COLUMBIA | SIPA
School of International and Public Affairs

How to write a research paper

Some general pointers and formal requirements

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One key academic output that you are asked to produce for this class is a group research paper. To this end, I would like to share some suggestions, as well as some formal requirements with you. I start by outlining the requirements and will then proceed to highlight a few general pointers.

The requirements have to be followed and I strongly urge you to read them carefully. The pointers are more abstract and I encourage you to think how these apply to your research and what you can learn from them. I hope that these ideas are applicable beyond this current project and please let me know what you find useful and clear and what not.

These suggestions complement the PowerPoint presentation from our class on group projects that I encourage you to consult for further details on the division of labor in the group and ideas for research questions.

Formal requirements:

- **Length of the paper**: As stated in the syllabus, the paper has a minimum length of 4,500 words and a maximum length of 6,000 words. In the word count everything counts: title, footnotes, bibliography. I would appreciate it if you used the 'word count' function in word (under tools) and made sure the box "including footnotes" is checked and submitted only papers that meet the length requirement.

- **References/citations:** Please adhere strictly to the APSA citation style, both for in-text citations and for the references in the back. You find the relevant pages from the APSA style-guide in Files on CourseWorks. Please follow these guidelines.
    - This means, don't provide the full reference in the footnote.
    - Normally, in the text it's
        - Clover (2014, 3) highlights …
        - Migrants are people (Clover 2014).
    - For direct quotations you *always* need a page number—if it's a publication with pages. (But also see the pointers in the end of this document advising you to limit the use of direct quotations.)
    - But also when you don't use a direct quotation but refer to a specific idea or information in the text, you should put the page number (imagine you say Clover (2014) said that remittances amounted to $30 billion and Clover (2014) is a 300 page book where the reader would have to look for this information if she wanted to check it). On the other hand, if you refer to the overall idea of an article or book, you can quote the publication without a page number.

[1] For questions or suggestions, please contact me at daniel.naujoks@columbia.edu.

- **Website references**: In an attempt to provide longer and permanent references, I am asking you to archive websites at WebCitiation www.webcitation.org/archive.php. WebCitation is a large and reliable service provider that permanently archives hundreds of academic journals and any amount of weblinks private users want to archive. Thus, regardless of what happens to the website you have visited—i.e., if their content change, their site goes down, etc.—the archived website is saved permanently on the WebCite server and everyone can go to the link and find the same information in 5, 10, 15 years. You should check the archived sites after you're done with the process. Some (government) websites don't allow this or some websites display only the domain name, without a specific URL to the tab that you want to reference. In this case, you can't archive the site this way.

- **Other formalities:**
  - *Page numbers*: I should not have to stress this but: please make sure your paper has page numbers.
  - *Title/header:* Every paper has to have a header, which states the names of the group members, the course name, the semester, what this document is (Group Research Paper), and the title of your paper (make sure your title is not too broad or too narrow and describes well what your paper is about).
  - *File format*: Please send me files in word format, not pdf. That makes it easier to insert comments. Please name the electronic files you'll be sending like this:

    Group#_Research Paper_Title of paper
    (e.g.: Group2_Research Paper_Amazing refugee research)
  - *Proofreading*: After writing your paper, use the spell-check function of word (or similar programs) and go through all that the program thinks is wrong. Even more importantly, print the paper and do a focused round (or two) of proofreading.

Please also see my clarifications on the grading criteria in the end of this document.

General pointers on naming files

While I am telling you now how I want you to name your files, I would like to stress that whenever you send someone an electronic file, don't name it the way that makes sense for you, such as "curriculum vitae" or "Paper 1". For you, this may be a clear and unique file name. But it's not very helpful for the person who is hiring (or grading papers) if she gets 10, 20, 30 files that are all called "curriculum". Thus, try to think what may be the best way to name your document. Starting with your last name is often a good principle.

Anyway, for this paper, I told you how to name your file, so please just follow the style indicated above.

