

WRITING RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Note:

In our seminars, research proposals are meant to help you formulate a relevant and analytically coherent research question and to plan the course of your research.

Objective

A research proposal outlines the plan for a scientific piece of work. It should help you (the author) and your lecturer to answer the following questions:

- How is the research question relevant for politics/ political science?
- What exactly/ which phenomenon is to be explained? (= dependent variable)
- Which factors explain the phenomenon? (= independent variables)
- How can the relationship between the factors and the phenomenon be explained? (= generation of hypotheses und theoretical approach)
- How will the analysis be conducted? (= methodological approach)

In seminars, research proposals help students learn to formulate scientific research questions and to answer them in a structured, analytical manner.

Research Question

Formulate a **concrete, analytical** research question for your project. “Why”-questions are expected. Such questions ensure that, when researching, you analyze and explain causal relationships instead of merely recounting developments descriptively.

Example:

- “Why have consolidated (liberal) democracies emerged from some former Soviet states but not others?”

Please consider whether and how your question can be answered. For this purpose, you should clearly delineate your question (time period, region, carefully justified case selection for comparative works).

Selecting the Variables

In order to answer your research question, you need to select variables. The dependent variable (DV), or the situation or phenomenon that you are seeking to explain, can be derived from your research question. After identifying the dependent variable, you then determine, on a theoretical basis (see below), which factors influence the phenomenon in question and which you will therefore use to explain it. Depending on the scope of your research paper, you may choose to identify one, two or three (theoretically many more) independent variables (IV). There are a great number of possible influencing factors. What is most important, however, is that the factors you chose to examine in your paper are the ones most likely to be relevant for explaining the particular case(s) you are focusing on. All other possible influencing factors should be controlled.

Example:

- Phenomenon to be explained (= dependent variable, DV): degree of democratization
- Relevant influencing factors (= independent variables, IV):
 - IV1: degree of economic development
 - IV2: education level
 - IV3: external incentives

Operationalizing the Variables

In order to be able to measure your selected variables, you should start out by defining **indicators**. Then you indicate exactly which data or sources (statistics, indexes, legal texts, etc.) you are planning to use to measure these indicators. The process of identifying and measuring indicators is called *operationalization*.

Example:

- Possible indicators for the DV (degree of democratization): rule of law, free elections, freedom of the press
(> Indexes such as Freedom House, Polity IV, the Democracy Index of *The Economist*, and/or the Bertelsmann Transformation Index)
- Possible indicators for IV1 (degree of economic development): income per capita or purchasing power
(> statistics)
- Possible indicator for IV2 (education level): percentage of population with a post-secondary degree
(> statistics)
- Possible indicator for IV3 (external incentives): Treaties with the EU and their implementation in the exemplary state
(> legal texts)

Formulating Hypotheses

The definition of a dependent and independent variables already indicates that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the factor that needs to be explained (DV) and the factor that provides the explanation (IV) (causality). In your hypotheses, you demonstrate the relationship between the IV(s) and the DV by describing the exact effect that an IV has on the DV.

You should formulate one hypothesis per IV. In the end, you should have presented exactly as many hypotheses as you have IVs. These competing hypotheses should then be compared and evaluated in terms of their explanatory power.

Examples:

- H1: "The higher the degree of economic development, the higher the degree of democratization."
- H2: "The higher a country's level of education, the higher the degree of democratization."
- H3: "When external incentives exist, then the degree of democratization increases."

Theoretical Integration

As a part of your argument, you should indicate relevant theoretical approaches or concepts. Referring to an appropriate theory, you can explain how and why certain influencing factors can determine and/or influence a particular phenomenon (= hypothesis), as well as how and why an independent variable leads to the dependent variable. Accordingly, the choice of a theory and the selection of the independent variables are linked together.

Example:

- Hypothesis 1 is derived from a theoretical approach of Martin S. Lipset, according to which economic prosperity influences democratic processes. (modernization theory)

Methodology

In your research proposal, you should also briefly explain how you plan to approach your research question.

- Which method(s) do you choose? (e.g. comparative case studies, a single case study, discourse analysis, evaluation of interviews, etc.)
- From where will you obtain information? What type of sources will you use? (primary or secondary literature, own data generation e.g. through interviews, etc.)
- How will your paper be structured? (A rough outline is sufficient here.)
- What is your research timeframe?
- Which cases have been selected.

Formal Requirements

- Header: name of the course, the professor, and the author, the date, etc.
- Length: 500 words max.
- Please correct grammar and spelling (use spell check). Not doing so can impact your grade negatively.
- Please submit the research proposal online as a Word document, so that any comments can be inserted directly into the text. .

Grading

You can receive a maximum of 5 points for the research proposal. For missing or incomplete elements, 0.5 to 1.0 points will be subtracted. The total score is calculated according to the following table:

Research Question	-/1.0
Dependent Variable (DV)	-/0.5
Operationalization of DV	-/0.5
Independent Variable(s) (IV)	-/0.5
Operationalization of IV	-/0.5
Hypothesis	-/1.0
Theory	-/0.5
Method	-/0.5
Total	-/5.0

Note:

This handout presents an example of a positivist research design. You can select another approach to scientific writing and use a constructivist or other post-positivist method for your work. However, we ask that you stick to these guidelines when constructing your research proposals for a seminar. After all, the purpose of these guidelines is to help you understand what to explain with what. To this end, working with variables is a valuable exercise.