Guidelines for Writing Papers, including MRPs, at GSPIA[1]

This version: July 07, 2020

Before we start

You will encounter many kinds of papers - term papers, take home exams, major research papers, briefing notes, theses, policy papers, etc. - but the differences between these types of papers are actually not as large as they may appear. All of these types of papers should give an answer to a precisely defined and relevant question, and this answer should be evidence-based or otherwise structured according to your objectives. Three pitfalls that every paper would want to avoid are: 1) having no question or an unclear question; 2) providing evidence not related to your question; 3) concluding with no answer or substantive reflection, or with an answer to a question that you never posed in the introduction. The easiest way to avoid these pitfalls is to carefully review your introduction and your conclusion and make sure that they 'match'.

Any paper - even a five page term paper – should be preceded by a blueprint, framework, outline, or, indeed, a 'research proposal'. This stage of research is so important that it may reasonably take half of your research time. Once you have it, however, the rest of your writing will be much easier. Conversely, without a research proposal, you risk getting lost. The purpose of this document is to offer practical guidelines that will assist you with writing a research proposal.

How will your paper be evaluated?

The evaluation of your paper clearly depends on the exact requirements for the specific paper. No matter what the requirements are, there are a few 'rules of thumb'. A good paper has a clear and consistent theme. It makes an argument. It defines central analytical concepts. It provides appropriate evidence to support the argument. It demonstrates internal consistency; that is, the research question, the evidence, the methods and the conclusion 'speak to each other'. The paper is well-written, well-organized and provides interesting insights. A poor paper shows shortcomings in terms of internal consistency, argumentation and composition, such as poor evidence to support statements made, a lack of logic, poor synthesis of the material, disorganization and poor writing.

What is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a document that proposes a research project (and, yes term papers, take home exams, major research papers, and theses are all, to some extent, research projects!). A research project addresses a research problem. This problem is framed as a question; the research provides an answer or solution.

Goal of a research proposal

A research proposal seeks to convince a research supervisor or research committee that the research project is relevant and feasible. *Relevant* means that the project should be undertaken, i.e. it is an important question that should be researched. *Feasible* means that it is possible, i.e. you know how to approach and execute the project, you know that there are sufficient data, and you can do the project in the required time frame. It is easy to find a relevant question, but it can be tricky to find a relevant *and* feasible question!

[1] This document has been drafted by Srdjan Vucetic, Christoph Zuercher and Geranda Notten. We would like to thank our colleagues and students at ESAPI for their feedback; further suggestions are always welcome. In the meanwhile, we take responsibility for remaining errors and inconsistencies.

Importance of writing a strong research proposal

A clearly defined research problem (or question) is central to the success of a research project. It helps ensure that your project is doable before you begin writing the paper. In addition, if you take the time to clearly describe your project in your proposal, you will be able to write your research faster and more easily because you will have already solidified the key elements. Also, the research proposal can be used as a guide to help you stay on track while writing your research.

What format can a research proposal have?

Your proposal explains what you are going to do, why and how; it typically includes the elements listed below:

1) Title
2) Introduction
3) Research question
4) A lay-out of the structure of your argument as well as your main concepts, methods, data and sources
5) Bibliography
6) Your time-frame

How to write a research proposal?

As we have already mentioned, a good research proposal is a substantial part of every research project. The following guidelines outline the steps that should be followed to produce a research proposal. But even if you do not have to produce an elaborate research proposal (for example, because you are working on a presentation, or on a short term paper), it is still a very good idea to follow these steps. By 'follow', we do not mean linearly follow the sequence of steps as outlined below: the development and writing of a research proposal typically involves a lot of 'back and forth' between the steps before a concise and logical proposal emerges.

Step 1: Find a good – relevant, interesting, important – topic

A good paper asks an important / interesting question (usually, it asks only *one* question!). There are many ways to identify a question. For example, unresolved disputes in the scholarly literature or the policy arena may point to a relevant problem or a puzzle. Following public policy debates may help you identify key disputes about facts, events or theories that you may want to address.

