

## UNIVERSITY OF KONSTANZ

Department of Politics and Public Administration  
The Dean of Studies

### Proseminar II: Guidelines for the Exposé

The Exposé is intended for the preparation of a seminar paper or thesis and should provide concise answers (guideline: 3-5 pages) to the following questions:

- What is the *Research Question*?
- What is its *Relevance*?
- How does your approach differ from previous theoretical or empirical approaches (*State of Research*)?
- How can it be answered (*Research Design*)?
- What is the status of the work, what are the next steps? Are there any open questions regarding *further steps*?

#### Research Question

The core of the Exposé is a clear, independent, and answerable research question. A research question does not aim at merely reproducing facts but at solving a scientific problem. "What does the party system in India look like?" is not a research question and therefore not a suitable topic for a research project; however, "Why are there so many parties in India despite the majority voting system?" would be a viable one, as the observed number of competitive parties contradicts a widely accepted theoretical expectation regarding the relationship between electoral and party systems ("Duverger's Law"). The selection of research questions requires familiarity with relevant literature because interesting research gaps, controversies, and puzzles can only be identified against the background of empirical facts and the state of research. Unfortunately, according to Plümper (2008), many common textbooks inadequately introduce students to current political science debates. Instead, they only reflect the (often not very extensive) established knowledge in the respective research areas. Eidlin (2011) refers to this as the "malady of inquiry without problems" or "topicism." In lectures and seminars at the Department of Political and Administrative Sciences, instructors explicitly address current scientific debates and attempt to assist students in selecting attractive research questions for seminar and thesis papers. In seminars and colloquia, problem formulations for research papers are frequently suggested as well.

*Tips for selecting research questions:*

- Address empirical observations that contradict common theoretical expectations. What possible reasons can you find for the deviating behavior? Identify the conditions under which a common theoretical model is valid.

- Are there alternative explanations for empirical regularities that have been interpreted in the light of a particular theory so far? How could empirical discrimination be made between alternative theoretical approaches?
- Attempt to test previously untested assumptions of a theoretical model, such as behavioral assumptions at the micro level.
- Read newspapers with a focus on implicit models underlying journalistic event interpretations, new laws, or court decisions. Can these be generalized into a testable theory?
- Show that theoretical and empirical approaches from an adjacent discipline are also applicable to a political science problem.
- Choose a research design that allows for more definitive conclusions about whether a particular factor is truly causally related to an interesting outcome.
- Argue that the central constructs in a literature strand have been inadequately measured so far. Propose measurement-theoretically based alternatives.

## Relevance

The relevance of a research paper is measured on the one hand by its potential political and societal consequences, and on the other hand by the significance of the contribution to the scientific debate. A research paper is *scientifically relevant* when it identifies and solves scientific problems, obtains valid and reliable data, tests and develops theories empirically. A research paper is *socially and politically relevant* when it can contribute to the understanding and solution of social problems (Gschwend and Schimmelfennig 2007). Ideally, a research paper serves both dimensions. Some degree of disciplinary relevance arises almost automatically when you connect the selection of the research question to current scientific controversies and puzzles. Think about which target groups within and outside the scientific community your research paper might be relevant to.

## State of Research

Research is a cumulative endeavor. With a brief report on the state of research, you demonstrate where your work fits into the existing literature and what scientific contribution you aim to make:

- Identify the research gap you intend to fill with your work,
- present the scientific debate you aim to contribute to
- or describe the empirical observations that appear puzzling against the background of common theories.

## Research Design

The research design includes the methodological steps planned to answer the research question. In empirical work, these often include

- the *concept specification and operationalization of theoretical constructs*,
- the *data collection or identification and utilization of existing data sources*,
- the *data analysis*.

These steps are to be described and critically reflected upon in the Exposé. The research design significantly determines how unequivocal the answer to a research question will be. Therefore, when critically reflecting on the research design, consider which evidence would be most meaningful for answering your research question and how it could ideally be obtained (e.g., through a randomized experiment if it concerns causal inferences?). Even if you ultimately have to choose a different research design for pragmatic reasons, such a thought experiment often helps to identify and reduce uncertainties in your own design (e.g., how can competing explanations be ruled out in a non-experimental design?).

*Feasibility* is a significant criterion in selecting the research question and must be discussed within the framework of the Exposé. Pay particular attention to the *availability of relevant data*:

- What data do you need to answer your research question?
- Do these already exist? Are they (freely) accessible?
- Are there publications on similar issues? Do the authors, as is now common practice (King 2006), make their data available?
- If not, can the data be obtained within the processing time?

## Further Steps

Briefly report on the status of preliminary work here (e.g., literature review, screening of relevant literature, report on the state of research, clarification of data availability, data acquisition, etc.). Present the next steps (e.g., concept specification and operationalization of theoretical constructs, data collection or utilization of existing data sources, data analysis, presentation and interpretation of empirical results, transcription, formatting) in a tabular timeline. Also, mention here any open questions that you would like to discuss with the supervisor and other seminar participants.

## Further Literature

Baglione, Lisa. 2008. „Doing good and doing well: Teaching research-paper writing by unpacking the paper“. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41(3): 595–602.

Eidlin, Fred. 2011. „The Method of Problems versus the Method of Topics“. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44(4): 758-762.

Gschwend, Thomas und Frank Schimmelfennig. 2007. „Forschungsdesign in der Politikwissenschaft. Ein Dialog zwischen Theorie und Daten.“ In Gschwend, Thomas und Frank Schimmelfennig (Hg.). *Forschungsdesign in der Politikwissenschaft. Probleme – Strategien – Anwendungen*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, S. 13-38.

King, Gary. 2006. „Publication, publication“. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39(1): 119–25.

Plümper, Thomas. 2008. *Effizient schreiben: Leitfaden zum Verfassen von Qualifizierungsarbeiten und wissenschaftlichen Texten*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag.

Rank, Allison, und Heather Pool. 2014. „Writing Better Writing Assignments“. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47(3): 675–81.