

How to Write a Political Science Research Proposal

The purpose of a research proposal is to demonstrate to others that you have a fascinating research question (that no one else has answered satisfactorily). To accomplish this, however, you have to do quite a bit of research to convince reviewers that your work—and your work alone—will answer your question. A strong research proposal usually requires you to survey the research that already exists in this field, formulate a provisional research question, lay out the research methods you will use to answer your research question, and make a provisional argument for what you think you will find. These are general guidelines; as always, you should follow any specific instructions from your professor or TA.

1) Description/Justification for your topic

- Why is the issue you are researching important? To whom is it important; that is, what audience will want/need to know your findings?

2) The Literature Review

- Focus on scholarly (peer-reviewed) sources: instructors will usually provide guidelines to let you know the minimum number of books and peer-reviewed articles.
- The lit review is both the hardest and easiest part of a research proposal.
 - It's easiest in the sense that it's pretty easy to do a search on Google scholar to see what the top books or articles in your field are.
 - It's difficult in the sense that you have to read them all and figure out what they are missing AND how your proposed research can fill in a gap that either 1) you independently identify, or 2) that another source has identified but which no one else has researched.
- Think of the lit review as the constellation of knowledge that exists in (y)our knowledge universe: how can you group the various authors under consideration? What assumptions do they share? Do they agree about the implications of their work? Do they prioritize things the same and/or correctly?

- Once you have grouped them in these various ways, what gaps do you see? What questions remain unasked, and therefore unanswered?

3) Writing a Research Question

- Once you've completed the lit review and have a sense of what is out there, you need to figure out what your research question is.
 - Writing a good research question is incredibly hard: writing a mediocre one is remarkably easy.
 - Your research question should not have been answered satisfactorily by other people's work: it really should be an original question that no one else has sufficiently answered.
- The research question needs to be narrow enough to actually answer but not so narrow that the answer is dumb.
 - Too broad: Why do states go to war?
 - Too narrow: Why did Pearl Harbor drive America into World War II?
 - Juuuuust right: Given the US's isolationist tendencies and Japan's imperial ambitions as demonstrated by their dominance of the Pacific from 1933 to 1941, why did the bombing of Pearl Harbor lead immediately to war when other significant transgressions against the interests of Americans and American allies had not?

4) Thesis Statement: Your answer to the research question

- The thesis statement is always a direct response to your research question: in many courses, you are given research questions, then expected to go answer them. Coming up with your own research question is more difficult, but far more rewarding.
- Essentially, the thesis statement is a provisional claim: given what you know after doing the lit review, what do you think you will find out after you do additional research?

5) Preview your argument, methods, and evidence

- What steps do you take to answer your research question?
 - What sub-arguments do you need to prove your larger argument true?
 - What case(s) will you use? Why?
- What methods will you use?
 - Qualitative methods like ethnographic research, historical research, content analysis?
 - Quantitative methods that rely on statistics, variable manipulation, empirical observations?
 - Mixed-method analysis that combines some qualitative with some quantitative?
- How much evidence is already out there that you can use, and how much will you need to generate? Has someone else gathered information that you might be able to adapt to your use?
- The type of method you will need to use determines what kinds of evidence you will need to gather. Will you need to conduct surveys, do archival work, data analysis?
- Make sure that these steps will logically allow you to answer your research question, i.e., to prove your thesis statement.

6) Conclude by reiterating why this project will make a significant contribution to the field.

- You want to position yourself in relation to other works to signal the fact that you are entering an already-existing conversation, but that your contribution will be novel and new.