

# EPIC

## Tips on writing and structuring a paper

These tips should be read in addition to Stephen Van Evera. 1997. *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, appendix

### 1. Basics

Four golden rules for any paper:

- a. Structure: paper should have a structure which is (a) clear, (b) set out in the first paragraph, and (c) explicit as the paper unfolds.
- b. Writing: the paper should read as easily as possible; as part of that, words have precise meanings and should be used with precision (grammar and spelling per se are not that important). Try writing in a language which can be understood by any intelligent undergraduate.
- c. Answer the question you have chosen or are asking yourself: the killer mistake is to give a brilliant answer to a questions which is subtly different to that asked.
- d. KISS (keep it simple, stupid) -- i.e. short, simple words, short sentences. The better a person understands a topic, the more simply he/she can express it – as any lecture by a Nobel Laureate testifies.

### 2. Organisation

Say very clearly in the beginning which question you are asking in the paper, and what your answer is. Then say how you will go about answering it. Put bluntly, in a short paper (1500 to 2500 words), by the end of the second paragraph the reader should know what you will say and how you are going to do that; in longer papers, such as dissertations, you can take a bit more time, but then the reader should know what's going on by the middle of the second page.

Such a set-up provides the reader with all the information to evaluate the claims you will substantiate in the body of the paper: readers rarely fundamentally disagree with what you're saying, but you lose points for not saying whatever it is you are trying to say in a clear and transparent manner. This set-up also assures that the reader does not get frustrated by having to read until page 30 to figure out what the question of the paper was, and then has to reinterpret the material read up until in light of your question and the belated answer.

### 3. Real-world questions and the literature

Nothing beats a current policy issue, a big historical problem or something of that sort to open a paper. Make sure your research is relevant –and make sure you make it clear that it is relevant by setting it up as a big, real-world question. "Gaps in the literature" are manifold, and bad reasons for doing research. The literature exists to help you understand an issue, but not more than that. Very few pieces of advice are as sound as "forget the literature!" when you are trying to think through what you want to say.

Use literature reviews very instrumentally. They are there to position your paper in a wider debate on the question you are trying to solve. They are not proof that you've read "everything" there is to read, and should definitely not reflect your search process in the literature (very few people are interested in that). This implies that you have to cut the literature review down to its essentials, and take it from there.

Some courses and papers ask for a more extensive literature review. It is important to bear in mind that such essays articles are not round-ups of the literature, but exercises in analytical thinking. Put differently, you should critically evaluate the existing

literature (and not simply summarize it), but that implies that you have ideas of your own on what the relevant criteria for evaluation are –making those explicit will offer you a way to get your own points across.

#### **4. Provide road maps**

The reader should always know where he or she is in the paper and in your plan for the paper. This means summing up what's been done, and a glance at what's to come. One good way of doing it is by providing a short summary and "what's to come" at the end of every section that covered an important point (i.e. at least the intro and the body of material, but sometimes also between subsections). If you discover afterwards that there is too much of this road-mapping going on, you can always cut some out.

#### **5. Parsimony**

A good paper only answers the question it set out to answer, and it does so with as little material as possible. All the rest is superfluous baggage, which distracts the reader from your main point. Evacuate it, since it makes the paper harder to read. It is not necessarily lost: you can always turn it into the basis for another paper.

#### **6. One paragraph, one idea**

One paragraph should contain one idea. More than one idea in one paragraph confuses the reader, especially if the second argument redefines, confines, circumscribes or (in part) contradicts the first. The best way to resolve this is to break up the paragraph and organise the transition between the two. Paragraphs can be one sentence long, but should not be longer than 15 lines. If they become that long, this is often a sign that you are trying to put too many things into one paragraph, and you should consider splitting them.

#### **7. Language**

Avoid overly "academic" language: most complex arguments can be said in simple words. Too many difficult words annoy readers, and they often leave the impression that the author is simply showing off his or her knowledge of such words. If you feel that an argument requires complicated language, see that as a sign that you are not entirely clear in your own mind about what exactly you want to say: the difficult words allow you to obfuscate (oops! –hide is a better word) that lack of clarity.

#### **8. Referencing**

As a rule, a reference should be used to indicate the source of tables and graphs, factual statements that are not common knowledge, and particular support for a contested argument. Your argument, in contrast, can build on some existing literature, but there the logic of what you are trying to say is far more important than any sources you might come up with. Try to avoid over-referencing your papers, especially the shorter ones.

