

Research Methods
in **POLITICS &**
INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS

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Learning Objectives

- To be able to resolve common challenges and pitfalls you will encounter during the research and writing processes;
- To understand the general expectations and conventions of academic publishing;
- To be familiar with the general conventions of op-ed and policy paper publishing.

Our final chapter turns to some last words of advice relating to the overall research and writing process. There are several hurdles that all researchers and writers will encounter at some point during a research and writing project. Sometimes these hurdles may slow our progress as we seek to find ways around them, while at other times, they may derail a project all together. Such hurdles can range from the types of challenges that we have specifically addressed in earlier chapters, such as how to find the right articles and books for a literature review, to more fundamental problems such as a simple inability to start or continue writing – a phenomenon known colloquially as **writer's block**.

However, before we begin this discussion, it is important to acknowledge that each of us has a unique way for going about research and writing that best reflects our own work ethic and style. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the challenges that arise during the research process, and in the end, it will be up to you, through trial and error, to find your own best way forward. This is why effective time management is so important. You need to give yourself enough time to work through any unexpected hurdles that you may encounter. And given that the research and writing process is one that involves constant learning and discovery, it is almost certain that you will encounter unexpected challenges.

In this chapter, following our discussion of some of the challenges you might face in the research and writing process, we will discuss a final important part of the process: assessment, or evaluating the quality of your research output. We will point out that assessment is not the end of a project, but rather an opportunity to gain valuable feedback from your instructors and supervisors on how to become a better researcher and a better writer. Then we will discuss potential pathways forward for your research, such as publishing your research findings either as a short opinion-editorial piece that advocates a policy position based on your findings or as a full-length peer-reviewed article.

Tips and Advice for the Research Process

First, let us turn to some general obstacles that you may encounter during the research and writing process. One of the challenges that students often cite is that they reach a certain point in the research process and are unable to proceed. In other words, they have hit a roadblock. Sometimes this is because they get lost in the data, or become overwhelmed by the scope of their research question. Often this relates to not being able to fit the data into a theoretical framework. At other times, roadblocks emerge from challenges in data collection or analysis. Other students just get tired, and begin doubting the value of their topic. Don't let any potential roadblocks that arise in the research and writing process keep

you from continuing to work on your project. Every researcher, even seasoned ones, arrive at such roadblocks occasionally. What is most important is that you keep working consistently. As we wrote in Chapter 11, research is not a linear process where you must complete each component stage of the process before moving on to the next.

If you find yourself stuck on one issue, try to move on and come back to it once you have thought more about the problem you have encountered. There are many times when you will go back and rethink parts of your project that you already thought were settled. During your literature review, you might discover that your research question needs to be reconsidered as you become more familiar with the literature on your topic. You may revisit your research design if you find that the cases you selected might not be best suited to answering your research question. You may also find that your final written work has departed significantly from what you initially envisioned in your research proposal. There is nothing wrong with this. In fact, the more you rethink your project, the more likely it is that you are applying the concepts and research practices presented in this book in a cogent manner.

As we emphasized in Chapter 11, you should make sure that you devote enough time every day to work on your project. Remember, as you are working on your essay, dissertation, or thesis, that academic research and writing is a continuous work-in-progress type of activity. If something serious does come up, let your supervisor know that it is preventing you from focusing on your research and writing. Do so early. Good communication with your instructor or supervisor will help alert them to any serious problems that might arise during your research early enough for them to be able to provide assistance or guidance.

As we also advised in Chapter 11, save the introduction and conclusion for the very end. Even if you have drafted a tentative introduction early on in your writing, you can expect to rewrite this portion of your text many times before submission. You can expect your project to evolve during the research process, but also remember that you need to maintain its logical consistency from beginning to end. Each section of your essay, or each chapter of your dissertation or thesis, should form one coherent line of argumentation that is traceable throughout. Do not forget to include regular 'signposts' to your main argument. Repetition is OK. If you go back through your draft and find sections or chapters that appear to stand out or do not flow with the preceding or following sections, you may want to go back and see if you can formulate transition sentences between the sections or chapters. If that does not work, you may need to consider whether this particular section is relevant to your overall thesis.

Try to Visualize Your Argument

We now turn to four general tips that you might find useful in the research and writing process. The first is to visualize your argument, the second is to start writing as early as possible, the third is to always keep research ethics in mind, and the fourth is to become a good time manager.

One major problem with longer writing projects is that you may lose sight of your overall argument. In fact, you may start your essay asking one question, and in the end find yourself answering a completely different question. Alternatively, you may find yourself making arguments that are disjunctured, or lack adequate support, because you have missed key steps along a causal pathway. One way to help make sure that you do not

fall into the trap of starting your project with a coherent idea and ending up with a finished project that lacks structure or fails to respond to the research question that you asked, is to map your overall argument. Recall in Chapter 2, where we noted Van Evera's (1997) injunction that good theory should be arrow diagrammable. While not every social process will lend itself to this kind of simple schematic, it can help you map your overall argument. How do different concepts, ideas, or variables relate to each other? What exactly are you trying to say about a particular political phenomenon or issue?

