

# Check list for term papers and theses

## Eleven steps to an outline for your term paper or thesis

Jan Helmdag\*

**General remarks:** The text at hand is a check list that should be used by students who want to author a quantitative empirical study in comparative politics. It is recommended to use the check list for assessing whether or not the work on a particular research question is feasible. Students who want to author either a term paper or a thesis should make use of the check list before seeking advice in the consultation hour or the colloquium of the *Chair of Comparative Politics*. Below, eleven aspects that should be included in an outline of your term paper or thesis are presented.

### 1 Research question

*What is your research question and which causal relationship do you want to investigate within your paper?*

The research question is the most central aspect of your term paper that demands particular attention and appropriate framing. Your research question should be a genuine question, that has to be written-out and ends with a question mark. As a general rule of thumb, your research question should be simple and not include any conditions, because that almost always results in difficult research designs and sophisticated application of statistical methods.

*Note: Examples for research questions can be found in the appendix at the bottom of the document.*

### 2 Research design

*Is your research design centered on describing the influence of an independent variable (x-centered) or does it focus on the comprehensive explanation of a phenomenon (y-centered)?*

In most cases, it is recommended that you choose a design that is x-centered, meaning that you concentrate on the explanation of why one certain independent variable is crucial in explaining the variance of outcomes of a dependent variable. In contrast, y-centered designs look at all possible independent variables that could influence outcomes in the dependent variable.

*Note: Y-centered approaches are not feasible for term papers and should only – if at all – be chosen by students authoring a master thesis.*

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\*Department of Political Science, University of Greifswald. Address: Ernst-Lohmeyer-Platz 3, Room 3.40, 17489 Greifswald. Email: [jan.helmdag@uni-greifswald.de](mailto:jan.helmdag@uni-greifswald.de), Phone: +49 3834 420 3173

### 3 Relevance/research gap

*Why is it important to answer your research question? Is it a question that gets frequently tackled by researchers or is there a possible research gap?*

This section should give a concise overview of the research field and the overall scientific consensus. It also should be a genuine self-reflective treatise that explains the nature of your intent.

### 4 State of research

*Who has already worked on that particular research question? Is there a general dissent on the causal relationship and are there any contradictions that you identified? Are there certain aspects that researchers recommended on investigating, but haven't been investigated, yet?*

For this purpose, it is recommended that you compile a tabular overview of empirical studies and the cornerstones of their findings (see example in appendix C). You should choose influential, well-cited studies that report differing results on your research question (ideally compartmentalized in positive, negative, and non-results). As a general rule of thumb, the following number of empirical studies should be evaluated by each specific paper:

- **Undergraduate (bachelor)**
  - Term paper: 8–10 studies
  - Thesis: 12–15 studies
- **Graduate (master)**
  - Term paper: 12–15 studies
  - Thesis: at least 25

### 5 Theory

*What is the theoretical basis for your research and what explanatory approaches do exist?*

Outline the theoretical basis of your argument. Formulate hypotheses that can be derived from the theory you previously outlined and that can be empirically tested. Do not formulate hypotheses that you will not (or cannot) test in your paper. If possible, try to visualize the relationship between the variables mentioned in the hypotheses. Try not to formulate as many hypotheses as possible, but rather try to keep it simple (sometimes even one hypothesis can be sufficient).

### 6 Dependent variable

*Which dependent variable do you want to use in your model?*

Describe which indicators can be used to measure the dependent variable and its operationalization. Discuss whether your dependent variable captures an *outcome* or an *output* and thereby what the (potential) analysis results do and do not capture. Name ready-made datasets that you can use or describe a (feasible) data gathering procedure that can be conducted by you. Use descriptive statistics (tables and/or graphs) that show the deviance/variance of your dependent variable.

## 7 Independent variables

*Which independent variables you want to use in your model?*

Describe which particular independent variable corresponds to each of your hypothesis. Again, describe which indicators can be used to measure the independent variables and how can they be operationalized. Create some basic plots that visualize the relationship between your dependent variable and your independent variable(s). Based on your theoretical considerations, discuss which control variables should be implemented into your model. If you formulate interactive hypotheses, then further elaborate on the relationship of the independent variables of interest.

## 8 Sample of analysis

*What is your sample for analysis?*

Describe your sample regarding  $i$  (countries, governments, municipalities, individuals, etc.) and  $t$  (time period [years, days, etc.], or point in time [e.g. cross-section of the year 2000, last election]). Describe the relevance of that particular sample and the advantages and disadvantages of investigating it.

*Note: As a general rule of thumb, your sample should be as big as possible, since you are conducting a quantitative empirical analysis using inferential statistics.*

## 9 Method

*What statistical method are you using?*

Describe the statistical method you are using for evaluating your hypotheses. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the method you chose. If you are using an uncommon method, then you should elaborate more on it and discuss its merits.

## 10 Data sources

*What data sources are you using?*

Name the data sources you want to use and if these are openly accessible. If you are not sure how to access the required data, name a backup plan (or alternative forms of operationalizations) you want to proceed with.

