ended, this class probably isn’t right for you. You have been forewarned.

Phil Gussin PhD  
Political Science Department  
Office: Pico Canyon Hall 222  
Office Phone: (661) 362-3708  
Email: phil.gussin@canyons.edu