The term paper

First of all, look at what it says on the course page:

The term paper needs to have a front page with your name (not candidate number), email address and total word count (not including notes, references, list of contents, tables, figures or appendixes). It should have a length of roughly 5000 words (not including notes, references, and so on). It needs to have page numbers, introduction, a main section and a bibliography. Beyond that, you can structure it pretty much as you want to, as long as you adhere to regular social scientific standards. Any term paper also needs to refer to relevant literature in order to pass (you can certainly refer to whatever literature is on the syllabus, but you also have to go outside the syllabus). You can choose whatever style of referencing that you would like, as long as you are being consistent throughout the paper and you use a technical standard that can be found in well-reputed social science journals.

The most important part is to find a good research question (RQ). That you should all have by now since you have all talked to me. A good RQ does not necessarily lead to a good paper, but a bad RQ almost always leads to a bad, or at best an unfocused paper.

A good advice is to think about mechanisms as soon as possible. So; how do you think the world works? What are the important variables, and how are they connected? What about (for instance) the financial crisis, or inequality, or underdevelopment (and so on) is it that you want to explain? In other words, the paper needs to be more than a description of (for instance) the financial crisis, or inequality, or underdevelopment (and so on), it needs to be an explanation.

If you want to write about the financial crisis, or inequality, or underdevelopment, the next important thing to do is to seek out the literature to see what others have already written. If you want to find out the answer to a question, it pays off to find out what others have already found out before you. Maybe the question you were asking has already been answered. Or maybe you have a feeling that the literature has missed out on important points. Either way, the literature is there to tell you the state of the art in the area that you have decided to write your term paper. Also, remember to take a look at the bibliography section of these articles. The bibliography will give you lots of valuable tips with respect to finding other relevant sources of literature.

You also need some theory. In some instances, when you are writing about extremely recent phenomena, it could be the case that not much theory exists yet. If that is the case, use the literature as your substitute for theory. But in most cases, theory is available, and it is there to help you. We don’t insist on theory because we are academics and strangely in love with theory, but we do it because without theory it is impossible for you to know what data to even look for. The bigger the RQ, the more difficult it is write a paper without having theory, or at least some theoretical ideas about what it is that you expect to find. It is the theory that tells you what mechanisms are important, and what variables to look at. Obviously, it could easily be that as you are doing your research, you will find out that you started out with the wrong theory. But that’s how the game works. We start out with an (theoretically founded) expectation, then we do the research, and that allows us to find out if we were correct about our expectation or not. Thus, the theory is there to help you structure your empirical section.

This course has already given you the tools to analyze problems from a classical angle, a neo-classical, Keynesian, Marxist, institutionalist, and evolutionary angle. If you’re analyzing for instance the financial crisis, these general theories will steer you in the direction of very different explanations. (Lots of other theories exist as well.) You can analyze something with respect to a particular theory. Or ask, which theory is better at explaining the financial crisis? Schumpeterian or Keynesian? Or if a theory applies in every country, or just in some.

Data: You need empirical data to write a paper. When we say data, many students automatically think that we talk about numbers and statistics. This is NOT true! Data can be quantitative and they can qualitative, and it is your RQ that determines whether you need quantitative or qualitative data. But data you need! So; you should determine a strategy for gathering data. You need to pick an RQ where you can actually find the data that you need in order to answer the question that you asked. And you need to think hard about exactly what kind of data it is that is required for you to answer your question.

When you are done with the empirical section, there is the analysis. This is important. A lot of students (and professors) think that data speaks for itself. This is completely wrong! The analysis section is where you tell the reader what the empirical data that you have found actually means. This is where you hold the reader in the hand and tell him/her what you want him/her to get out of your paper. This is where you bring the theory and the empirical data together. To you, it may seem obvious what the point of the paper is, but to the reader, who is not privilege to your innermost thought processes, it is often not equally obvious. (We all keep making this mistake, over and over again…!) Thus, get it down on paper. Tell me what the point of your paper is, tell me what the answer to the question is, guide me through the process, explain to me how the world works!

Be honest! Don’t make a stronger conclusion than the data allows you to. And don’t plagiarize!

And be consistent about using a technical standard. When you look up journals and books, you will see that they all employ slightly different technical standards. Find a well-respected journal and use the technical standard that it uses. When the reader sees that your technical standard is good, he/she automatically draws a sigh of relief and think, finally a student that actually gets it…! The same goes for the introduction chapter. It should give the reader the RQ, and your argument. It should also tell the reader a little bit about how you have gone about answering the question you’re asking, and finally tell me what the answer actually is. Don’t save the conclusion for last. This is not a detective story where the murderer is revealed on the final page. On the contrary, I want to know the answer right away! If I know the answer right away, it is far easier for me to trace the argument throughout the paper, and making up my mind as to whether or not your argument makes sense. Again, when the reader sees this in the introduction, he/she draws a sigh of relief, thinking finally someone who actually gets it…! It is so easy to do this well, and yet there are so many students who don’t.

Besides that, talk to each other, and talk to me!