Writing a Political Science Research Proposal

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Why research proposals matter

Academia involves two things that most people hate pretty much more than anything on Earth: writing papers and public speaking.[2] This is notable given that writing and talking are the two main ways scientists convey what they have learned about the world. As a result, most academics have refined planning or coping mechanisms to produce written research or get in front of an audience. One of the best ways I have found to overcome my occasional reluctance to writing and speaking is to have a topic I find really interesting and that I want to share with others. Another is to clearly plan out what I want to say and break it into manageable chunks.

This brief research proposal guide describes the techniques my field (and others) often use to describe a research plan to others. We write research proposals to elicit feedback and suggestions from others that can strengthen our research approach before too much time and energy has been expended. This is why the topic of writing a research proposal gets me interested enough to write this guide—learning how to write a compelling research proposal is both a really useful skill as well as something that helps break larger research projects into a set of clear and manageable chunks.

This guide begins by outlines a research proposal's main elements then discusses each step in more detail. It then highlights challenges we often face when writing research proposals generally as well as specific challenges you may face when writing a research proposal for my class. It concludes with a discussion of the research proposal rubric for this class.

Elements of a research proposal

We write research proposals for a variety of reasons. First and most obviously, we do it because we have to. Undergraduate instructors, graduate programs, and grant-funding institutions can require a research proposal before allowing us to continue with our research. Second and most importantly, we write a research proposal to try and clarify our own thoughts and plans for a project. A research proposal by nature is a first attempt at clearly stating what we want to do and why. When I first started both my MA and PhD coursework, my instructors told our classes that the hardest part of writing a thesis is figuring out what we want to do and what we have to

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[2] Fear of public speaking (also called *glossophobia*) has been estimated to affect up to 75% of people and can often exceed the fear of death. There is no comparable technical term I could find for fear of writing long papers. Common terms include "writer's block" and "writing anxiety." For more details about writer's block see Upper (1974).

say. I definitely found this to be the case when I reached the stage when I had to figure out what I wanted to spend 50,000-100,000 words talking about and a hard deadline staring me in the face. Third, we write research proposals to get feedback on our plans from others. A research proposal is a clear statement of our research plans and allows people to quickly and concisely size up what contribution we might be making and what areas may need further thought or revision.

This is by way of explaining why I require a research proposal for this class. Writing a research proposal will both help you decide what you want to do, why you want to do it, and how you plan on going about it. It will also allow me to give you feedback at a relatively early stage in the process. This will, hopefully, allow you to write a better researched and written paper, which will have the added benefit of making it more interesting to the reader.

So, let us get on with it. Overall, I see four crucial elements to any research proposal—the relevant literature, the research question, your argument, and the evidence you plan on gathering. Each element arises from the one before it.

The literature

As you have undoubtedly learned in your time at the ANU, there are a whole bunch of smart people here and around the world working on almost any topic you can think about. Seriously, you can go to Google Scholar and type almost any topic into the search bar and there will have been some published work someplace that has focused on it. In my literature review guide, I mentioned a few more outlandish examples that were awarded Ig Nobel prizes for their unusual and imaginative research. More prosaically, what you are likely to find in your research is that there are established academic literatures on the topics we touch on in this class and that you are likely considering for your research paper. You are also likely to find that these literatures evolved over time as each author built on the lessons and mistakes of those who came before. No written work is perfect. Rather, each work has its own goals, assumptions (both stated and unstated), priorities, and evidence.

Hopefully after writing your literature review, you have a clear idea of the main debates in your chosen area and the influential articles or authors that frame these debates. For example, in the civil war literature we have touched on theories of conflict that either focus on motives (e.g. greed and grievance) or opportunity (e.g. government capacity). More generally, you should have a clear idea about what topic you want to focus on and why it is an important concern in contemporary political science.

In your research proposal, you need to have a clear eye as to what literature you are speaking to and what is outside the scope of your study. You cannot cover everything that has been written that might be related to your topic. Rather you need to focus the reader's attention on either a current debate in the literature or something that remains unclear about a more established literature. This sets the stage for what is to follow. Who are you speaking to? What lessons has the existing literature learned? What might have been overlooked or have been left for future research?

<u>Literature takeaway</u>—Start your proposal with a few sentences or a paragraph suggesting what literature you are speaking to in your proposal and why it matters. References to existing literature will also likely be helpful in the rest of your proposal as well.

