

Concrete Steps on the Path to Approaching Academic Research

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June 2021

Overview

Whether you've done hundreds of academic research papers before or this is your first time, there are a few concrete steps that can help you along the way to writing a complete academic research paper. For my advisees and for those I have in class, these are steps that I will require you work through.

Note that none of these steps require or ask you to work with data. Ideally, you work through these steps *before* you ever touch the data set you will eventually use to test your proposed hypotheses and associated theory. If you have questions about best practices in building data sets, working with data, and documenting your process, please ask. However, that is outside the purview of this document, which focuses on the development of projects and beginning the writing process.

The three, concrete steps that I recommend (or require) working through are:

(1) *Short Research Proposals*

These are 1-page documents that pitch and outline an idea. You should circulate these short research proposals early and often.

(2) *Annotated Bibliography*

This helps structure and think through what literature already out there can inform your research project and how it fits in. This may range from 5 to 20 pages in length.

(3) *Research Design*

In doing a research design, you are essentially writing the front two thirds of a paper: the introduction, literature review and theory, and a preview/plan for the data and analysis. Circulate designs and update based on feedback received!

When I was first starting out and even now if I find myself stuck, it helps to breakdown the research process into a few concrete steps, which is what this document walks through. The rest of this document breaks down what should go into each of those documents.

(1) Short Research Paper Proposals

A paper proposal gives you and your collaborators an opportunity to provide feedback on the early stages of a project. Most importantly, a paper proposal requires you to narrow your topic, pushes you to further formulate your argument, and forces you to consider how it might be tested. From this, the hope is that you can avoid sinking more time than you otherwise would into a topic that is unworkable and to provide a relatively low cost way to formalize a few ideas and pick between them.

A proposal should hit on four key points. These are:

(1) The Set-Up

The first section of your proposal, which should be 1 to 2 paragraphs long, needs to clearly set the stage for your paper and communicate why it's interesting. The two main components in doing so are:

a. ***Statement of the Problem, Question, or Puzzle***

In 1-3 paragraphs, you should clearly state the research question being asked and/or puzzle being addressed.

b. ***Statement of Contributions Made***

A statement on what contributions this project would make (e.g., a justification for your topic).

(2) Previewing the Argument

In the second section of your proposal, you should preview your argument. At a minimum this includes a clear thesis statement. Ideally, you will quickly hit previous work in this area, your theory, and your (core) hypotheses. This should be your longest section of your proposal at 2-4 paragraphs long.

(3) Previewing the Analysis

In the final (required) section of your proposal, you should quickly propose and sketch how you might test your theses (or ideally your stated hypotheses). This should be 1 to 2 paragraphs long.

(4) Plan of Attack

An additional section that you may include is a plan of attack that provides a sketch of how you might go about doing the project.

Others have written more extensive instructions on what should be included in a project proposal. For additional information and inspiration, see those other descriptions:

<https://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/Handouts/HowtoWriteaPaperProposal.pdf>;

https://www.uwlax.edu/globalassets/academics/departments/political-science-and-public-administration/assignments/research_proposal_instr.pdf.

For short project proposals, an ideal length is a one, single spaced page, with one-inch margins, and between a 10 and 12-point font. While the proposal should be written out in paragraph form, you can (minimally) use bullet points or enumerated lists if useful and section headings. Remember to include the proposed, working title for your project and your name.

(2) Annotated Bibliographies

The purpose of an annotated bibliography is to compile sources supporting your central argument and help you understand the contours of the debate with which you are engaging. The goal is that these sources serve as the cornerstone of your paper.

For this, you should include:

1. your (preliminary) paper title,
2. a summary paragraph of your paper topic (3-10 sentences),
3. and **annotations of at least 12-15 sources** (which should almost entirely be peer-reviewed sources but may also include policy reports from reputable think tanks and government agencies).

It should be single spaced, be in an 11 or 12 point (standard) font, between 5 and 20 pages, and include page numbers. For each included source, you need to provide the full citation in a standard format (i.e., APA, MLA, Chicago) and then an annotation of it (i.e., a paragraph consisting of 3-8 sentences).