If we go back to the two examples introduced in Chapter 2 – the rise of populism and how human rights matters in the foreign policies of western states – you can try to sketch some causal inferences or logical steps in argumentation to account for both in relation to the different kinds of research questions that were discussed in Chapter 4. For the second issue, you might create a diagram that represents the following argument: increased media exposure → domestic political pressure → foreign policies emphasizing humanitarian action. For the first issue, the rise of populism, you might create a diagram like this: mass migration in electoral districts where inequality is growing → populist success. These examples are simplistic and apply only to positivist projects. Your diagram may be more complex and reflect an interpretivist approach. But having such a schematic in front of you as you write the paper should help keep you focused.

It's Never Too Early to Start Writing

We sometimes spend too much of our time reading background literature on our topics. After all, on almost any topic of interest in PIR, there is a seemingly endless and ever-growing body of literature. As a result, when it is time to write, we will find it difficult to synthesize the large body of scholarship that we have engaged with into a coherent written work.

In addition, it is also often the case that you will spend weeks or months working on data collection and analysis only to find the task of translating this data into a coherent written work is seemingly insurmountable. One way to avoid encountering writer's block is to make sure that writing is a continuous process that starts from the moment you have formulated a research question.

For example, when reading articles that are relevant to establishing your theoretical framework, write your own short review pieces about them. Try to establish how different perspectives in the literature talk to each other. What are the points of agreement? What are the points of disagreement? By doing this, you will be able to synthesize existing perspectives while also bringing out your own voice. Alternatively, just start writing about what attracted you to the topic in the first place. Maybe it was your experience studying abroad. Maybe it is related to your family history. At the very least, you will have fodder for your preface and introduction. Don't worry if large amounts of this preparatory text do not make it into your final draft. By just trying to put your observations into your own words, you will be helping yourself to better understand the issues, debates, concepts, and frameworks that you will be addressing in your final paper.

Ethics

As noted in Chapter 3, research and work ethics are something that you should consider throughout the research and writing process. Here it is worth remembering that a good

work ethic such as notetaking will help ensure that you do not inadvertently misrepresent data, misrepresent other people's findings, or misrepresent your own findings. Often, those students who get into trouble for failing to attribute someone else's ideas did not intend to commit an act of academic dishonesty, but rather they found themselves in this situation as a result of sloppy research practices. For example, if you are taking notes while reading journal articles, ensure that you make it clear at the top of the page which source you are making notes on. This is easily done by recording the full references of your sources.

Once you get to the end of your project, you should always double- and triple-check the veracity of your findings and claims. If you are using quotes from your interviews, go back and double-check that you have got them right. If you are thinking about publishing your work, you might want to confirm that your interview subjects agree to being named by sending them a short email with the quote that you will be using, and providing some context, such as the paragraph or section in which the quote appears. By taking these extra steps, you will help make sure that your work is not open to accusations of research malpractice on the part of your research participants or your readers.

Time Management

Throughout the research and writing process, there are a number of challenges that you may encounter that could slow your progress, or may act to impede your ability to write an essay, dissertation, or thesis that reflects your own high standards of research. One common problem is that writing projects often take place over long periods of time. Although some in-class essay assignments will require you to produce a short research essay in a matter of weeks, most thesis projects at either the undergraduate or graduate level will take place over the course of at least one semester, in some cases maybe two or more semesters. As a result, it will be left largely up to you to manage your time during your project. One effective way to do this is to create internal deadlines for yourself, even if your supervisor does not require them. Ideally, working with your supervisor, you will mutually agree on a schedule of deadlines to submit the various parts of the project (topic, research question, literature review, research design, etc.), as well as a schedule of mutually convenient regular meeting times. Yes, some supervisors are more 'hands-off' and laissez-faire, but by being proactive in creating self-imposed deadlines and waystations in the process, you will be helping yourself stay on track. And you will avoid creating a situation where you have left too much to complete for the very end, which in our experience derails many projects which are otherwise well-conceived. A proposed outline for an 8-week schedule is provided in Table 12.1.

Table 12.1 Sample writing schedule for an in-class essay that is due in two months (an 8-week schedule)

Weeks 1-2	Background readings on topic for literature review; formulate research question and research design
Weeks 3-4	Write initial drafts of literature review and theoretical framework sections
Weeks 5-6	Data collection and data analysis
Weeks 7-8	Writing up, revising drafts for submission and assessment