Research question

One of the main goals in writing a literature review is to give you an excuse to read in a focused but broad manner on a topic that you want to learn more about. An important but often underappreciate benefit of the literature review is that it allows you to more quickly and more confidently take the step to developing your own research question. What is a research question? A great question! Contrary to what you may think, a research question is not the sort of general introductory questions we may have when approaching a topic. What causes civil war? Why are some countries richer than others? What effects is climate change having on international relations?

A research question is more focused that that. Your research question is at the heart of why you are writing your paper. It is the main question that you are trying to answer in your research essay. Every semester I get a significant number of student emails asking about how to write a good research question. There is no easy answer.

Some say that you need to have a puzzle. A segment of political science really focuses on research questions that arise out of a puzzle. The textbook I used when teaching POLS1005 focused each chapter on a real-world puzzle that International Relations research was trying to solve. For instance, the democratic peace literature arises from trying to solve a real-world puzzle—democracies just don't seem to fight each other. That simple empirical regularity took someone a good amount of time and observation to notice and understand. The challenge when writing undergraduate essays is that puzzles can take years to fully develop or understand the implications of. We just do not have the time to come up with new puzzles in a twelve-week semester.

Therefore, I would suggest a focused research question that links an outcome you want to explain with one of the potential explanator factors. For instance, how does compulsory voting increase voter turnout? Does an independent judiciary increase human rights observance? If so, how? Does political stability increase foreign investment? If so, how?

Research question takeaway—Your research question should follow your literature overview and should develop from your literature discussion, often in the first or second paragraph of your proposal.

Argument

The next crucial piece of your research proposal is your argument. This is what you think answers your research question. In political science research it can be hard to narrow down a focus on one factor given that multiple factors explain your outcome of interest. For instance, in a meta-analysis of voter turnout I wrote recently with a friend of mine, we found 124 separate factors that forty published articles suggested affected national-level voter turnout. Your argument should not focus on 124 factors! Rather it should focus on one factor and describe why you think it is important in shaping your outcome of interest. You should also think about explaining why it is particularly compelling when compared to some of the main explanations the literature has already touched on. Spend time working out exactly how the factor you want to argue is important works in theory and practice. Who is doing what to whom and why? What actor or type of actor is the most important doing that thing? What is their target (if they have a target)? Is there a motivation behind this decision? Or perhaps your argument is about

structural factors. How does this structure shape political activities at the heart of your outcome? What actors are affected by it?

Almost as important as being able to say what you are planning on arguing is being able to say what you are not arguing. When thinking about your final paper, do not think that you have to focus on your argument without considering alternate explanations. We do not live in a vacuum. Rather it would be helpful to spend some time considering what alternate or complimentary explanations for your outcome would also be worth including in addition to your argument. One of my old bosses who has written over a dozen influential books in comparative politics once told me that she always tries and create tension in her books by including a foil or alternate explanation in her writing. It helps show the power of her main argument as well as the areas where it might not apply or have as much explanatory power.

Argument takeaway—Your argument should answer your research question. It should explain the causal mechanism underlying the chosen explanator factor. It can also include a discussion of competing explanations.

Evidence

The readings I assign and the lectures I give are shaped by the main debates in the field, what theoretical or empirical works are shaping these debates, and the cutting edge of research in this area. In addition, they also are shaped by my experiences as a student, reader, and producer of research in this area. It is impossible to cover everything, which inevitably leads to tough decisions about what to include and what to leave out. What I often include, then, is theoretically driven articles focused on causal inference that frequently use quantitative analysis for evaluation of these theories. Students sometimes worry that because they have had to read these sorts of articles for class that they would be expected to produce similar research for their final papers. While I have had undergraduates analyze data for their papers, this is by no means expected or required.

Rather, the methods you should use are ones that you find the most feasible and compelling given your interests and training. For this research paper, most methods and evaluation of evidence is either going to be a case study or a comparative case study. Some students who are PPE or theory-focused have written interesting essays that focus on logic.

For your research proposal, what is important to get across is what sort of evidence you plan on using for your paper. If you are going to use a case study, then be clear about what the case is, when it happened, who the main actors are in it, and what sorts of sources you will use. Some students also include a citation to an overview article or book that they have used to jump-start their case study research. With this information, the reader can gauge whether the case is clearly linked to the literature, question, and argument. The reader can also get a sense as to whether you might need suggestions for other sources or whether you have a clear grasp as to what is considered legitimate sourcing. For your case study, I would recommend sticking to academic work that has been peer reviewed. For sourcing about the basic facts about your case, mainstream news outlets would also be appropriate.

