

# Economics as a Vocation\*

## *Or, a few hints on how to survive and thrive in the CSS Sophomore Economics Tutorial*

Hi Sophomores!

Welcome to your economics tutorial. As you all know, CSS is intended to be a multidisciplinary major, which means that through the course of your studies, you should get some idea of how to think, read and write in the four disciplines of government, history, philosophy and economics. The goal of this sheet is to clarify just what those expectations look like within the economics tutorial. Hopefully, they'll help you relax a bit about the task ahead of you. And who knows... you just might come to enjoy it!

### **READING FOR ECONOMICS**

Readings for the economics tutorial are shorter and denser than government or history. The theory within them can at times seem too thick to penetrate. Thus, it may be helpful to keep the following questions in mind as you go through your set of readings:

- **Context**— who are the authors? More than their names, what historical/political/cultural events and trends may have influenced their writing?
- **Focus**— what's the central idea in play? Broadly, of course, each week's theme will be given to you by Prof. Jacobsen's syllabus, but can you articulate this theme in your own words?
- **Assumptions**— what assumptions does each author make? Which ones do they share? Why would they be true?
- **Is vs. should be**— what are the **positive** aspects (dealing with the world as it is) of the arguments the authors are putting forward? What are the **normative** aspects (dealing with the world as it ought to be)?
- **Differences between authors**— what exactly makes each author's argument unique? The opening assumptions? The inclusion of certain mechanisms? How those mechanisms work?
- **Implications of an argument**— how would each author argue their own case against the criticisms of the others? Can you carry their logic beyond the text of their book/article to encompass new situations?
- **General importance**— why is this debate worth studying?

### **WRITING FOR ECONOMICS**

Writing a CSS economics paper is an exercise in creative logic. Your goal will be to design/describe a set of economic mechanisms in order to explain some economic/social phenomenon, carrying the logic of your particular set of economic mechanisms through a paper in order to prove a point and answer the week's question. These simple guidelines should help keep you focused during this task:

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\* This will be funny only after you've finished the Social Theory Colloquium. On second thought, it will never be funny.

***Readability:***

- Keep your sentences short and simple.
- While you shouldn't waste space with filler, such as "the thesis of my essay is..." you should keep your reader aware at all times of where you are in your logical argument.
- Provide examples, and don't be afraid to get creative! Contrary to popular belief, economists are people too, and thus *can* get bored, regardless of how mind numbing their own writing might be. Sometimes an outrageous situation can be just the thing to both illustrate your logic and keep your reader plugged in.
- Don't write more than 7 pages! In fact, do your best to keep it to 5.

***Clarity:***

- Define your terms clearly and concisely-- what *is* mercantilism anyway?
- Be clear about the differences between the positive and normative aspects of your argument.

***Plausibility:***

- State your assumptions— what does the starting point of your system look like? What's included? Who are your economic actors; how do they behave and why?
- Be explicit about how your mechanism works— what incentives are your actors responding to? What constraints are they facing? How does that affect the world around them?
- Consider some possible arguments against your thesis. Does a criticism address your underlying assumptions, the inner workings of your mechanism, or the outcome that you claim it will have? How might you refute such a criticism? Is a criticism positive or normative?