

# Writing a Prospectus

POSC 3410 – Quantitative Methods in Political Science

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In this class, I ask the student to write a prospectus to outline an empirically oriented research design paper due at the end of the course. This document will outline my expectations for the prospectus due in advance of the research design paper at the end of the semester.

I will address basic formatting issues first. The prospectus should be two or three pages, single-spaced, with one-inch margins all around the document. Students are permitted three lines maximum as a preamble of the document. The preamble consists of identifying information like the student's name, the name of the class, the date, et cetera. The title of the prospectus is centered and follows the preamble. In-text citations should be parenthetical with a bibliography attached at the end of the document (e.g. [American Political Science Association, 2006](#)).

## 1 Introduction: What Is Your Question?

The first task in writing prospectus is to make clear your research question. What social science puzzle are you trying to tackle? There are no shortage of questions to ask. The nature of politics and society is that we have far more questions than we have answers. Ideally, students are registered in political science because they are interested in understanding the complexity of the political world around them. Framing a proper question may take some work, but the hope is there is a place to start.

The introduction should be one or two paragraphs in length, but these paragraphs should be solid. They will serve as the foundation of your prospectus and, if done right, the research design paper to follow. It is imperative that the student hook the reader with the research question and puzzle *first*. Do not expect the reader to care at the end of the document if the reader is not made to care at the beginning of the document.

Prof. K. Amber Curtis in our department has the following advice for framing a good research question from her POSC 1990 course, which I will reproduce here.

- A good research question is **thoughtful**, suggesting considerable work in identifying a topic of interest to you and the reader to help us understand our political or social world.
- A good research question is **analytical**. It argues for a causal relationship about a phenomenon of interest that is neither normative nor tautological.

- On a related point, a good research question is **empirical**. This is important for a class on quantitative methods. Your research question must be operationalized and tested with data.
- Finally, a research question must be **feasible**. You must be able to have some realistic means of providing a working answer to your research question. Asking “what would a new world order of a world government look like?” would not be feasible by this definition.

## 2 Literature Review

After identifying a research question of interest, the student should take two paragraphs (give or take) to review relevant literature on the topic of interest. Here are important tips to consider in list form.

- The surest way to try a reader’s patience with a literature review is to lose sight of its purpose. A literature review is not supposed to include every work ever written about a topic. It should instead stress those works that present or imply different answers to the research question.
- The literature review is supposed to be a roadmap of previous works on the topic of interest. Beyond just summarizing what other authors have found, the student should frame what these authors have done as alternative answers to the research question or identify how other authors have led to this jumping-off point for the student’s proposed research.
- Wikipedia is not a valid source. Twitter and Facebook are not valid sources either unless the student is interested in a network analytic approach to a political science question. Newspaper sources and government documents are good sources, given a particular research question. Even then, these should not be the focal point of a review of the literature. The review of the literature should stress books from major publishers (e.g. university presses, CQ Press, Norton) and top academic journals in the discipline.

## 3 Working Toward A Thesis

In one to two paragraphs, the student should propose an answer to the aforementioned research question. Theory-writing is the hardest part of writing in political science, but it is also the most important. Here, the student should outline an expectation about what explains the outcome outlined earlier in the research question. The prospectus permits that expectations may be rough at this stage in the research design, but the student must communicate that s/he has given considerable thought to what explains the outcome in question.

## 4 Methods and Research Design

How will the student go about answering this question? In one or two paragraphs, the student should outline the research design. How will the dependent variable and independent variable be operationalized? What statistical controls will be introduced to account for a possible spurious relationship? What statistical model will be used? Where will the student get the data for this

assignment? This section should also outline the case selection. That is, what is the temporal domain of the analyses to follow? What cases are included and why?

## 5 Implications and Conclusion

Finally, the student should write one or two paragraphs at the most concluding why the findings to follow are important. Why should the reader care about the results of the aforementioned statistical test? This section should also consider the implications of failing to reject the null hypothesis (i.e. if the student's proposed independent variable has no effect on the dependent variable).

## References

American Political Science Association. 2006. *APSA Style Manual for Political Science*. American Political Science Association Committee on Publications.

**URL:** <http://www.apsanet.org/media/PDFs/Publications/APSASStyleManual2006.pdf>