Understanding Politics — Chapter 1 Student Practice Pack

Thinking Politically: Concepts, Arguments and the Political Canon

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About this pack

Chapter 1 teaches the skills every later chapter uses: separating explanation from evaluation, handling contested concepts and building arguments that survive objection. This pack replaces close reading with an argument workshop. Answers are in the Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff from www.oxterpress.com. Student Pack, Chapter 1, version 1.0 (October 2026). © Oxter Press. CC BY-NC 4.0.

Chapter at a glance

Skill	Question it answers	Typical mistake
Normative versus empirical	Is the claim about what is, or what ought to be?	Moving from ‘is’ to ‘ought’ without a premise
Conceptual discipline	What does the key term mean here?	Changing a term’s meaning mid-argument
Argument structure	Factual premise, normative premise, practical conclusion	A missing or hidden premise
Explanation, interpretation, evaluation	Why it happened, what it means, whether it is justified	Treating an explanation as a justification
Ideal and nonideal theory	What would be just, and what should we do now?	Judging real institutions against an unreachable ideal only
Public justification	Can reasons be accepted by people who disagree?	Relying on reasons only one group shares

Argument workshop

Part A: reconstruct the argument

Set out each argument as factual premise, normative premise and practical conclusion. Mark any premise the author leaves unstated.

1. ‘Most citizens want the facility moved, so the council must move it.’
2. ‘Smoking costs the health service money, so it should be banned.’

3. ‘The constitution was written by an unelected elite, so it has no authority.’

Part B: diagnose the flaw

Name the main weakness in each, using the chapter’s list: equivocation, circularity, false alternatives, unsupported generalisation, unexamined assumption.

1. ‘Freedom means doing what you want; laws stop people doing what they want; so every law reduces freedom, and freedom is what democracy protects.’
2. ‘Either we cut welfare or the economy collapses.’
3. ‘This government is legitimate because it has authority, and it has authority because it is legitimate.’
4. ‘Two former colonies became authoritarian, so independence produces authoritarianism.’

Part C: revise

Choose one argument from Part A. Rewrite it so that it survives the strongest objection you can find, in no more than 150 words. State what evidence would change your conclusion.

Self-test

1. ‘Proportional representation produces more coalition governments’ is:
    - A. An empirical claim
    - B. A normative claim
    - C. A definition
    - D. A tautology
2. ‘Governments ought to protect minority rights’ is:
    - A. An empirical claim
    - B. A prediction
    - C. A normative claim
    - D. A statistical finding
3. A concept is contested when:
    - A. No one uses it
    - B. Reasonable people disagree about its proper meaning and application
    - C. It has a dictionary definition
    - D. It is only used by politicians
4. A practical conclusion requires:
    - A. Only facts
    - B. Only values
    - C. A survey
    - D. Both a factual and a normative premise
5. Equivocation occurs when:
    - A. The premise assumes the conclusion
    - B. Only two options are offered
    - C. A key term changes meaning during the argument

- D. Evidence is too thin

6. Circularity occurs when:
    - A. A premise assumes what the conclusion should establish
    - B. The argument is too long
    - C. A term is undefined
    - D. A counterexample exists
7. A false alternative presents:
    - A. Too many options
    - B. A hidden premise
    - C. A contested concept
    - D. Two options when others exist
8. Explaining why a policy was adopted:
    - A. Shows it was justified
    - B. Does not by itself show it was justified
    - C. Shows it was unjustified
    - D. Is impossible
9. Ideal theory asks:
    - A. What politicians promise
    - B. How to win elections
    - C. What a just arrangement would be under favourable conditions
    - D. What the public prefers
10. Nonideal theory asks:
    - A. What should be done given injustice, limited compliance and constraints
    - B. What is impossible
    - C. How to ignore justice
    - D. Only about history
11. Public justification requires reasons that:
    - A. Are true
    - B. Come from experts
    - C. Are popular
    - D. Can be offered to people who disagree on deeper commitments
12. Debates about the canon concern:
    - A. Only which books are hardest
    - B. Whose arguments and experiences count in political theory
    - C. Copyright law
    - D. Translation alone
13. Reading a thinker well requires:
    - A. Reconstructing the argument before evaluating it
    - B. Judging by modern standards only
    - C. Ignoring historical context
    - D. Accepting the author’s conclusions
14. A strong essay conclusion:
    - A. Summarises every paragraph

- B. Avoids taking a position
- C. Follows from the argument and states its conditions
- D. Introduces new evidence

15. Collective responsibility raises the problem of:
    - A. Who votes
    - B. Translation
    - C. Ideal theory
    - D. Assigning duties when harms arise from many people's actions

Short answers and essays

Short answers: (1) Distinguish normative and empirical claims with an example of each. (2) Why are political concepts contested? (3) Reconstruct one argument in premise–conclusion form. (4) Explain one fallacy with an example. (5) Distinguish explanation, interpretation and evaluation. (6) Why does the canon matter? (7) What is public justification? (8) Ideal versus nonideal theory. (9) When is authority legitimate? (10) What makes a position defensible without certainty?

Essays: (1) Can political science be value-free? (2) Are political concepts essentially contested? (3) Should we judge institutions against ideals they cannot meet? (4) Who belongs in the political canon? (5) Must political arguments be acceptable to those who reject them? (6) What is politics?

Glossary

Term	Definition
Normative claim	A claim about what ought to be
Empirical claim	A claim about what is, testable by evidence
Contested concept	A concept whose meaning is itself in dispute
Practical conclusion	A conclusion about what should be done
Ideal theory	Theory of justice under favourable conditions
Nonideal theory	Guidance for action amid injustice and constraint
Public justification	Reasons acceptable to those who disagree
Canon	The texts treated as central to a tradition