## 11 Empirical results

*Note: This is by far the most important section on the check list and should be thoroughly discussed. It is most helpful if you can present (preliminary) empirical results, since it makes supervision more expedient.*

*What are your empirical results? Which hypotheses can be accepted or rejected according to your results? Are your findings in line with previous results of other researchers, or do they differ in some*

*crucial respects?*

It is expected from you that you extensively present your results with the help of tables and graphs. Since it is most likely that your results stem from multiple regressions, do present them in a form that is commonly practiced. Also, try to present predicted values/probabilities and marginal effects that help in assessing the importance of certain independent variables.

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## **Appendix A: List of feasible research questions**

*Note: The provided research questions below are exemplary ones that are suitable for supervision.*

1. How does economic policy and growth influence welfare policies?
2. How do parties influence social policy reform?
3. Which institutional factors do prevent parties from implementing social policy reform?
4. What are driving factors of increasing female employment?
5. To what extent can welfare policies create more gender equality?
6. Is increasing globalization inducing a race-to-the-bottom in social policy reform?
7. How do social policies diffuse within the OECD?
8. What influence had the recent financial crisis on welfare state reforms?
9. What is the impact of trade unions and corporatism on unemployment replacement rates?
10. Does the generosity of social insurance influence turnout on elections?
11. Which countries do react more comprehensive on demands and needs created by new social risks?
12. How does the Open Method of Coordination of the European Union influence social policy trajectories?

## **Appendix B: Literature on writing a (quantitative-empirical) research paper in political science**

- Baglione, L. A. (2018). *Writing a Research Paper In Political Science: A Practical Guide to Inquiry, Structure, and Methods*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.
- Miller, J. E. (2013). *The Chicago guide to writing about multivariate analysis*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- *If you are struggling with English texts on the topic:* Plümper, T. (2012). *Effizient schreiben: Leitfaden zum Verfassen von Qualifizierungsarbeiten und wissenschaftlichen Texten*. Oldenbourg Verlag, München, 3. Auflage.

## Appendix C: Example of an annotated bibliography

**Table 1:** Annotated bibliography

Author(s)	<i>i</i>	<i>t</i>	Method	Dependent variable	Independent variable(s)	Synopsis of results
<a href="#">Allan and Scruggs (2004)</a>	18	1975–1999	TSCS, panel-corrected SE, unit FE	$\Delta$ Unemployment replacement rates, <i>Source:</i> CWED <a href="#">Scruggs (2004)</a>	<i>Independent variable(s)</i> <b>Positive:</b> Left cabinet share* <b>Negative:</b> Right cabinet share* <b>Mixed:</b> -  <i>Control variables</i> <b>Positive:</b> Corporatism* <b>Negative:</b> GDP growth <b>Mixed:</b> Trade openness, Financial openness, Veto points, Unemployment rate, Deficits	- <b>Partisan effect present</b> ('Golden age') - <b>Partisan effect present</b> ('Silver age')  - Parties matter when investigating replacement rates instead of social expenditure  - Left parties have positive influence in expansion phase, effect disappears in the retrenchment phase  - Right parties exert no influence in expansion phase whereas they have a negative effect in the retrenchment phase
<a href="#">Korpi and Palme (2003)</a>	18	1976–1995	Intensity regression for repeated events	Cut in average net replacement rate (sickness, work accident, and unemployment insurance) <i>Source:</i> SCIP ( <a href="#">Korpi and Palme, 2007</a> )	<i>Independent variable(s)</i> <b>Positive:</b> Confessional cabinet, Sec. C-R cabinet* <b>Negative:</b> Left cabinet*  <i>Control variables</i> <b>Positive:</b> Unemployment*, Current account deregulation, Export/import share* <b>Negative:</b> Gov. fin. balance, Institutional model, Veto points*, Capital account deregulation, Initial benefit level	- <b>Partisan effect present</b>  - Parties matter when investigating replacement rates instead of social expenditure  - Left parties are correlated with lesser cut-back events while secular rightist parties are correlated with more cuts in replacement rates

*Note:* The table represents the annotated bibliography in tabular form and lists two quantitative-empirical studies that analyze changes in replacement rates.  
*Abbreviations:* *i*: Number of countries, *t*: Time period,  $\Delta$ : First-order differences, SE: Standard errors, TSCS: Time-series cross-section.

## References

- Allan, J. P. and Scruggs, L. (2004). Political partisanship and welfare state reform in advanced industrial societies. *American Journal of Political Science*, 48(3):496–512.
- Korpi, W. and Palme, J. (2003). New politics and class politics in the context of austerity and globalization: Welfare state regress in 18 countries, 1975–95. *American Political Science Review*, 97(3):425–446.
- Korpi, W. and Palme, J. (2007). The Social Citizenship Indicator Program (SCIP). Swedish Institute for Social Research, Stockholm University.
- Scruggs, L. (2004). Comparative Welfare Entitlements Data Set. University of Connecticut.