

HOW TO WRITE A RESEARCH PAPER
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1) Research projects start with a puzzle or question.

When you start the research, the question should be something you do not know the answer to, that is, do **not** just reframe your opinion (e.g. “US policy in case X was wrong”) or your general topic of interest (e.g. international norms) into a question (“how was US policy wrong?” or “are norms important?”)

The best puzzles and questions concern variation in outcomes (e.g. “why did peace hold in Mozambique but not in Angola?”) The thing you are trying to explain (here, whether peace held) is the **dependent variable**. Examining cases in which your dependent variable actually varies gives you leverage to answer your question because you can identify factors that held in one set of cases (where peace held) but not in others (where it didn’t). These factors that might explain the outcome are **independent variables**.

2) Formulating and Testing Arguments.

Once you have a question, the next step is to think of possible explanations – what factors might explain the variation in outcomes? These might come from our readings in class, from arguments made in the material you read about your topic or cases, or from your own head. These are your **hypotheses** – a hypothesis is an argument or answer to your question that might or might not be right.

Your research is to test these hypotheses (figure out if they are right or wrong). So, think about what kinds of **evidence** would support each of the alternative arguments. For each of them, and especially for whatever argument you end up settling on, think about what would prove that argument wrong – what would a skeptic about your argument say, and how would you argue against her? If there is no possibility (even theoretically) that a hypothesis is wrong, it is not a good hypothesis – hypotheses need to be falsifiable. Otherwise, they are either tautological (true by definition) or unresearchable.

Make sure that the cases you examine allow you to answer your question – if you are interested in the difference in outcomes between ethnic and ideological conflicts, but all the conflicts you look at are ethnic, it’s hard to say anything about the difference. Similarly, if you are interested in why there is reconciliation after some conflicts but not others, but there was reconciliation in all of your cases, you have no variation to explain.

By the end of your research and BEFORE you start writing the actual paper, you should have an answer or explanation to your question/puzzle. This is your **thesis**.

3) Writing the paper.

The paper should start with an introduction that states your question or puzzle, and your thesis. If you can't state your thesis in one or at most two sentences, you probably do not have a clear answer/argument. Stop and think it through some more.

The main body of the paper should be used to evaluate and elaborate your thesis, to show why your argument is correct and alternative arguments (the skeptics) are wrong. Include background information on your cases only if it is needed to make your argument clear.

Everything that is in your paper should strengthen your argument. Anything that does not relate to making your argument is extraneous and should be cut out.

The conclusion should restate your argument and discuss further implications (e.g., for other cases or for policy). Check to make sure the statement of the thesis in the intro and in the conclusion are consistent. Sometimes as you write the first draft your thinking develops and your argument shifts. This is fine, but you then have to go back and reformulate the thesis so that it is consistent all the way through.

CITE YOUR SOURCES

you should cite

- direct quotes or paraphrasing, obviously, but also
- other people's arguments/ideas/opinions. whether or not you agree with them, give credit to the person who thought of it
- facts that are not common knowledge. a good rule of thumb is, if you didn't know it before you started your research, cite it.

not to cite your sources is PLAGIARISM.

Please use in text citations or footnotes, rather than endnotes (unless your computer program can't cope) – endnotes are harder to read.

Avoid excessive use of quotes – put things in your own words (though of course cite), unless the particular wording is important or pithy, or a quote from a participant (rather than analyst).

Avoid excessively complicated language. (e.g. don't say "utilize" when "use" will do) Keep sentence structure fairly simple.

Write a draft and revise it. Ask a friend or writing tutor to read and give you suggestions on your paper – ideally, I should not be the first person besides you to read the paper.

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