

American University--Washington Semester Program
American Government and Politics Seminar--Unit III
Spring 2007 Research Seminar Syllabus

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FOR STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE RESEARCH SEMINAR ONLY

Introduction

The research project offers a unique opportunity for you to conduct intensive analysis on a national political topic of interest to you. This work should complement the knowledge you will acquire in the Seminar and Internship components of the Washington Semester Program. Ultimately, you will produce a 35-50 pageⁱ original paper. The final product should show evidence of your research activity throughout the semester, including detailed knowledge on the topic and original analyses of your primary source information.

Some students might find the concept of producing such a lengthy paper overwhelming. The research project *is* a substantial task, which might not be for everyone. However, students who complete the research project will find that it is a truly rewarding experience. You have the rare opportunity to conduct political research in Washington, with someone guiding you through each step of a complex process. You are unlikely to encounter a similar opportunity in the future.

The key to a successful research project is being committed to work diligently during the term on each stage of the project. You should choose a manageable topic and research design and be disciplined as you write each section of the paper. Moreover, you should not be easily discouraged when you encounter minor setbacks along the way. You simply cannot afford to fall behind at any point in the process. Procrastination is not an option when you have such a massive project ahead of you.ⁱⁱ

Topic Selection

Topic selection is the first critical step in the research process. Be sure to choose a topic that meets the following requirements:

1. Your topic must be original. You must produce more than a simple examination of secondary sources. Your project will include primary source collection, such as interviews with relevant political actors or first hand observation of political actions.

2. Your topic should be current. You must focus on a contemporary American political issue, not a distant historical event. A current topic allows for the study of political actions as they occur. You need to take advantage of your ability to witness developments on major political issues.
3. Your topic should be Washington-based. You should take advantage of the unique resources (political actors, institutions, groups, special documents, etc.) available in Washington DC. The research project should not be something you could have completed at your home university.
4. Your topic must be manageable. The research project must be completed during the semester. Incompletes are not given. Many research questions you develop will need to be narrowed to a reasonable breadth.
5. Your topic must be interesting to you. You will spend an enormous amount of time working on this topic and your life will be much more enjoyable if you actually like the topic.
6. Your topic should be significant. The topic should pass the “so what?” test. In other words, will the result of your research matter—to any political actors in Washington or beyond?
7. Your topic should be non-biased. You must present competing views of the arguments. If you feel too strongly about a topic to consider the arguments on the opposing side, you should *not* choose that topic.
8. If you anticipate seeking a job in Washington, you should select a topic which is marketable. You can take advantage of the opportunity to become an “expert” on a specific topic and at the same time, you will be able to meet with others who already work on the topic. Sometimes, a student will link the research project topic with the internship work, an option which is likely to benefit the student on both endeavors.

Outline

The outline is the second step in the research project. You will rely on the outline to guide you through the remainder of the semester. The first version of the outline should be approximately one page long and should include the following elements:

- a concise statement of your research question—phrased as a question.
- a justification of your topic—explain why your chosen topic is significant and interesting.
- an explanation of *how* you can answer the question—be sure that your question can be answered.

- a general description of how you plan to gather the necessary data to answer your research question (including interviews)—You need to demonstrate that you have *considered* how you will conduct your research.

The format of the first outline is not set—you can opt for outline style or paragraph style. The emphasis at this stage is including all of the relevant information described above.

The second version of the outline requires that you demonstrate progress on your project. Please follow a hierarchical outlining format for this assignment; in other words, do not submit paragraphs of writing. The hierarchical structure is useful in understanding how you see the various concepts relating to each other.

In addition to noting changes from the original outline, you must elaborate on your research plan (how you will answer your research question and gather your data). Include as much information about the details of your plans as possible in the second outline. The more details you can give at this stage, the more feedback I can provide. This outline (as well as your final paper) should adhere to the following basic structure (each component is described below):

- I. Introduction
- II. Literature Review
- III. Current Status of the Issue
- IV. Research Design/ Methodology
- V. Analysis
- VI. Conclusion
- VII. Bibliography

Introduction

You should begin with your research question. List and offer a very brief explanation of the key criteria you intend to use to answer your question. Describe the general plan for your paper. Later on, when you write your full Intro, you will need a “hook” to grab the reader’s attention. If you have an idea for a hook as you write your outline, you should include it.