Evidence takeaway—Your evidence section should outline what type of evidence used (a case study of X from 1911 to 1939), what sort of academic sources used (or likely to be used), and why this evidence is appropriate and can enable conclusions to be drawn about the empirical usefulness of your argument.

Questions and challenges

The above discussion is my brief take on the four main elements of a research proposal. Since I cannot write a guide tailored specifically for every student, I have had to speak in general terms about these elements and what is important about this element for the assessment task at hand. The challenge, of course, is to try and take general guidance and apply it to a specific research proposal that you are writing.

I know that you have questions or concerns about your specific proposal and whether it meets (or will meet) expectations. That is why I asked you to think about in class and in emails questions that you have. Below are a number of the most common questions and concerns I heard from students and my brief attempts at answering questions and addressing concerns.

Topic*—How do I decide on a topic? How do I narrow down a general topic? How do I stick to one topic? How close should my topic be to the course material? Do I have to hit all topics covered in the class?*

Most questions about the topic and literature related to it focused on either difficulties related to settling on a topic and which topics are acceptable.

The first challenge, selecting a topic, can often be the hardest one. For this class, I cannot give you a topic. I can see the usefulness in presenting a list of topics or research questions for first-year classes where students are relatively (or totally) new to a field and can be overwhelmed by the freedom in choosing a topic. For a third-year class, the expectation is that you have been exposed to a good amount of related readings and cases and can develop your own approach. The most frequent suggestion I give in office hours and via email when students ask me about how to decide on a topic is to try and be as narrow and clear as possible. Most can find it hard to find the appropriate level of specificity, often because they worry about not having "enough" to write about for the assigned word count. I say that if you find a clear and defined topic and are truly interested in it the length will more than take care of itself. Be specific and focused as you can. It will make for a more targeted literature to address, a clearer question, and more obvious cases for examination.

The second challenge is whether the topic is appropriate for this class. The most obvious way to be sure about this is to ask me via email or in person beforehand. I am always happy to talk to students through this process. And by-and-large I agree with most students that their topic falls within the subject matter in this class. However, if the class is on African politics and you propose writing about Peru, then you need to rethink your topic. Each class at the ANU has a specific area of focus, and the reason to take a class is to learn more about it. You don't have to cover everything in a class (that would be impossible), rather you need to have a clear link to the topics and questions the class focuses on.

Argument*—How do I figure out what I think about my topic?*

This is a really hard issue with a rather easy (if sometimes unsatisfying) answer. It is up to you. One of the main skills I try and help you develop in this class is moving from being a passive consumer of information to a critical reader that probes the strengths and weaknesses of arguments and evidence you come across. I remember when I first started studying political science (my undergrad was in English literature) I took the works as infallible and unquestionable. That is why my first semester in graduate school I struggled (as did most of

my cohort) to write critical reviews of what I was reading. Sometimes we went too far in tearing down what we were reading we did not see their strengths and contributions.

This is a large part of why we had a literature review before the research proposal this broad reading and seeking for gaps was an attempt to give you the time and incentives to get familiar with an area of work before being asked to have a perspective on it.

And over the course of actually writing the paper you may find that what you think was happening was not actually what was most important. This is the essence of learning and questioning assumptions. You are not locked into your argument here, and it would be a real indication of critical learning if you were able to express how a first-cut explanation might be incomplete.

Building on the literature review—*Do I have to use my literature review in my proposal? How many words from my literature review can I use in my proposal? What if I want to change my question or argument? How much time do we spend in the proposal referencing other's ideas/framing prior discuss vs telling the reader about our own thoughts?*

Ideally, your literature review did help you familiarize yourself with a topic and a literature. Thus, building on your literature review would be easier and more useful than starting from scratch. That said, some take the literature review experience as a lesson in what they are not interested in researching. That is fine too. If you want to change topic and are willing to do the legwork to familiarize yourself with a new literature, that is up to you.

I have also heard that the research process was too interesting, and students got lost in the number of different subtopics or directions that they could explore. What may not be clear from the published research that we read in this class is to what extent all research is following the occasional blind alley, procrastinating with other topics, and struggling to figure out where to may a contribution.

Some also found the literature review quite broad. I would say that was a decision that you made rather than a reflection of the assignment. You do not have to cover everything in the class, rather you take a part of if of interest to you and explore it using critical reading, thinking, and writing.