Always cite and list the literature you used: it shows the reader where you are coming from in assembling material for the paper. There are standard ways of referencing the literature you used, and you should get acquainted with them. The fastest way is to look at the back cover of reviews, where the instructions for authors invariably list reference styles. References should at least include author, book title or journal title, place of publication and publisher (for book), year of publication, and if necessary page numbers. It is common (and the easiest) to give author, year and if necessary page numbers, in brackets in the text and the full reference in the bibliography

afterwards: (Van Evera 1997); Van Evera, Stephen 1997. *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press. It is not really important which style you choose –*de gustibus...*-- but that you adopt the style consistently throughout the paper. Database and bibliography software such as Endnote also offers a host of conventional pre-defined styles, which you can simply import into the document.

### **9. Footnoting**

Use footnotes sparingly (unless that is the journal's referencing style) along the principle that either something is important, and then it should find a place in the text, or it is not, and then it should not be a footnote. Footnotes should say something, which sheds additional light on what you just said, but might break the flow of the text if added in full.

### **10. Multiple versions**

Learn to live with the idea that your first draft is a bad paper, which is full of interesting possibilities –the trick is to make the paper a good one and to bring out all the possibilities the paper has. This means that you should rewrite the paper if it is a "serious" one, and/or take the comments by colleagues and teacher and others not as critiques of your work, but as potentially helpful suggestions to make the paper better (many papers would in fact be a lot better if they were read by other students, colleagues and teachers and reworked fully addressing the critiques received there). Almost all published academic papers go through at least three fully revised versions, and most have existed in many more versions. You may want to give your seminar paper to a friend before you give it to the teacher: he or she will help you sort out what does and does not work in your paper.

### **11. Presentation**

Use a large font, at least 1.5 spacing on the computer, and leave relatively wide margins (at least one inch/2.54 cm) for comments. The world's forests may have their rights, but so do teachers' eyes.

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## Further Guidelines on Structuring a Paper

**Points to address in the paper.** In preliminary drafts, but also in the final paper, you will have to address the following questions.

1. What is the problem/puzzle/issue that you want to analyse?
2. Why is important/interesting to analyse it?
  - 2.1 Why is important historically / politically?
  - 2.2 Why is it important theoretically? (What has been written? And what do you find puzzling in such writing?)
3. How do you propose to examine/solve the problem/puzzle/issue?
4. What cases / countries will you analyse? And for which historical period?
  - 4.1 Why and how do you select the two countries for your analysis?
  - 4.2 In what ways are they similar/dissimilar on the dimension you wish to examine?
  - 4.3 What insights will you gain from comparing the two countries?
5. What does your empirical analysis suggest? What conclusions do you arrive at? What policy implications would your analysis have?
6. Is your analysis convincing? That is, does it properly address the historical and the theoretical issues?
7. Briefly, generalize from your analysis and discuss what insights you have gained for the other countries you have studied in the course?
8. If needed, how would you extend such analysis in future research? Why?

**I. Theory / model.** What are you trying to explain?

- (1) What are the causal claims you are interested in?
- (2) What is the simplest model you can propose?
- (3) Why do you like the model?

**Methodology: How to explain? Or what evidence you marshal to prove your point.**

**(1) Research designs:** comparative method for 2 countries

(1.1) Most similar kind method:

(1.1.1) Countries are similar in many respects; yet they differ on some crucial dimension(s) of interest to you.

(1.2) Most dissimilar kind of method:

(1.1.2) Countries are dissimilar in many respects; yet they are similar on some crucial dimension(s) of interest to you.

**(2) Sample:** countries and

(2.1) Countries: on what bases are they similar or dissimilar?

(2.2) Time period: which historical period(s) will you analyse and why?

- Synchronic? Similar shocks or events?
- Diachronic? Different historical periods within/across countries?

**(3) Data and data sources:** where will you get the necessary information?

## **Example: Industrial Strikes and Conflicts**

### **1. What is the question/problem/puzzle/issue that you want to analyse?**

Does political corporatism affect the intensity of industrial conflicts leading to strikes?