FAQs

(1) What should I put in these annotations?

- **Summarize the contents.**
This should be done in 1-4 sentences. The goal of this part of the annotation is to remind yourself what the source did and showed and allow me to quickly understand these things as well. This does not mean that all of the nuances of the article are articulated, but rather the key takeaway(s) and aspect(s).
- **Evaluate the source.**
This should be done in 1-3 sentences. The goal here is to think critically about the source. You may want to ask yourself: do you trust it; do you believe it; why or why not? Essentially, you should succinctly evaluate the method, conclusions, and/or reliability of the source. This could include pointing to the research design, organization that produced or published the report, putting it in context with other sources in the bibliography, etc.
- **Connect to your research.**
This should be done in 1-3 sentences. The goal of this portion of the annotation is to draw a connection for yourself (or others doing a similar project) to your research agenda. As you go through this process, you may discover that some resources are less relevant than others; that's okay – it's part of the process. If you pull sources that you thought on first glance would be helpful but turn out not to be, note this in your annotation. Tell me on first glance the resource seemed relevant for your paper, and then tell me why it is not.

(2) Where can I find sources?

- If I have a semi to well defined idea of my research topic, I typically start searching for resources on Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>). Treat this as a standard Google search engine

(which it is); the difference is the pool of resources it's pulling from – a more academic and scientific pool rather than sifting through everything on the internet. Then I supplement what I find by searching the University of South Carolina library

(https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/university_libraries/index.php). Note that you will need to log in to see and access all of the returned result of a search.

- If I have a less well-defined idea of my topic – and am doing policy specific research – I often turn to think tanks and government agencies (e.g., the CRS, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>) first, as they are more likely to have produced summary or overview pieces on the topic that will help refine future search engine searches and construct an outline. Examples of think tanks and “fact” tanks that you might turn to are: Pew Research Center, Pew, Brookings, Kaiser Family Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, Cato, Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, RAND, the Urban Institute, and R Street Institute.
- By the end of the process however, you should have accessed both pools of resources.

(4) I still have questions about what an annotated is, what to include and what it looks like. Are there additional resources you can point us to?

- Both Wisconsin and Temple have put together a robust set of resources discussing annotated bibliographies. If you have additional questions, I would take a peek at those documents as well. Here are those resources:
<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/annotatedbibliography/> and
<https://guides.temple.edu/c.php?g=553329&p=3801525#s-lg-box-11818324>.
- As for a template, below is one example of what your assignment may look like. Note that it's already in 11 point font and includes very little text and is already 1.5 pages long.

(5) What might this look like?

Your Paper Title

Your Name

PURPOSE or STATE OF RESEARCH

Date

Insert a paragraph summarizing your topic puzzle, or question.

1. Citation

Annotation that includes a brief summary of the contents, brief evaluation, and discusses whether and how the source is useful for your final paper.

(3) Research Design

A research design is essentially a cross between your short research proposal that you have built upon in your annotated bibliography and a full, final academic paper. In a research design, you should essentially write the front half of your paper (i.e., introduction and literature review/theory, along with an explicit statement of your hypotheses), and then propose a plan for the back half of your paper (i.e., data, methods, and analysis).

(1) Introduction

In essence your introduction sets the stage for your article. It should draw the reader in, hit home the question at hand, drive home its relevance, and provide a roadmap or preview for the rest of your paper.

(2) Literature Review, Theory, and Hypotheses

This communicates your proposed answer, connects your paper to the broader literature, and explicitly tells the reader what should be observed if your answer is “correct.” Another way to structure this section is to discuss a set of competing expectations by highlighting possible conflict between previous studies or by highlighting that two different perspectives both apply to this case and that they imply different outcomes.

(3) Data

What data are you using to test your hypotheses? Where does this data come from, how are your variables of interest being operationalized, what do these variables look like?

(4) Analysis

How do you test your hypotheses? What do you find? (Note that everything should be documented in an appendix, codebook, and/or in replication code.)

(5) Conclusion

Bring it all together.

For more information on this, see Tom Carsey’s writing guide.