

Writing an Undergraduate Political Science or International Relations Paper

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Introduction

Writing a good political science paper (like any written work) is as much art as science. Nevertheless, regardless of the subject the writing process often entails many of the same steps and papers share a similar structure. Over the years, I have read many papers that make similar errors. This guide describes what I see as the basic tenets of undergraduate political science research paper writing. I encourage students to read this guide and follow it as much as possible when submitting a paper to one of my classes. This guide will hopefully help you in formulating your research area and question and help clarify my expectations for your final paper.

This is by no means the only way to approach writing a political science paper, but it is consistent with expectations for other undergraduate political science classes—both at the ANU and at other institutions. At the end of this handout, I list several writing resources I have found helpful in my own writing as well as preparing this handout.

Elements of a Research Paper

Most papers consist of the following six sections: introduction, literature review, argument, evidence, conclusion, and bibliography. I touch on each in turn. It is okay (indeed often preferable) to have section headings breaking up your paper. Section headings make it easier for the reader to understand the paper's structure as well as flip back and forth between sections. You will hopefully have noticed that most of the readings in this class follow a similar structure.

I. Introduction

The introduction is often the most overlooked and least structured part of a research paper. It should not take multiple pages to reach your paper's main argument and a summary of the rest of your paper. Writing in political science does not employ the same tools as writing fiction—regardless of how far your late-night last minute flights of rhetorical fancy may take you (I speak from experience). Your introduction should not make the reader feel like he or she is walking through a maze (or worse, a room full of fairy floss) when trying to find out your argument. A convincing argument is one that enables the reader to intuitively grasp both its meaning and significance. Have a thesis statement and state it clearly. In short, the introduction should introduce your *research topic*, *research question*, *argument*, and briefly *outline* the remaining parts of your paper.

In the POLS3033 Course three fundamental questions are asked:

1. How can environmental scarcity or abundance affect human security and conflict?
2. Why do states and non-state actors use violence?

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3. Why do individuals choose violence?

These are the type of general research questions that can motivate a paper's introduction, but they are likely too general for a research paper in this class.

II. Literature review

This section discusses the previous literature that has been published on your subject. However, it should not include every article, book, or press clipping that you could possibly think of. Rather it consists of the literature (often building on the course's readings) relevant to your subject area. For example, if you were writing on the causes of the 1998-2002 Congolese civil war, you might start with the literature on post-colonial Zaire, the effects of the Rwandan genocide, and other topics of your paper—whether they be natural resources, state failure, or the regional spread of conflict.

The literature review is the foundation upon which you build your argument. Rarely does a writer come up with an idea completely divorced from the writer's experience. Rather, we are all researchers standing on the shoulders of other researchers. You want to build a strong foundation out of previous research for your argument to build on. Discuss the literature in a way that suggests that there remains a gap in this literature and that you are going to fill or question a particular aspect or conclusion of other works to highlight the relevance and importance of your argument.

III. Argument

This is the heart of your paper. This section outlines the argument you are making in a clear and concise manner. It builds on the literature review, yes, but it is an opportunity for you to differentiate what you are arguing from the arguments of previous works.

For example, imagine that you are writing a paper on foreign aid's effects on institutional transparency. Further, imagine that the current literature in your literature review suggests that foreign aid decreases corruption through increased international oversight of domestic politics. However, you are arguing in your paper that foreign aid increases corruption by (1) providing a readily abused new source of revenue and by (2) being given to government bureaucracies that have more information about domestic needs than the donor country. In your argument section, you would outline your argument, how it differentiates itself from current works, and concludes with the empirical implications of your argument (in other words what we should see in the world if you are right).

Sometimes the literature review and argument sections can be combined into one section. Often this helps you to not get side-tracked and to focus on the literature that is useful in making your argument.

Also, in this section be sure to recognize arguments that might contradict the one you are making. Be sure to address their main points and explain why you think yours is better or more complete.

When putting forward a theoretical argument or examining evidence, it helps to be aware of three fundamental challenges to interpreting evidence in social science. We have touched on all three in class. First, to what extent is your proposed relationship endogeneous. For example, declining resource rents can cause conflict, but the probability of conflict can also reduce resource rents. Second, to what extent is the relationship spurious. Government weakness can lead to both a reliance on resource rents and increases conflict risk. Third, are you really focusing on the levels of an explanatory factor or the magnitude of its change over the short term. For example, is it levels of resource rents that matter, spikes/dips in rents, or both?

IV. Evidence

This section can consist of a case study, a review of the narrative relevant to your case, or a systematic quantitative analysis. The important part of this section is that it ties the argument you made in the

previous section to the real world. This is where the reader really gets a chance to understand the importance of (and implications of) your argument.

Be sure to support any assertions you make with evidence that is well cited! A reader should be able to verify what sources you used to make your argument and track down any important statistics and quotes you may use. Be sure to give proper credit when using other people's words by using appropriate citations. If you quote another's words, *always* mention the author, publication year, and page number of the quote.

V. Conclusion

The conclusion is the final section that provides an opportunity to reiterate what you have told me, why it matters, and what areas remain to be explored in future papers. It is an opportunity to draw all the various strands of your paper cleanly together and reinforce the main point you are trying to bring across in your paper.

VI. Bibliography

The bibliography is where you cite *every* resource you mention in the text. Do not mention sources you might have read while doing research for your paper but that did not find their way into the final draft. Unlike rest of the paper the bibliography can be single spaced as I am less likely to want to leave comments on the sources and its pages do not go towards the minimum page length. Most importantly, use a consistent format for your bibliography. Most political scientists use the *Chicago Manual of Style* although the Modern Language Association's (MLA) Handbook is both acceptable. Chicago has a handy citation guide on their website which can be easily searched for online.

In addition, be sure to *never* paste a hyperlink into a footnote or your bibliography without full citation information preceding it. A hyperlink suggests very little about the internet source you used. Recent style manuals provide clear outlines for how to cite web sources.

Formatting

Your paper should have a 2cm margins on all sides. Double-space all text. This allows sufficient room to make comments on your work on Turnitin. Using other margins or font sizes looks like you are trying to pad your paper. Further, please use Times New Roman or Calibri twelve-point font. Other fonts might be the default in your word processing software or ones you prefer, but nonstandard fonts are distracting to read and can make it harder to focus on your argument. In addition, be sure to delete the extra space in between paragraphs that is now standard in Microsoft Word. A cover page is not necessary but is acceptable. Taking up half of your first page for the title and your name looks like a blatant effort to take up space.