Please also proofread your file name. Sometimes we make mistakes when we type the name. Thus, to submit a paper (or any document) professionally, please take a minute to proofread the file name.

General Pointers

While I ask you to follow the requirements discussed above, I'm going to elaborate briefly on some general points that you may want to take into account for writing this (or any) paper. Some of these pointers are only tangentially relevant for the actual group projects you're engaging in but I hope that they may be of some use for other research assignments you will be during your education or afterwards.

- **Ask a question**: Some articles and books you see describe a topic. Often scholars find that an area is not sufficiently researched and they attempt to add to our understanding of the world by describing in great detail what they find. Thus, they may discuss "Migrants in China" or "The Immigration Policies of West Africa".

  When you write a paper for university or a similar context, it is unlikely that you'll be able to cover an entire topic. And it is unlikely that you'll discover something new or add to the knowledge. You could still show that you did research on a topic and pulled together a lot of information that shows how much you learned (and reproduced). But, arguably, that's not the best way of approaching a paper.

  It's best to start with a question. First, a question makes you more inquisitive. It makes you ask several questions about how different phenomena are connected and if the insights from one case or strand of research can be transferred to another case. Second, it helps you to structure your paper. Your task is not to provide an overall overview of an area but to answer a concrete question. This also helps to trim down things that are not relevant to your question. Having one overarching question doesn't mean that you can't ask more questions. Often, right from the start, you'll have (and should try to have) several subsidiary questions.

- **Manageable research & appropriate methodology:** When you decide on the key question, such as looking at a specific aspect of a parliamentary debate, media or other discourse analysis, think hard about how to make the question relevant, the research manageable and what methodology to apply to explore it. If your sample of newspaper articles is too big you won't be able to do a meaningful analysis. If your sample is too small, your findings won't be sufficiently generalizable. When you choose a certain paper or source, ask yourself: What population is the media reaching? Whose opinion are they shaping? In what way does the selection of sources, dates, debates, etc. lead (or may lead) to bias? Thus, try to contextualize the information you are analyzing as much as possible. Then think if there is anything in the methodology you can do to do address this. Or maybe you have to tweak your initial research question to make sure your results remain meaningful.

- **Sound empirics**: In an era of "fake news" and "alternative facts," it is of utmost importance to keep your facts straight and know where information is coming from. Most of you will not do original research, though the media and discourse analysis you're supposed to do for this paper is empirical in nature**.** Nonetheless, it may be difficult to get authentic and sufficient "proof" for a claim you make. But even when relying on secondary analysis, try to think: "If I were to convince someone that what I say is true, what evidence could I include?"

Often statistics help. Thus, if you are making a claim that is based on numbers — as will often be the case — think where you can get good data to illustrate this. Think about research articles, government sources, databases, etc. In most cases, there are serious limitations to the data. If this matters, put this into a footnote and show that you are aware of where the data comes from and how it is generated, not just that you provide a reference for it.

Academically, it is often enough to quote one source for a piece of information. But to convince the reader (and to ask yourself how accurate the information you are using is) you have to be critical. From where does this author get the information? What empirical study underlies this statement? Can I find many people who say that, which underscores that this is a widespread understanding of the phenomenon at hand? On the other hand, remember that something does not necessarily become true because many people say it.[2]

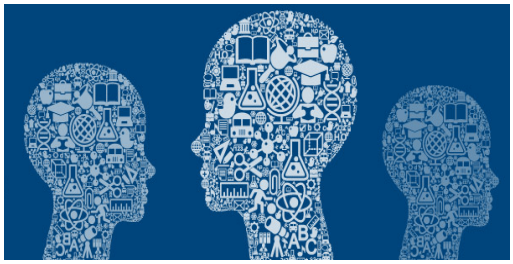
In this regard, please make extensive use of the great resources the university provides you with. **The search engine at https://clio.columbia.edu is a treasure trove** and I strongly encourage you to look for academic articles and books that are pertinent to your research. A good empirical paper is connected to theories and it references other research.

