Getting Started with International Relations

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, JAN 3 2017

This is an excerpt from *International Relations* – an E-IR Foundations beginner's textbook. Download your free copy here.

This book is designed to be the very first book you will read in the area of International Relations. As a beginner's guide, it has been structured to condense the most important information into the smallest space and present that information in the most accessible way. The book is split into two sections, each of nine chapters. Together they offer a broad sweep of the basic components of International Relations and the key contemporary issues that concern the discipline. The narrative arc forms a complete circle, taking you from no knowledge to competency. Our journey will start by examining how the international system was formed and end by reflecting that International Relations is always adapting to events and is therefore a never-ending journey of discovery. Unlike typical textbooks, there are no boxes, charts, pictures or exercises. The philosophy underpinning this book is that these things can be a distraction. This book, like others in the E-IR Foundations series, is designed to capture attention with an engaging narrative. The chapters are short, with simple paragraphs and clear sentences. We recommend that you read the book as it is presented and avoid cherry-picking chapters. Remember, the book is an unfolding narrative and each chapter builds on the one before it. Think of it like this: you would not skip to chapter seven of a novel and expect to understand who the characters were and what the setting was! Start at the beginning. If you find a chapter difficult, leave it for a little while then come back and give it another try. All chapters are equally important.

Key terms

Each discipline has its own unique language. This comprises a range of specific terms that have been developed by scholars to describe certain things. As a result, a lot of the time you spend learning a discipline is spent learning its jargon so that you can access and understand the literature. Instead of packing this book with jargon we have tried as far as possible to explain things in ordinary language while easing you into the more particular terminology of International Relations. This approach should keep you engaged while giving you the confidence to read the more advanced literature that you will soon encounter. We have also tried to avoid over-using acronyms.

Understanding key terms even applies to something as basic as how to express the term 'International Relations'. The academic convention is to capitalise it (International Relations, abbreviated as 'IR') when referring to the academic discipline – that is, the subject taught in university campuses all over the world. IR does not describe events; rather, it is a scholarly discipline that seeks to *understand* events. On the other hand, 'international relations' – not capitalised – is generally used by both scholars and non-scholars to *describe* relations between states, organisations and individuals at the global level. This term is interchangeable with terms such as 'global politics', 'world politics' or 'international politics'. They all mean pretty much the same thing. We have maintained this capitalisation convention in the book.

IR examines just about everything that concerns how we, as human beings, have organised our world. As a discipline it is often described as 'broad church' as it has delved into other disciplines for the tools to examine the wide range of issues within its scope. Although the chapters will progressively build up the picture, it may be helpful to skim through a few of the key terms here as an introduction.

Political power has found its ultimate form (so far) in the creation of the nation-state. Yet, 'nation-state', most commonly referred to in the shorter form of 'state', is a jargon term that you might not often hear. Instead you may hear people say 'country' or 'nation'. But, these terms are technically incorrect at describing the prime units that comprise international relations. France is a nation-state. It also happens to be a country and a nation, but then so is Wales. But, Wales is *not* a nation-state. It is part of the United Kingdom, which *is* a nation-state because, unlike Wales, it possesses something called 'sovereignty' – which is yet another key jargon term central to IR. These issues cannot be understood without IR delving into the discipline of Politics and borrowing and adapting its insights. But you need not worry, as all these terms are explained in the book as they appear.

You may not be satisfied that international relations is just politics between or among nation-states. Economics is also involved, and this has evolved to the extent that we are often said to be living in a globalised world characterised by the relatively free exchanges of goods, people and information. Understandably, this adds new elements to IR and requires it to incorporate an understanding of actors beyond nation-states, such as international organisations and corporations. And you may like to look even wider than the role of states, economics and organisations. Individuals – you and I – are of course also important. After all, international relations is essentially a system of interaction between human beings. To understand and analyse this, IR has had to borrow tools from other disciplines such as Sociology. As it has done so, it has added yet more jargon and the complexity has increased.

The paragraph above also introduces the word 'globalisation' – a buzzword of our time, even though scholars still heatedly debate what it actually means. Is globalisation the description of a shared idea of what international politics should be? Is it a description of the growing cultural connections we share globally? Is it the description of a world linked by a single global economic model – capitalism? Is it all of these things together? Is it new or has it always existed? If we try to answer these questions we quickly find new questions emerging, such as whether we think globalisation is a positive or negative thing. For example, if we settle on an idea of globalisation as the emergence of a shared global culture where we all recognise the same symbols, brands and ideals, what does that mean for local cultures and customs? Some even question whether globalisation exists at all. One of IR's foremost scholars, Kenneth Waltz, famously called it 'globaloney'.

However, this book purposefully avoids getting too bogged down in big debates over contested terms such as globalisation. We have also avoided packaging complex terms in simplified definitions. Instead, where such issues arise, we aim to give you sufficient context for you to think for yourself and read deeper and wider. We wish to open your mind, not to tell you what to think or attempt to give you pre-packed answers.

IR's dense library of key terms and jargon may appear a dizzying prospect for new students. But, it should be clear to see how unavoidable they are and why IR scholars need to use them. Even making the simplest point about something within the sphere of IR draws on specific terms that need to be understood. Some readers of this book will not be beginners. They may have started their IR journey in other places and landed here for a pit stop due to jargon overload. The book is also designed with those readers in mind.

We should also mention that as this book is published in the UK it is presented in British English. This means words like 'globalisation' and 'organisation' are spelt with an 's' rather than a 'z'.

