

TWO: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

The First Step: Choosing a Topic

Hopefully, you use the spring and summer before your senior year to think about a research topic that fascinates you. At this point, your interests can be incredibly broad—but remember, this is the earliest stage of your research. The process eventually entails that you will narrow down your interests to a workable project. Here are some tips for choosing a good topic:

- **Choose what fascinates you.** This is *your* project, it will consume most of your senior year. Take ownership of your project and pick a topic that excites you, but choose a topic that you can also envision committing to for six months. Think about topics you discussed in your coursework—could you expand on some of those ideas for thesis?
- **Pay attention to the world around you.** How has politics come up in your everyday life? Look to the news, your friends, local issues—what issues come up? What’s the debate? What questions or puzzles need to be solved?
- **Ground yourself.** Make sure that you are choosing a political science topic. Politics is wide-ranging. Can you think of your topic as belonging to one of our subfields: American Politics, Public Administration, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Public Law, Political Theory?
- **Brainstorm.** Do not force one topic. Students usually go through multiple iterations of their project in which where they begin in August is very different than when they write the paper. Take the time to write out your ideas. Do not be afraid to take a sheet of paper and write down 5 to 10 topics that interest you.
- **Look ahead.** Perhaps most crucial is to think ahead with your topic. Can you sensibly write 30 to 40 pages on this idea? Have political scientists written about these issues before? What type of evidence will you collect? Will this eventually bore you in the next six months?

Again, your research topic does not have to be specific yet. In the next section, we discuss moving from topic to research question. Talk with friends, professors, and family to see which topics are the most interesting (and could provide the starting point for a strong thesis). Once you have decided on a topic, you are ready for the next step.

From Topic to Research Question

What is the difference between a research topic and a research question? A topic is a broad subject area while a research question is narrow. A **research question** is a specific problem or puzzle that can be addressed with evidence in the typical length of a senior thesis. The research question begins with a topic, but is able to be narrowed by identifying a clear causal relationship to investigate. This relationship should be anchored in the discipline’s literature and should be testable with a valid research method. This is a tall order! But here is what we mean:

- **A clear causal relationship.** At its core, a good research question usually identifies a puzzle by identifying two major concepts in which you are proposing to investigate a cause and effect relationship. Research questions can be written a multitude of different ways, but ultimately the research questions is narrowed down to a cause and effect relationship in most instances. Remember, all research should begin with a *question*. Even if you are confident and/or excited about embarking on your research, do not begin your study with a definitive statement. Regardless of how self-assured you may be about your topic, you should initially phrase your project an open-ended puzzle asking how and why two ideas connect to one another.
- **What does being “anchored in the discipline” mean?** Developing a political science research question requires situating your topic within the debates and literature of our discipline. Political science professors around the country publish scholarly articles and books where they outline their own research. Your topic will be structured on the shoulders of this work. Part of acknowledging this work is making sure that you do not attempt to investigate a relationship that is already well researched in the field.
- **Consider narrowing your question to a specific time period and geographic location.** It is impossible and infeasible to take on the whole world. Often times, thesis projects are focused on a very narrow time period or geographic location. Think about it: you cannot sensibly answer a question that applies to the entire nation, state, or even city. Is it possible to investigate your idea in a local area? in a specific time period? Will this help you in terms of coming up with evidence down the line? Do not let this process discourage you either. Science calls for researchers to investigate the details in understanding the bigger picture.
- **Make sure the question is *crystal* clear.** The research question is the heart of your thesis. In early months, students often have a convoluted and wordy research question. Your research question should be narrowed down to a one-sentence, concise statement where your two topics are clearly identifiable. While this takes time, do not be afraid to constantly revise your research question.

Ultimately, remember that *you* are responsible for answering this question. You must be at least somewhat confident that this question will lead to a feasible, practical project. Do not make your life harder than it has to be, pick a question that you can provide evidence for later on. Pick a question that you can write a thesis project on.

Answering the Question with the Argument

The argument is simply your answer to the research question. Perhaps differently than any other paper you have written before, both the research question and argument should be clearly articulated in the opening pages of your thesis. Thus, while we are doing this work to ensure your project is viable, you will be explicitly presenting your question and argument in the introduction to your thesis. Typically, the exposition and identification of your question and argument should be around 3-5 pages in your final paper.