Literature Review

In this section, you must cite the work of others who have addressed your topic or some part of your topic. Even if no one has written about your precise research question, there are relevant works that relate to your topic. You should read background material on your topic as soon as possible. You might also find it helpful to interview an informed person in the area for some

additional direction toward relevant literature. Keep records of your sources as you find them and read them in order to simplify the creation of your bibliography.

Current Status of the Issue

Describe the current status of the main issue at hand. You might also briefly summarize the key political actors for the issue, their reasons for involvement on the issue, and the arguments offered by these actors.

Research Design/Methodology

In this section, you should explain exactly how you intend to answer your question and why this method is appropriate. Describe the primary source material you intend to gather (interviews, documentary evidence, congressional testimony, etc.). You must be specific in this section. For example, if you are doing interviews, you need to provide a list of people you plan to interview. Give names and titles as well as how you intend to contact them (I don't need phone numbers or email addresses, but I would like to know if you are making a cold contact or if you have some connection to the individual). For other sources, you need to explain exactly what information you will request and from whom. Moreover, you should verify the dates when you will obtain the information. In the final version of your project, you should replace your information about *intended* contacts with details about whom you interviewed and why.

Analysis

In your outline, explain what your research might tell you about your question. Describe how you hope to use the information you will gather. This section of the outline can be very brief (because you have not yet conducted your research), but ultimately, the analysis will be a major section of your paper.

In the final paper, analysis is where you answer your research question. You will demonstrate everything that you have learned in the research process. At a minimum, you must explain how the evidence relates to your research question and describe the implications of your findings. In some cases, you will be able to extend your analyses to make some type of recommendation on your topic.

Conclusion

Briefly summarize your project and your findings. Describe how you (or someone else) could extend the project in the future. Did you develop additional questions in the course of your research? Are there other people you wish you would like to interview? What additional documents do you wish you could have incorporated in your research?

Bibliography

You must include a bibliography with your outline, rough draft and final paper. You need to follow a standard scholarly format for bibliographic citations. See the writing guidelines (posted on Blackboard) for more complete information.

Written updates

Throughout the semester, you are required to turn in written updates. These one-page documents must include the following information: the current wording of your research question; progress you have made since the last update; plans for the next step; and any questions or concerns you have. These updates serve two purposes: first, they keep you focused on the task at hand; second, they keep me posted on your progress and any problems you are experiencing.

Annotated Bibliography

Along with each bibliographical entry (full citation according to the writing guidelines), an annotated bibliography includes a description of the material and an assessment of its value to your project. For this assignment, a few sentences should suffice for most sources. You may wish to write a bit more for your key sources.

Ideally, you would have read each item included in your annotated bibliography. For various reasons, that might not be possible. Nonetheless, you are required to annotate *all* entries, noting what you hope to gain from a source if you have not yet read it.

Students who are using many newspaper articles for content analysis or some other grouping of multiple documents are allowed to group entries together with a single annotation, such as: All New York Times articles mentioning Ralph Nader published in 2004 will be used for content analysis.

Meeting with the Professor

In addition to the written updates, throughout the semester, you must meet with me to discuss your progress on your research project. Meetings should occur at least once each month for the duration of the semester. Please visit with me during my office hours or make arrangements for another mutually convenient meeting time. It is *your responsibility* to check in with me throughout the semester.

Writing requirements

I will post detailed writing guidelines on Blackboard. You are expected to use the guidelines as a checklist for formatting, style, and general writing requirements.

Date	Requirement
Monday, January 22	First individual meetings completed
Thursday, January 25	First outline
Thursday, February 8	Second outline
Monday, February 19	Annotated Bibliography AND Written update
Thursday, March 1	Draft of Introduction AND Written update
Thursday, March 8	VOLUNTARY Draft of Literature Review
Tuesday, March 20	Written update
Monday, March 26	Rough Draft of Research Paper
Thursday, April 12	Last Written update
Thursday, April 26	Final Research Paper Due

Grades for the Research Project will be assigned based on the following components:

All assignments (Outlines, annotated bibliography, drafts, updates)	20%
Meetings with Professor	10%
Final Project	70%

ⁱ Technically, you will be submitting the equivalent of 35-50 double spaced pages. Because I prefer 1.5 spacing, I adjust the page limits accordingly to 27-38 pages approximately.

ⁱⁱ For more information about the research project process, refer to the blue Research Project Guide distributed in class.