Step 2: Specify the type of paper you intend to write (see below for a list of examples)

As we suggested earlier, there are different types of papers you will be expected to write during your studies; the following five types are among the most common. Note that a paper can be a combination of these different types and can therefore have more than one objective and in many cases the objectives will overlap and (ideally) reinforce the core argument of your paper. Having said that, you should always be very clear about the objective(s) of your paper and your argument.

1. A literature-assessing paper

Such a paper summarizes and evaluates existing theoretical or empirical literature on a *precisely defined* research question. It asks whether existing explanations are valuable and identifies gaps in our knowledge. Note that a literature assessment is a *part* of almost every type of paper. However, if well done, a literature assessment can be a complete paper in its own right. As a matter of fact, the most common type of term paper or take home exam is a literature assessment.

Note that a literature-assessing paper also has a research question. It is not enough to summarize a few papers which talk about a common topic. Rather, the objective of a literature assessing paper is to see how different

authors have tried to answer the same question. Where did they get their evidence? What methods were used? What are the findings? Where does the literature agree, and which are the big debates (i.e. where does it not agree)?

2. A policy-evaluative, -descriptive or -prescriptive paper

A policy paper starts with a policy question. Such a paper describes and evaluates current or future public policies or policy proposals, and may ask some of the following questions: Are the factual and theoretical premises of the proponents and opponents of these policies valid? Do they develop and connect these premises logically and in ways consistent with their policy recommendations? Will they produce the results that its proponents promise? Are the promised results desirable? Note that this type of paper does not give your personal opinion on a given policy; it constructs an argument about these polices based on available evidence.

3. A normative/ position paper

Normative analysis consists of evaluating whether certain policies are good or bad and therefore whether they should or shouldn't be pursued. The goal of this paper is to outline and defend a position such as, for example, multiculturalism policies are a success, or multiculturalism policies should not be pursued. To make these claims you should identify your normative perspective and then provide a logical collection of reasons to justify your claim (typically, you should consider both points that support your position and that oppose it. You must also explain why the latter are false, not weighty, misdirected, etc). This type of paper is for those interested in exploring how philosophy, social and political theory, or ethics and moral reasoning apply to the study of public policy and international affairs.

4. A theory-testing/theory-proposing paper

A theory testing paper uses empirical evidence to evaluate existing theories. The evidence can be, for example, case studies or data sets. The objective of such a paper is to test whether the evidence in one given case, which you select and describe, strengthens or weakens an existing theory. A theory-proposing paper advances new hypotheses, but many such papers of this type are a combination of theory testing and theory proposing. For example, they test an existing theory, using case studies, and find that the existing theory does not fully explain the outcome. Then they propose an addition or modification to the existing theory, or a synthesis of existing theories.

5. A historical explanatory paper

Such a paper explains the causes and consequences of one specific historical case, fact, phenomenon or the dynamics of events. For example, a historical explanatory paper can approach an event or a process from the past (e.g., a decline of trade, terrorist attack, emergence of an institution etc.) and use a conceptual and/or theoretical framework to explain it. A historical explanatory paper can also be a lessons learned paper, focusing on the ideas of a thinker from the past and evaluating the relevance of these ideas to the present, including to the decisions of current policymakers.

Step 3: Develop the research question

All of the above paper types require a clearly defined research question. Finding and defining this research question is the most important part of your work! So ask yourself: What is the *concrete* problem at hand that I am going to attempt to solve? Thus, it is the central question of the paper and all elements of your paper are dedicated to the single purpose of answering this question.

Many of the most severe problems in writing a research proposal are related to having chosen the 'wrong' research question. Thus, first of all, ask yourself *critically*, whether it will be possible for you to find an answer to your question. In doing so you should consider whether the time and knowledge readily available to you is sufficient to complete this task and whether it can be accomplished within the parameters at hand (deadlines, pages limits etc.). Next, make sure your research question is concise and free from ambiguities (otherwise, you

might decide to write about *everything* and you will get lost). And last, you should have a sense of what the possible answer(s) to your research question looks like. This will help you identify the concepts, theories, methods and empirics that you are likely to need in order to answer the question adequately.

Example: Two Ways to Focus Your Research

One way to focus is your research to determine an appropriate **dependent variable** (y) and one or more **independent variables (x)**. Typically, by asking "how does x affect y?" you are trying to explain one phenomenon or outcome with your research question and thus you investigate only one dependent variable (i.e. explained variable). The number of independent variables depends on how many factors you will use for the explanation of this phenomenon (i.e. explanatory variable).

