

## **A Guide to Topics and Research Design**

*Material below taken from "A guide to the details of dissertation writing," compiled by the  
Department of Political Science at Columbia University*

### **Choosing your topic**

The basic idea is to reflect on your knowledge of some empirical situation and formulate a question relating to those aspects that are puzzling and significant. Another common approach is to establish a test of an existing theory using new evidence in order to provide an authoritative empirical proof. Since in political science we are supposed to be explaining what happens in the "real world", it may help to follow Professor Jack Snyder's words of wisdom that he offers to his students: the best research questions are found in the editorial pages of the Times. If an "empirical puzzle" does not come to you, it is also useful simply to start learning more about an issue (i.e., civil war, privatization in former socialist economies, aggressive foreign policy in a given region) that has always attracted your attention. Reading empirical cases to see what is "puzzling" about them, or what cannot be explained by existing theoretical work, is a good start.

Another way to look at your dissertation is as a device by which you can develop and exercise skills you wish to have as a political scientist. Do you want to be able to conduct a survey among welfare recipients, interview business people in Chinese, do hi-tech statistical manipulations of large data sets, read manuscript archives in Ottoman Turkish, do close textual analysis of German political theorists, develop game theoretic models of wars? Your topic should fit the skills you now have or are willing to invest in acquiring.

Remember that you don't have to "know everything there is to know" about a topic or approach before committing yourself. But don't become too ambitious and derail your paper in the process. Although this is a good time to learn things, it is not the last time you will ever be able to read, study, and learn.

### **Research design and proposal**

As you begin to formulate your topic, you should also be organizing your research design. Any good proposal will have the following elements.

I. *The Problem*: State as succinctly as possible the question you are addressing. It should concern the relations of fact and theory. Clearly state your argument, or hypothesized answer.

It perhaps should go without saying, but, to state the obvious: you should aim to choose a problem that both appears to be of intrinsic importance to the discipline--and to you.

II. *The Significance of the Problem*: State how the problem relates to the scholarly debates in the field. This should include a short intellectual history of the question. Has it been asked before? How has it varied in formulation and in the answers given? How have you varied your formulation from that usually found, and why? It should constitute a short bibliographical essay, touching upon works done on the empirical case(s) with which you are concerned, and on works dealing with the problem with which you are concerned. Note that the "literature review" is not an annotated bibliography of everything that has been done in the field. References to the literature must be specifically related to your question and argument.

III. *The Research Design*: How will you test your argument against competing explanations. How might your argument be falsified? Be careful not to give the impression that you're so sure your argument is correct that you won't be open to evidence that contradicts your claim.

You will also need to specify and justify the pattern of evidence collection. Will you use a case study? A comparative study? Will you collect evidence for many time periods or for just one? Will you collect evidence from the universe of cases, or just a sample? Indicate the various possible approaches and justify your choice with reference to its practicality and its power to convince. The justification of the evidence collected should relate to the logic of your argument and to the state of knowledge in the field.

IV. *Methods and concrete plan of data collection*: What specific data will be collected and how? Where will you get it? Will you use interviews? Analysis of census materials? Analysis of newspapers? What techniques will you use and how will they ensure accuracy? How are your variables being operationalized? How will the data be processed to produce propositions useful for demonstrating the validity of your conclusions? In what form will the evidence be presented? If access to the data is a problem, what steps have you taken to resolve these issues?