

## TEACHING STATEMENT

**Joseph Torigian**  
Stanford University CISAC  
616 Serra St  
Stanford, California 94305  
jptori@gmail.com

Centers of higher learning depend on society's contribution of enormous amounts of resources. That sacrifice instills in me a strong sense of mission and public-mindedness towards teaching. This sentiment is further strengthened by a loyalty and gratitude to the teachers who over the years have given so much of their time and talents. Tough but fair mentors who taught me how to think critically created in me a sense of duty to repay them by doing my best for my own students. Moreover, I believe political science is an enormously important discipline that has great relevance for students no matter their career intentions. I deeply value the opportunity to teach young people how to use political science methodology to think about contemporary political debates.

Based on these motivations, I place special emphasis on four principles: a dynamic classroom environment, creative and inter-disciplinary teaching, skills that will be useful for students over the long-term, and establishing a strong, context-specific relationship with my students that is conducive to learning.

As a teaching assistant for a class on American foreign policy at MIT, I extensively planned how to teach the material by using questions punctuated with review and summary. Each section would begin with a question about a key concept. I would follow up with polite but probing questions to explore the depth of the students' understanding. I deliberately structured discussion so that we could jointly arrive at all of the most important parts of a key concept. My ideal questions were those that were neither too difficult to answer nor too simple and boring. If a student stated something incorrect, I would follow up with a question that hinted about why their answer was problematic. Students were often able to correct themselves in such cases. Before the conversation on any given issue went on too long, I would summarize what the students needed to remember from the discussion.

This technique was especially crucial for students who just wanted the "takeaways" and to make sure that during the distraction of discussion students did not miss any notes. During section, I also deliberately challenged students to often think about the other side of an issue and encouraged debate. I was particularly pleased to see my students continue discussions as they exited the classroom. I believe that this particular method develops critical thinking, prevents students from losing attention, shows the practical usefulness of the skills they are learning, and encourages an interest in the topic while still making sure they are learning the basic material necessary for quizzes and exams.

I also hold in high regard innovative education that creates connections among different disciplines and ways of learning. At MIT I designed a course on graphic novels and political violence. Many graphic novels touch upon ideas of interest to political science, such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, religious extremism, terrorism, and occupation. The readings for each week coupled a graphic novel with a work of social science. This class was co-taught with two MIT lecturers from outside political science who provided students with the skills to make their own graphic novel or even animated feature, which was the assignment for their final project. This class successfully attracted students not normally interested in political science and taught them to communicate ideas in creative ways.

When students are finished with a class I teach, I mostly evaluate my success based on whether they improved critical thinking, writing abilities, and research. These skills will help them for the rest of their lives, and since many students will not necessarily be majoring in a humanities, let alone political science, this is often a rare opportunity to ensure that students pick up these essential skills. When I first taught, I was surprised by the low level of writing and research skills among some students. To make up for this deficiency, I prepared special tutorials on both of these topics and urged students to discuss with me outlines for their papers and their research plans. With regards to writing, I explained to them the importance of good introductions and conclusions, signposting, the clear wedding of argument to evidence, and other techniques. I particularly enjoyed teaching students about how to engage in research for qualitative analysis. My goal was to inculcate in them a sense of discovery and the fun of being a detective. More concretely, my students were provided with information on where to begin and how to identify the most fruitful avenues for research.

MIT is a high-pressure environment for undergraduate students, and this led me to reflect on the best ways to guarantee a challenging but comfortable setting. If students were having serious difficulties, I would reach out to them to make sure they were not feeling overwhelmed. For students with especially poor writing skills, I would offer the opportunity to submit their papers in advance to give them the chance to go through an extra draft. To facilitate class discussion, I would quickly memorize the students' names and ask quiet students questions that conveyed a sense of honest curiosity about their viewpoint. I remembered the interests of individual students and brought them into discussions by referencing their special appreciation for the topic. When giving students feedback, I always first told them what I thought was valuable in their work and, when providing criticisms, suggested specific ways to make their work better. Students were encouraged to come to office hours even if they did not have a specific problem.

I very much look forward to the possibility of teaching my own class at your university. Please feel free to contact me if you would like more information on the specific courses I can contribute.