Another way to focus your research is to ask the following questions: What **causal mechanism** allows X to affect Y? (What is it about X that allows it to affect Y?) What are the **constitutive structures** of X? (What makes X possible?).

Getting better at this – a few tips:

You have read these guidelines, you have read books on research methods, and it all makes a lot of sense and is easy to understand. Yet, your papers are not getting better and somehow you feel frustrated. Does this sound familiar? Well, this is because writing good (research) papers requires practice. There are, however, a few 'tips' that can help you on your way:

Tip 1: 'Dissect' a paper you appreciate

One way of practicing your skills without actually writing a paper is to closely observe how others do it. Take a paper which you appreciate and write a summary of it. Do not focus on the content alone, but also include notes on how this paper addresses the steps that we have listed in these guidelines. This may seem like a lengthy exercise, but considering the amount of work required for writing a quality major research paper, it could pay large dividends. By doing this you will better understand how a good paper is actually 'built'. Thus, you learn not only about the contents, but also about how it is made, which is as important and will help you 'build' better papers yourself.

Tip 2: Formulate sub-questions and integrate your answers to them into your research proposal.

Especially if you are working on a larger paper, you might find it easier to assess whether you can 'handle' your research question by formulating sub-questions. Sub-questions are questions that you need to answer before you can answer your overall research question. The sub-questions have to be logically organized so that they follow from your research question and lead towards the conclusion. If they are in the right order they will automatically provide section divisions for your paper. Choose precise, concrete words for the headings: avoid vague terms. Work out how one idea follows logically from the previous one. Note how you will make the transitions from point to point. This is a key step, but one that is often missed. Failure to think out the transitions in the planning stage can cost you time in the revising stage.

For instance, if your research question is:

What impact does Program X have on children's health?

Then potential sub-questions could be:

1. How does Program X work?
   (here you'll focus on explaining aspects of the program and its context that are relevant to your research question)
2. In what way is Program X supposed to affect children's health outcomes?
   (here you'll focus on theory /theories explaining such changes)
3. What empirical evidence supports / contradicts that Program X affects children's health outcomes?
   (here you'll focus on the evidence that is likely to explain the mechanism and health outcomes)

Step 4: Specification of concepts

In order to have a precise research question, you also need to be precise about the concepts which you will be using. Hence it is important that you provide accurate definitions of the concepts and terms that you will use, and that you explain and justify your choice.

What is a concept? A concept is a generalized idea of a thing or class of things. For example, 'democracy' is a concept that refers to a type of governance that is based upon participation, inclusion, representation and competition. If your research is about democracy, you should explain what exactly you mean by the concept of democracy. If your research is about civil wars, then tell us exactly what you mean by the concept of civil wars. This is important because your reader needs to know exactly what you mean when you use concepts that are often very general. It is also important because you may choose to 'operationalize' the concepts you use (turn them into something which you can measure). For example, your research is about whether democracy has an impact on civil wars. You need to know whether country A is or is not democratic, or whether country A is more or less democratic than country B. Hence, you need to operationalize democracy. For many commonly used concepts there are widely accepted operationalizations. For example, for democracy you could use the Polity IV index or Freedom House scores. For civil wars, you could use the definitions provided by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).

Note that concepts are quite complex and have several dimensions. For example, the concept 'human development' could include the following dimensions: longevity, knowledge and living standard. If you need to measure 'human development' you need to have *indicators* which measure all of these dimensions. For example: longevity can be measured by life expectancy.

Also note that the meanings of a concept can itself be regarded as a research problem. 'Democracy' and 'development' (like 'security', 'poverty' etc.) are contested concepts and these contestations are important parts of the theoretical and policy debates to which they are connected.

Getting better at this, tip 3: Write well!

A well written paper is easier to read, and easier to understand. The best argument is lost when your writing is unclear. Reading a few writing guides may be a good investment. Here are a few suggestions:

Michel Saintonge, et al. Bien écrire son français (Montréal: Éditions Québécor, 1994).

Joseph M. Williams and Ira B. Nadel, Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, Canadian Edition (Toronto: Pearson Education, 2004).