The fun about writing a research paper is that you are like a detective. You have to find answers and you have to collect clues. Sometimes you have to be creative and think, "where can I get this kind of information?"

Thus, don't limit your inquiry to the texts you start reading. When you write your argument and you think that a part is not well founded, think about what kind of literature could say something about it and then do a specific search. Would social psychology help us underpin something on 'identity questions'? Are their ethnographic accounts of this phenomenon, reading which could give me the "evidence" I am looking for? Since I'm talking about the economic effects, what economic scholarship would be useful to underpin my point?

[2] As Stephen Colbert sarcastically said in response to the Texas school board decision to remove the discussion of evolution from schoolbooks: "I have always been a fan of establishing reality by majority vote."

- **Multiplicity of angles**: Very few arguments —if any— are properly addressed by looking from one angle only. Good social science research requires making distinctions and differentiations. It avoids broad sweeping generalizations and questions statements that say "all … are like this". I sustain that the initial answer to 99% of all questions is: "it depends." Your job as researchers is to find out for whom a certain effect is in place and for whom not. Why is this the case and why not? Ask what the specific conditions for groups and individuals are and ask what the exceptions may be.



- **Considerateness**: You'll always deal with concepts. But concepts are never clear and have one meaning only. If a concept is critical to your analysis discuss its meaning. That does not necessarily mean that you have to have a long discussion. Sometimes a few sentences or a footnote suffice. But show that you are aware of the different connotations of the term 'migrant', 'refugee', 'diaspora', etc.

  Being considerate also means displaying academic honesty. Often you can't be 100% certain about something. Often there are several possible interpretations of facts. Be open about your choices and discuss the limitations of your analysis, which shows that you are aware of what you can say with more and what with less certainty.

  This also means, ask the right questions, which is connected to the sub-questions discussed in the first two sections of the pointers ("ask a question" and "sound empirics").

- **Start writing early:** Many students, as well as researchers, tend to do a lot of research before they start writing. While this can be warranted in some cases, in most cases it is best to start writing as soon as possible. When we write we think more clearly. We see lacunae and uncertainties in our ideas and conceptualizations that we had not previously noticed. Often we think that we'll write something on the literature on x or the findings on y quickly during the last days before the deadline. As you are probably well aware, most writing assignments take longer than anticipated. When you start the literature review, write about what you read and add relevant paragraphs to your draft paper. These will be critical building blocks once you advance more in your research.

- **Writing style**

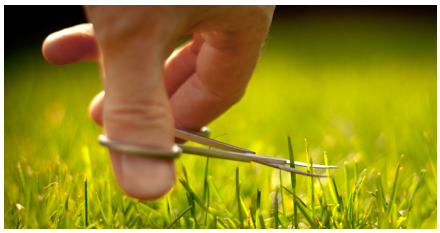
  Write beautifully: You don't have to use much jargon to write a good paper. On the contrary, using jargon is often not recommended. Think about writing beautifully. A nicely written text makes a much better argument and often we focus too much on writing the "right" (sound, compelling, acknowledged) arguments that we forget to focus on how they are delivered. That being said, you are tasked with writing academic paper. Thus, the paper should not be written using informal language and it should adhere to academic writing standards. Especially when writing sections that you may be less familiar with (such as the methodology), you can look at published work to get inspirations (though of course, you cannot copy the text). If you know that wrting is not your strength, ask fellow students, the writing center, your friends and family to read your text. Especially if you're

not a native speaker: know your own limitations and address them by getting appropriate support.

Guide the reader: Writing a good text also means guiding the reader well through your argument. The longer a text the more important becomes how well you guide the reader. Use the introduction to tell the reader what she can expect from the structure. Use transitions and intros to sections to tell the reader what you are doing now. Sometimes tell the reader that you won't do something in this section but in the next. This way, the reader who is expecting a certain aspect, keeping in her mind "but what about….?", knows that you'll do that later. Especially when you have sections that are only tangentially important for your main argument, tell the reader why she is reading this now and how this is relevant for your argument.