Some also thought the time was too much between literature review and research proposal. I take this point on board, but this is by design. While it can be easy to focus on other classes while there is no assessment looming, my intent with this gap was to give you time to think, reflect, and explore what you may be interested in.

As for what extent to focus on others' ideas, this was the starting point for the literature review, but the focus for your research paper is to, yes, highlight the main debates in the field, but to then put forward your argument and contribution.

Evidence*—Should we be focusing on a particular case study? A comparison of two case studies? Or a singular case study over time?*

There is no one answer to these questions. Whatever is the most direct evaluation of your argument given the literature and the research question you are asking.

Formatting—*How is a research proposal different from an abstract? What should I prioritize, my argument or the literature? How can I cover everything in 500 words? What formatting is preferred? How should I structure my proposal as I have never had to write one before? Should it basically be a summary?*

An abstract is a summary of a much larger work. Most abstracts are 150-300 words. They are also one of the last things that writers write. I usually write my abstracts after I have completed the related papers. An abstract then includes the empirical findings. Your proposal comes before most of your evidence research, so while you might want to point to initial findings or what you think you will find, you want to leave yourself open to finding something unexpected.

Focus on covering all the main parts of the proposal I outlined above. The proposal is an overview of the entire process not just the argument.

Five hundred words are not a lot to work with. The reasons for a limited space are both practical and theoretical. Practically, the ANU imposes a 5,000-word limit to all undergraduate classes written assessment. Theoretically, it is important to be clear in your own mind and be able to explain to others the important elements of a much larger and more complex work.

It is okay to directly quote your literature reviews. This text may show up in Turnitin as from another source, but I can click and see if it is from your own work in this class. In four years of teaching with this assessment, there have not been any significant problems with self-citing as long as the focus is on extracting the few important elements of your earlier writing for a different but related work.

The overall structure should be akin to a mini-essay.

A few little but important last formatting things.

- All papers should be in paragraph form and should <u>not</u> include bullet points.
- All papers need to have page numbers.
- All papers need to completely cite direct quotations.
- Section headers are not necessary but can be used if helpful to break up blocks of text or to help you outline your proposal to yourself.
- Your bibliography should only include works that you reference or discuss in your text.
- Chicago-style in-line citations are strongly preferred.
- Unnecessary spaces (I have seen five spaces between paragraphs) between paragraphs or sections are discouraged.
- It is fine to use the first person. Artificially using the third person when a judicious use of the word "I" is an easy way to the passive voice.
- Leave time to reread your proposal several times. Read it aloud. One more read through can identify awkward phrasing and passive voice.
- Reading articles for this class with an eye for formatting can help you see what the clear and more subtle formatting assumptions are in this field.
- There is no need to list your word count at the bottom of your paper. Turnitin automatically includes a word count.
- Avoid conjunctions. I use them in this guide to aid readability and personability, but they do not appear in published political science research.

- There are a number of undergraduate journals out there that publish student research. I know several of my students have published research papers they wrote for my class. Keep your eyes out for them as possible publishing outlets for your papers. Why not get a line on the CV for something you had to write anyways and get people reading and engaging with your research!

Rubric

The rubric for all assessments in this class is available in the course guide. The core elements for this assessment are:

- Topic (20%): The proposal identifies a relevant and suitable topic and clearly demonstrates why it constitutes an important concern in contemporary political science.
- Research question (20%): The proposal clearly states the research question being examined.
- Argument (20%): The proposal clearly states the argument that the author thinks answers the proposed question.
- Evidence (20%): The proposal clearly outlines appropriate sources to be used in evaluating the paper's argument.
- Structure, citation, & errors (20%): The essay has clear topic sentences, is well structured, and paragraphs are clearly organised. The paper's footnotes, references, and bibliography are properly set out. The essay has clearly been proof-read and drafted and contains no/few grammatical errors.

Conclusion

Well, that was more than I planned on writing about your research proposals. Indeed, it may seem a bit silly to write over 4,300 words about a 500-word assignment. However, I am of the view that most students face similar questions when faced with the same assessment and spending a bit of time reading a guide like this clarifies expectations, reduces stress, and helps produce more interesting work.

Like all first drafts, this guide includes mistakes, omissions, grammatical errors, and ambiguous writing. Do let me know if you have any further questions or suggestions for ways of improving this guide. Thanks!

Works cited

Upper, Dennis. 1974. "The Unsuccessful Self-Treatment of a Case of 'Writer's Block.'" *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 7(3): 497-497.