

Some Guidelines for Writing a Research Paper in Political Science
Professor Shanna Kirschner
Department of Political Science
Allegheny College

Identify a research question.

What is something you find puzzling or unexpected? For example, you might predict that because the Bolivian *cocalero* social movement opened democratic space in that country, a similar social movement in Egypt would produce a similar outcome – but it hasn't. Explaining this puzzle is a good question.

A good research question asks about the relationship between two factors. This relationship should not be obvious. Nor should it be already determined; that is, multiple answers must be possible. The answer also must be possible to ascertain.

Define the main terms you're going to use.

You need to establish the ground rules that define what you're explaining. If you're investigating the role of ethnicity in civil wars, what do you mean by ethnicity, and what is a civil war? If you're focusing on how NGOs fight corruption, what do you mean by corruption?

Defining terms will probably be more work than you expect – and more work than the final product will reveal. You'll have to read a fair amount to see what other scholars say about the concept, and then decide on a definition of your own. But most of that research into what others say will never see the light of day. Readers don't need to know every source you read. They just need a general sense of any debates, and the reasons you think your definitions are best. (If there are any obvious drawbacks to your definition, mention them here. Then justify why you use them anyway.)

Draft the literature review.

What do other scholars say about this question? Group their theories by the answer, *not* by the individual author. The literature review shouldn't read like a book report so much as a set of answers or theories that explain the phenomenon you're interested in. For example, if you're interested in the relationship between partisan polarization and voter turnout, your literature review might have two main sections. In the first, you would briefly summarize why polarization might *increase* turnout (according to scholars a, b, and c). In the second part, you would do the same for why polarization might *decrease* turnout (according to scholars d, e, and f).

Don't just summarize this literature; engage with it. This means that you should critically evaluate what you think is missing or confusing in existing studies, as well as what you find particularly compelling about a perspective. If there's a debate in the literature, think about how your project can help to resolve that. For example, if you're interested in how public opinion shapes foreign policy, you might find that some scholars argue it has little effect, and others assert that leaders are especially beholden to their publics. Your project, then, could help to resolve this discrepancy.

Much of the most important research in political science is in academic journals, not just books. So your review of the literature will need to cover the library catalogue *and* the databases that search for journal articles. These will, by and large, not appear in a standard Google search, but will require you to use these specialized databases. If you don't know how to do this, make an appointment with a reference librarian.

Formulate your theory.

What do you believe is true about the question you're asking? This should be clearly tied to the literature review, showing that your ideas are not completely out there, but are grounded in a larger community of scholars' research on the question.

Perhaps no one has directly answered your question; that doesn't mean they have nothing to say about it, however. For instance, if we were interested in why people vote for subnational parties in European federal systems,

we might draw implications or expectations from what we know about why people vote for locally-based parties in the US, a different type of federal system. If we want to understand how mediation in civil wars operates, we might look to the literature on mediation in interstate wars to generate some hypotheses, or expectations about what is true.

Your theory should address the primary relationship between the cause and effect you're examining (also known as the independent and dependent variables). It also should include an explanation of the mechanisms you believe is driving the relationship. This means explaining *how* the cause produces the effect. For example, perhaps you expect that Bahrain's economic policies will alienate the Shi'a community. One mechanism might be through preventing socioeconomic advancement, leading to unmet expectations, which we know from other literature tends to produce dissatisfaction.

Identify a method.

Common methods in undergraduate political science research papers are case studies and statistical analyses. Think about how your method helps you answer the central research question. Of course, at this stage, you may also be constrained by your training, but it is still important to understand the strengths and limitations of different strategies.

For example, if you're exploring whether poverty causes terrorism, you might conduct statistical analyses to establish whether there is a relationship between the two factors. Then, you might use a case study to show the mechanism – that is, *how* poverty leads to terrorism. If you're using paired case studies, how does each case fit into the “universe” of possible cases? For example, to explore the US response to torture in other states, you need to look at different types of responses by the US in order to get a sense of why observed variation exists. This means that, at a minimum, you would compare a case in which the US protested torture, and one in which the government didn't do so. If you're interested in how different types of appeals to donors influence their likelihood of giving to a political campaign, you need to look at several different types of requests to get a sense for what is more and less effective in certain circumstances.

Gather and analyze your data.

This is hard! And it's not something that you can just read in that stack of books and articles you have amassed by this point. It will require a lot of time sitting and simply thinking about what all this information you've gathered actually means.

You cannot leave this part to the end and expect to successfully complete it in a week or two. Moreover, the best academic inquiry is honest. Trying to shoe-horn information into a preconceived notion of what's true about the world will usually just leave your argument full of holes. It's OK to be wrong sometimes. It's also OK to acknowledge that you believe you're right but there's some evidence that you can't explain.

Proof-read your work.

It sends a terrible signal to readers if you can't even be bothered to correct typos. That signal includes, among other things, that a) you don't take any pride in your work and b) your work isn't worth reading.

Give yourself enough time.

While some people can pull off a major research project in only days, odds are you're not one of them (this isn't personal, it's simple probability). Allot time for editing, revisions, completing other required work, spilling coffee on your laptop/notes/books, really really needing books that are checked out of the library, slipping on the ice and breaking your arm, and simply being human...

The Mechanics of the Paper Itself

USE HEADERS TO ORGANIZE YOUR PAPER. This provides signposts to readers, helping them understand the flow of the paper. You might find that subheadings will be helpful as well.

A. INTRODUCTION

- a. Introduce your puzzle or question
- b. Briefly explain why it's important or relevant to the field
- c. Define the key terms
- d. Provide a brief roadmap to the paper itself, introducing each section and identifying how the paper will proceed to answer the research question

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

- a. Sections B and C are sometimes combined into one to make more clear how your theory relates to the existing research on the question

C. THEORY/HYPOTHESES

D. METHODS

- a. How will you measure your dependent and independent variables? This question isn't just for quantitative studies: if you're doing a case, you still believe that some factor (the independent variable) influences another factor (the dependent variable). Your explanation of how you will measure each variable (the operationalization) is very important. Work by other scholars may be helpful in identifying appropriate and available measures, as well as justifications for those specific measures.
- b. If you are doing a statistical analysis, discuss your control variables. If you're doing a case study, discuss why the cases represent a useful comparison that will, by virtue of the very cases you include, help you to answer your research question.
- c. You should be very specific in explaining your data collection methods. If you are conducting a survey, for example, you will need to attach your survey instrument as an appendix. If you are going to analyze archival documents, attach your codebook (a log of how you measured and coded each variable of interest). If you will be using an existing dataset, attach a discussion of the dataset and its measurement of the variables of interest.

E. DATA

- a. Sections E and F are sometimes combined.
- b. This is where you provide the details of your cases (for a case study) or include the results of a statistical analysis

F. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

- a. Discuss your results in the context of your theory. You should return to the theoretical perspective that drives the research question and consider that theory in light of your results.
- b. You should also critically evaluate your research design (including an assessment of the limitations of your research, i.e., measurement problems, generalizability, underspecification of model, etc...)

G. CONCLUSIONS

- a. Briefly recap it all in a few pages.
- b. This is also the section where you might talk about broader normative implications of the project, if you are doing so.