Paul Silvia, How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2007).

Summing up, it is important that you define the terms and concepts that are at the heart of you research project. You also need to describe how you can measure (or 'operationalize') these concepts. If you are using a variable design (e.g. asking how does y affect x, when z is constant), then make sure that you operationalize all of your variables (How are your indicators measured? What level of measurement is available - nominal, ordinal, interval or ratio)? Alternatively, conceptualizations can be used to map the structures of the objects and practices you are examining. In such cases, the aim of a conceptualization is to identify the necessary relations that form the structure, and the causal potential of the object or practice you are studying (e.g. What properties are attributable to x and what is it about x that allows it to affect y in certain circumstances? What causal mechanisms are triggered when x affects y? What countervailing conditions might prevent x from affecting y, i.e. what might prevent x's causal mechanisms from being triggered?)

Step 5: Determine the research method

Now it is time to define your research method. The research method can refer to methodology, method or both. Methodology is a theory on how research is or should be done, given the assumptions regarding the status of reality (ontology) and/or its place in a knowledge domain (epistemology). A method is a technique for collecting and analyzing data.

Methodologies and methods can roughly be considered either qualitative or quantitative, though many works of scholarship use multiple methods (mixed, nested, two-step etc.). To help you determine your research method, it is always a good idea to consult your notes from the last research methods class you took, review a research methods textbook (we provide a list of suggested reading at the end of this text) and talk to your instructor. In principle, the research method follows the research question and not the other way around.

A literature review can be regarded as a basic method for answering your research question. Almost every research paper – including theoretical or policy papers – requires some form of a literature review, which seeks to synthesize (scan, filter etc) information from secondary sources and distill answers (arguments, propositions, hypotheses, options, scenarios etc.) relevant to your question. It might be that you are using a literature review to explore a topic and in doing so formulate your research question. Once you complete this task, you might want to go back and also identify the answers supplied by the same literature.

If your research paper is asking a causal question, and you do not want to rely only on existing literature in order to answer this question, you might need additional methods. Among these may be: qualitative studies based on case studies (either single case studies or comparative case studies); statistical methods, such as regression analysis (bivariate, multivariate etc.); content analysis and discourse analysis; and various data collection tools, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups. If you want to learn more about these methods, please consult the literature tips at the end of this list and talk to your instructor.

Are two cases better than one?

We receive many papers which discuss two or more cases. There is usually no added value in discussing more than one case *unless* you compare these cases or show clearly what is gained by examining multiple cases. Comparing two cases is called a comparative design. Please be sure to make explicit why you chose these cases, and what you hope to demonstrate by this particular comparison. Consult van Evera (1997), George and Bennet (2005), or your instructor on how to complete a comparative analysis.

Examples of types of papers and research questions

Here are examples for the different type of papers we have mentioned above. We also give you a few examples of research questions that correspond to these types of papers. Note that research questions come in many forms. They can be normative, policy oriented, descriptive, or causal.

1. A literature assessing paper

Examples of such papers are:
- Cederman, Lars-Erik, Hug, Simon and Wenger, Andreas (2008) 'Democratization and War in Political Science', *Democratization*, 15:3, 509-524.
- Blank, Rebecca M. (2002) 'Evaluating Welfare Reform in the United States', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 40:4 (December), 1105-1166.

Examples of questions for this type of paper are:

- What income support programs exist for families with children in Quebec and Ontario and what are the key differences between them?
- How much poverty exists in Canada? Which population groups are most at risk of poverty?
- How did global financial markets operate before 1971?
- How do natural resources increase the risk for civil war?

2. A policy evaluative or policy prescriptive paper

Examples of such papers are:
- Armitage, Richard L. and Samuel R. Berger, Daniel S. Markey (2010) 'U.S. Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan', CFR Independent Task Force Report No. 65, New York: Council on Foreign Relations.
- Blank, Rebecca M. and Patricia Ruggles (1996) 'When Do Women Use AFDC and Food Stamps? The Dynamics of Eligibility vs. Participation', *Journal of Human Resources*,. 31:1, 57–89.
- *IRPP, "*Canada's Strategic Trade Policy Options: Deeper Continental Integration or Diversification?", *IRPP Study*, No. 11, December 2010.