Avoid too many direct quotes: You'll be tempted to use many direct quotes that you find in the articles you read. In most cases, you should avoid direct quotes. Sometimes direct quotes can bring the voice of someone else in or help you to quickly summarize a point so you don't have to quote 10 articles for something that is only a minor point in your analysis. Or of course, the exact wording is important for an interview, a government statement, etc. There are other examples where a direct quote is in order. But often people use direct quotes because they're too lazy to paraphrase the argument or to insecure. So my advice is: don't fall in these last categories. Think hard whether you actually need a direct quote or whether it would be equally fine to say this in your own words and then attribute it properly to the source where you found the argument. In most cases, this will increase the readability of the text. It will also allow you to incorporate the fragment better into your own argumentation.

- **Formalities:** Think about the font type and size, spacing, and margins (I already mentioned page numbers and word limit above).



I would recommend you to "select all" text in the end and then format at least the font size and font type, to make sure that while copying and pasting there are no glitches. Then click into the footnotes and do the same. Often there are two spaces between words and you can easily get rid of them by using the "replace all" function in word (put two spaces in the "search document" field and one space in the "replace all" field).

And as mentioned above: Proofread, proofread, proofread.

Good luck!

Evaluation

I will grade the papers assessing the following four categories. Reading my expectations and clarifications carefully will make it easier to avoid getting on the wrong track and loosing points because you didn't realize what I expect. Needless to say, feel free to ask for clarifications anytime during the semester.

Evaluation category	% of paper grade	Expectations
Research question	10	Asking good questions is the key starting point for a good research paper. Your main question will be discussed with me in advance in any case but even as you elaborate further on it, you should think about the pointers given in these guidelines. I will evaluate how relevant the question is, how much it shows consideration of certain issues and how much you focus on specific and manageable questions.
Use of research literature and methodology	20	If you engage in any primary research, you need to have a substantial methodology section. This needs to justify what you're doing and what not and provide the reader with a good understanding of your choices and processes. This also needs to include references to research. All papers need to incorporate a good amount of appropriate research literature and include the references and ideas from the literature into the paper. This does not mean that you need a chapter called "literature review". It is best to integrate references to research literature into the main discussion: setting the stage and relevance of the research, methodology and analysis. Thus, even if you do primary research, you need to use facts and findings from other research in the analysis to contract, corroborate and situate the findings. And please make sure you don't rely exclusively on media sources and so-called 'grey literature' from the UN and NGOs. You need to look for academic publications (books and journal articles) that you easily find through CLIO.
Depth, exhaustiveness and clarity of argument	50	Your argumentation and the originality of your arguments are at the center of the research paper. I evaluate the value and clarity of ideas you present and stringency of argumentation. How considerate are you, how much are you sensitized to discuss the issues from various perspectives? I also urge you to define your key terms and concepts (and if need be discuss them briefly). *Don't write the text for me but with an audience in mind that doesn't know anything about the subject*. Thus, be clear and don't start from certain assumptions. This also means discussing (and were appropriate) scrutinizing the empirical basis of certain arguments (what evidence does the author present?). You don't have to do additional research but if you feel intrigued by an argument feel free to do so in order to make your argument stronger. The deeper your analysis, this more you looked at it from different angles and not only provided some "results" but also discussed them and contextualize them, the better your paper.
Writing style, structure, spelling mistakes, formalities (length, format, reference styles, etc.)	20	I will evaluate your writing style, grammar, spelling mistakes, and the structure of the paper, how you incorporate other references, if you follow the reference style and the other formalities (thus, please read the section on formalities carefully. Though it should be easy to follow the guidelines I am always surprised how many papers don't.) Please avoid too many direct quotes. Needless to say that any kind of plagiarism will not be tolerated (see academic integrity statement in the Syllabus). All papers will go through a formal plagiarism check at TurnItIn.