

- **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.

- **Like your question, the argument should be *crystal clear*.** If the question is the heart of your thesis, the argument is the heartbeat of the thesis. Like the research question, the argument should be narrowed down to a one-sentence, concise statement. The argument will most certainly be updated as you do more work throughout the school year. Like your research question, do not be afraid to constantly edit and revise the argument.
- **Your question and argument should clearly connect.** Since we develop the question and argument separately, sometimes there is a disconnect between the two. Most often, this could mean that the question and argument address different concepts or additional ideas. Make sure that your question and argument directly address one another. They should both be one-sentence long, but when you write them down side-by-side, they should make sense together!
- **Do not introduce a new idea or concept.** Do not bring a new idea into the fold with the argument. The argument is a definitive statement about the causal relationship you first raised with the research question. Whatever research question you end up with, it could be answered in a multitude of different ways. What is your perspective as to how it *should* be answered?
- **The difference between an argument and a hypothesis.** Often in research, we work with hypotheses. It is beneficial to think of hypotheses as falling under the umbrella of your argument. Hypotheses are optional to include in the thesis, but they are often described similarly to how we have been discussing the argument. Hypotheses are testable statements positing a relationship between concepts. Your argument itself could be seen as a major hypothesis. Some students elect to break down their argument into multiple, testable hypotheses that they examine in the analysis. Again, this is completely optional but something to think about.
- **Look ahead... you have no choice.** Can you provide evidence to prove this question? Will your evidence be convincing? Will this evidence fit the standards set forth by our discipline? You are responsible for proving this argument, so think ahead and try your best to envision what the entire thesis may look like. Remember, this has to be a plausible, practical, and *provable* thesis. This is an admittedly difficult exercise and do not be discouraged if you still are uneasy about the project at this stage. However, continually think ahead and be flexible in the expectation that your thesis may evolve as you do more work.

Now, we are ready to start doing some heavy lifting with your ideas! As reasonably possible, the topic, question, and argument should be solid. You should feel somewhat confident about moving forward. However, again, it is fair to say that your ideas will evolve as you progress through your project. Nonetheless, the more you think through these ideas in the first two chapters, you will have laid a better groundwork for what will ultimately be a long, yet satisfying endeavor.