Sources

Referencing sources is very important in academia. It is the way scholars and students attribute the work of others, whether they use their exact words or not. For that reason it is usual to see numerous references in the expert literature you will progress to after completing this book. It is an important element of scholarly writing, and one that you should master for your own studies.

In this book we have tried to summarise issues from an expert perspective so as to give you an uninterrupted narrative. When we need to point you to more specialist literature, for example to invite you to read a little deeper, we do so by inserting in-text citations that look like this: (Vale 2016b). These point you to a corresponding entry in the references section towards the back of the book where you can find the full reference and follow it up if you want to.

Typically, these are books, journal articles or websites. In-text citations always include the author's surname and the year of publication. As the reference list is organised alphabetically by surname, you can quickly locate the full reference. Sometimes you will also find page numbers inside the brackets. For example, (Vale 2016b, 11–13). Page numbers are added when referring to specific arguments, or a quotation, from a source. This referencing system is known as the 'Author-Date' or 'Harvard' system. It is the most common, but not the only, referencing system used in IR.

When the time comes for you to make your own arguments and write your own assignments, think of using sources as if you were a lawyer preparing a court case. Your task there would be to convince a jury that your argument is defensible, beyond reasonable doubt. You would have to present clear, well-organised evidence based on facts and expertise. If you presented evidence that was just someone's uninformed opinion, the jury would not find it convincing and you would lose the case. Similarly, in academic writing you have to make sure that the sources you use are reputable. You can usually find this out by looking up the author and the publisher. If the author is not an expert (academic, practitioner, etc.) and/or the publisher is unknown/obscure, then the source is likely unreliable. It may have interesting information, but it is not reputable by scholarly standards.

It should be safe to assume that you know what a book is (since you are reading one!) and that you understand what the internet is. However, one type of source that you will find cited in this book and may not have encountered before is the journal article. Journal articles are typically only accessible from your university library as they are expensive and require a subscription. They are papers prepared by academics, for academics. As such, they represent the latest thinking and may contain cutting-edge insights. But, they are often complex and dense due to their audience being fellow experts, and this makes them hard for a beginner to read. In addition, journal articles are peer reviewed. This means they have gone through a process of assessment by other experts before being published. During that process many changes and improvements may be made – and articles often fail to make it through peer review and are rejected. So, journal articles are something of a gold standard in scholarly writing.

Most journal articles are now available on the internet, which leads to confusion as students can find it difficult to distinguish a journal article from an online magazine or newspaper article. Works of journalism or opinion are not peer reviewed and conform to different standards. If you follow the tip above and 'search' the publisher and author, you should be able to discern which is which. Another helpful tip is length. A journal article will typically be 10–20 pages long (7,000–11,000 words); articles of journalism or commentary will usually be shorter.

A final note on the subject of sources: the internet is something of a Wild West. There is great information there, but also a lot of rubbish. It can often be hard to tell them apart. But, again, if you follow the golden rule of looking up the author and looking up the publisher (using the internet), you can usually find your way. However, even some of the world's biggest websites can be unreliable. Wikipedia, for example, is a great resource, but it often has incorrect information because it is authored, and usually edited, by ordinary people who are typically enthusiasts rather than experts. In addition, its pages are always changing (because of user edits), making it hard to rely on as a source. So the rule of thumb with the internet is to try to corroborate anything you find on at least two good websites/from at least two reputable authors. Then you can use the internet with confidence and enjoy its benefits while avoiding its pitfalls. When preparing assignments, however, you should only use the internet to supplement the more robust information you will find in academic journals and books.

Read smart

Try to set aside time to read. You will need to put your devices on silent, close your internet browsers and find a quiet space to work. Take ten-minute mini-breaks every hour or so to do other things and make sure to eat a decent meal midway through your study session to give you a longer break. Finally, get a good night's sleep before and after you study. Your brain does not absorb or retain information very well when you are sleep deprived or hungry. There will be times in the year when panic sets in as deadlines approach, but if you have already developed a good reading strategy you will find you are in good shape for the task at hand.

Reading for scholarly purposes is not the same as reading for pleasure. You need to adopt a reading strategy.

Everyone has their own way of doing this, but the basic tip is this: take notes as you read. If you find that you don't have many notes or your mind goes a little blank, then you might be reading too quickly or not paying enough attention. This is most likely if you are reading digitally on a computer or tablet, as it is very easy for the eyes to wander or for you to drift onto a social media site. If this happens, don't worry: just go back and start again. Often, reading something a second time is when it clicks.

Best practice is to make rough notes as you read through each chapter. When you get to the end of a chapter, compile your rough notes into a list of 'key points' that you would like to remember. This will be useful when you come to revise or recap an issue because you won't necessarily have to read the entire chapter again. Your notes should trigger your memory and remind you of the key information. Some textbooks do this for you and provide a list of key points at the end of each chapter. This book, being a foundational book for beginners, does *not* do so: we want readers to develop the important skills of reading and note-taking for themselves and not take short cuts.

By making notes you will form a reading strategy that will allow you to retain the most important information and compress it into a smaller set of notes integral to revision for examinations and preparation for discussions and assignments. You should adopt this approach with everything you read during your studies. It's best to use digital means (laptop/tablet) so you can create backups and not risk losing valuable handwritten paper notes. You should also note down the citation information for each set of notes at the top of the page so that you can identify the source you took the notes from if you need to reference it later in any written work.

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or Linkedin.