

## Research Paper Guidelines

- Choosing a topic and cases

Here are some selection criteria to consider:

*Relevance:* Try to choose a topic with significance for the particular course in which you are enrolled (Comparative Political Economy, Democratization in World Politics, International Law, etc.) as well as for international studies more broadly.

*Interest:* you will be committing significant time and energy to this project all semester, so choose wisely!

*Feasibility/Availability of resources:* select a theme and country that are likely to be examined in scholarly works and covered in international news sources.

- Formulating a research question

The purpose of most research papers is to pose (and answer) a research question of importance. Suppose your broad area of interest is comparative political economy and that you would like to examine neoliberal economic reforms within developing countries. This topic can yield a number of research questions: What explains the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms (or the timing or pace of such reforms)? What are the effects of reform packages on electoral support for political parties or candidates?

Sometimes observed variation across cases gives rise to a question: Why have some countries in Latin America passed freedom of information laws, while others have not?

Be sure that your question is researchable (i.e., that you can answer it by collecting and analyzing data).

Try to choose a question that matters: Who cares about the answer to your question? Why is it important, relevant, and interesting?

- Collecting information and data

You will need to consult a variety of high-quality sources, including (but not limited to) the following:

*Scholarly works:* To write a solid research paper, you **must** consult academic sources, including articles and books. If you are uncertain as to which journals are relevant to your area of inquiry, ask your professor. The most efficient strategy for locating articles is to perform keyword searches using Barret's online search engines and e-journal databases.

For a guide on how to distinguish scholarly journals from other periodicals, see <http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill20.html>

It is imperative that you begin to collect these materials early and well in advance of any deadlines! You may need to order books using Inter Library Loan, visit the University of Memphis Library, and/or purchase books not available at either Barret or U of M.

*International news sources:* Search the Lexis-Nexis and/or Newsbank databases on the Library's web page for articles from *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Economist*, and other sources.

*Reputable websites:* All websites are *not* created equal, so proceed with caution. Many examples of helpful sites could be offered: for economic development indicators, see the UN Development Program (UNDP) site; to learn how countries rank in terms of corruption, visit the Transparency International site; for data on liberal democracy, see the Freedom House site.

- Reading up on your chosen topic and question

As early as possible, devise a system for organizing and evaluating everything that you read. You should read in a focused, directed way: continuously ask yourself how a given work helps you answer your research question and advance your own argument.

- Organizing the paper

While there is no one way to organize a successful research paper, you may wish to include the following sections.

### 1. Introduction

Briefly establish the topic of the paper and clearly state your research question. Stimulate the reader's interest so that s(he) will want to read on.

You also should convey the significance of the issue you are analyzing: Again, why is your project relevant, worthwhile, and interesting? What are your theoretical, practical, policy, or other contributions? (Note: you will probably address this at greater length in the Conclusion.)

### 2. Argument

In this section, you present a clear thesis statement or argument. The argument is your answer to the research question. Ideally, it will be plausible, logical, and compelling.

Additionally, you should relate your own ideas to theoretical perspectives, historical patterns, and/or other themes discussed in class. The extent to which you are required to review existing scholarship on your topic will depend on your professor's specific goals for the paper.

### 3. Empirical evidence

You should devote this section to supporting your argument with evidence from one or more cases. Remember that you need to persuade your audience that your argument or position is valid and preferable to the alternatives.

It is usually a good idea to provide the reasons why you have selected the country or countries (or other cases) you are discussing at the beginning of this section.

#### 4. Conclusion

Summarize your main argument and findings as concisely as possible. Recapitulate the contributions or “pay-off” of your research (see above). Then use the remainder of this section to go beyond your analysis. For instance, what are the policy (or other) implications of your research? What new questions have arisen? What other cases would be interesting to analyze in the future?

- Norms of citation and other stylistic issues

Remember that you must adhere to the highest standards of academic honesty while preparing all of your papers. It is crucial that you use accepted forms of citation whenever you use others’ ideas. For guidelines on norms of citation (e.g., parenthetical approaches) and instructions on how to prepare a works cited page, visit these links and/or consult these texts.

*The Style Manual for Political Science*

Available for purchase at: [https://www.apsanet.org/section\\_362.cfm](https://www.apsanet.org/section_362.cfm)

The American Political Science Association’s guidelines are also available at: <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocAPSA.html>.

*The Chicago Manual of Style*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Turabian, Kate. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

*Important tip:* Check with your instructor first! S(he) may prefer that you use a particular style of citation.

Finally, there is no substitute for a well-structured paper with a coherent organization and a logical progression of arguments and evidence. Clear writing will allow the reader to focus on the substance of the paper. For all but the most gifted writers among us, clarity comes only with extensive revisions and editing.