Examples of questions for this type of paper:

- How effective are impregnated bed nets in reducing malaria?
- What is the impact of foreign aid on political stability?
- Do student grants increase access to post-secondary education?
- Should we increase student grants?

3. A normative / position paper

An example of such a paper is:
- Young, Michael (2010) 'Development at Gunpoint? Why Civilians Must Reclaim Stabilization Aid', *Foreign Affairs*, December.
- N.P. Kenny, S.B. Sherwin, F.E. Bay, "Re-visioning public health ethics: A relational perspective" Canadian Journal of Public Health 101: 1 (2010).

Examples of questions for this type of paper:

- Is universal health care wrong?
- Should there be minimum wages?
- Is affirmative action policy 'x' just?

4. A theory testing/theory proposing paper:

Examples of theory-testing papers are:
- Hopf, Ted (1991) 'Polarity, the Offense-Defense Balance, and War', *American Political Science Review*, 85:2, 475-493.
- Townsend, R.M. (1994) 'Risk and Insurance in Village India', *Econometrica* 62:3, 539-591.
- Ross, M. L. (2004) 'How do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases', *International Organization* 58:1, 35-67

Examples of questions for this type of paper:

- Are civil wars really caused by greed? Or, what factors contribute to the outbreak of civil wars?
- Is terrorism caused by poverty?
- Under what conditions do terrorist organizations disband or give up on violence?
- Under what conditions do regional organizations call for literacy programs for women?

5. A historical explanatory paper

Examples of such papers are:

- Fettweis, Christopher, (2000) 'Sir Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics, and Policymaking in the 21st Century', *Parameters*, Summer, 58-71.

Examples of questions for this type of paper:
- What are the origins of the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan?
- What does the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia have in common with the "colour revolutions" in Europe?
- How was universal suffrage introduced in Canada?

Suggestions for further readings

In preparing these guidelines, we followed in large parts:

- Stephen van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997)
- Paul M. Kellstedt and Guy D. Whitten *The fundamentals of political science research* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Other useful sources include:

- Andrew Sayer, Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach (London: Routledge, 1992)
- Berth Danermark, et al. Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences (London: Routledge, 2002)
- Andrew M. Koch, Poststructuralism and the Politics of Method (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007)
- Shulamit Reinharz and Lynn Davidman, Feminist Methods in Social Research (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

On constructing a clear argument:
- About.com, Grammar and Composition, http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/argmterm.htm, check for instance the terms 'argument', 'claim' and 'premise'.

On writing:

- Beaud, M., L'art de la thèse: comment préparer et rédiger une thèse de doctorat, un mémoire de DEA ou de maîtrise ou tout autre travail universitaire, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.
- Becker, Howard. S., 1986. Writing for Social Scientists: how to start and finish your thesis, book, or article, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Schmidt, Diane, 2005. Writing in Political Science: A Practical Guide, New York, Pearson Longman.
- University of British Columbia, website: http://blogs.ubc.ca/khead/research/research-advice/formula, provides guidelines on how to write an introduction, the do's and don'ts of figures and tables and how to write a scientific paper.

On the philosophy of social science:

- Hay, Colin, 2002. Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction, Basingstoke.
- Helen Longino, "The Social Dimensions of Scientific Knowledge," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last updated August 31, 2006, online.
- Olivier, L et al, 1998, Épistémologie de la science politique, Montréal Presses de l'Université du Québec.

On qualitative methods:

- Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash, eds., Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- George, A. L. and A. Bennett (2005). Case studies and theory development in the social sciences. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.

On quantitative methods:

- Bartholomew D. J., F. Steele, I. Moustaki and J.I. Galbraith, 2002, The analysis and interpretation of multivariate data for social scientists, Chapman & Hall/CRC, London.
- Gauthier, Benoît. 2003. Recherche sociale: de la problématique à la collecte des données, 4th ed. Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec. (Available electronically via the library).
- Wooldridge, J.M., 2009, Introductory Econometrics: a modern approach, 4th edition, South-Western CENGAGE Learning, Mason.

On normative analysis:

- Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006 (2nd edition)
- Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2006 (especially the introduction)