### **2. Why is this question important/interesting to analyse?**

2.1. Historical / political importance. Industrial conflict in the Post-World War II period is a crucial phenomenon in the political life of European countries. Yet, countries have exhibited often significantly different levels degrees of industrial conflicts.

2.2. [examples]

2.3. [question: how to explain such cross-national variations?]

### **3. Why is this question important/interesting to analyse?**

3.1. Theoretical importance. Political scientists / economists have been intrigued by these significant cross-national variations and have provided a variety of explanations of the causes of industrial conflict leading to strikes.

3.1.1. One explanation relies on the ideology of parties controlling the government: left parties would be more likely to pursue the interests of the working, would oppose business, and therefore would minimize the opportunity for the escalation of industrial conflicts and strikes. However, this hypothesis may account mainly for short-run oscillations and not for systematic cross-national differences. (Exceptions?)

3.1.2. A second explanation relies on the organizational strength of labour unions. The less fragmented and the more cohesive ideologically unions are, the greater is their ability to bargain with business, to obtain wage and security concessions, and do so without the necessity of industrial strife. Hence, countries with more fragmented and ideologically diverse unions may exhibit higher levels of industrial strife. However, this explanation does not take into account the political power of unions and business: that is the ideology of the party (parties) in control of government. For instance, a country can have strong organizationally strong unions that nonetheless confront an ideologically inimical conservative government.

3.1.3. A third explanation thus relies on political corporatism, which captures the interaction of both the organizational and the political power of unions and business. Three main scenarios can be envisioned: (1) left corporatism (which is?) with low intensity of industrial strife; (2) right corporatism (which is?) with low intensity of industrial strife; and (3) discrepant corporatism (which is) with high intensity of industrial strife. [Are there any other possibilities?]

[These are only some of the potential explanations of industrial strife. There are others, which you may want to suggest. One that you may consider is the level of unemployment. What happens to industrial strife when unemployment is high? And when it is low (full employment? And when it is moderate?)

[Also you may consider the relevance of political corporatism to explain cross-national differences in unemployment, inflation, budget deficits, welfare states, etc.]

#### 4. How do you propose to examine/solve the problem/puzzle/issue?

[Since this is an introductory class, your main task is to take a theory/model and evaluate the competing theoretical claims. If you decide to be adventurous and creative, and even a bit lucky (!) you may come up with something original.] So the issues at hand is mainly methodological: that is, to develop an approach to evaluate the competing theoretical claims. The objective is to demonstrate the cross-national variations in political-institutional arrangements and different degrees of industrial strife.

##### 4.1. First step: research design.

4.1.1. **Rely on the comparative method:** compare 2-3 countries. (Here the strategy is of the 'most similar kind': these European countries are all advanced industrial democracies and yet they differ significantly. So we want to figure out in what dimensions they differ, and how?)

- Compare a left corporatist with a right corporatist: what is the logic of the comparison? They differ on crucial political-institutional yet exhibit similar levels of industrial strife. Is that true?
- Compare a left corporatist with a discrepant corporatist: what is the logic of the comparison?
- Compare a right corporatist with a discrepant corporatist: what is the logic of comparison?

4.1.2. **Sample: time and space.**

- Space. Which countries will you pick for your analysis? Why? Do you pick them because of their differing levels of industrial strife or because of differences in political corporatism? (Or both?) In what ways are they similar/dissimilar on the dimension you wish to examine? What insights will you gain from comparing the two countries?
- Time. Which historical period are you going to analyse? This is crucial because, for instance different periods may have significantly different levels of industrial strife. Besides the conditions of political corporatism may change within a country, often significantly, and that renders analyses problematic. Is the period going to be the same for the countries in the sample?

4.1.3. **Concepts: operationalisation and measurement. (Crucial!)**

- Political corporatism. How do we recognize it? Who are the agents, organizations and institutions involved? What are their properties / characteristics? How do they relate with each other. [Of course, you now have to be very precise because you have selected the countries.]
- Industrial strife. What do we mean by it? How do we recognize it? How do we measure it? At what level of a country do we detect? Does it include the big strikes or the small strikes? Do we consider the occurrence of strikes or the hours of work lost . . . etc.

4.1.4. **Data and data sources (now that you have the countries)**

- What type of information will you require to prove your point - -whatever that may be? Clearly, you need information of political corporatism and industrial strife.

Where (source) will the information come from? Books? Journals? Newspapers? Government sources? Etc.