

**Short course on
RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND ACADEMIC WRITING**

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Overview

To what extent does the design of a research project really matter? Are decisions about questions and analysis not meant to follow from the type of data you have? To what extent should we be worried about research questions, and concepts and analysis at the very outset of a project?

These are some of the questions that this course takes on while introducing participants to the core components of the research design process. Through presentations and group discussions, including of their own research, participants will define what it means to engage with the research process with critical imagination, and identify the different components of a design-led research study. Participants will formulate and present research questions in their areas of interest and through group discussion refine these in ways that ensure the questions are researchable, given the many constraints under which scholars work. Participants will also identify the causal relations their research proposes to examine and place these in the context of recent developments in causal theory, which has advanced substantially in showing how our choices (often implicit) in theories of causation (or change) shape the findings we obtain. This discussion covers a wide range of causal notions, from probabilistic as used in statistical and econometric analysis, to conjunctural and path dependence in comparative case studies.

Research questions spell out relations between a small number of concepts that are central to a study. There have been substantial advances in concept formation in the social sciences in recent years and the course will discuss these in detail and guide participants to work in small groups to develop further the key concepts in their own research. The relationship between concepts and theory is explored by comparing how similar concepts take on different roles in the social sciences. Based on these critical decisions about questions, concepts and causal models, participants will decide the best combination of methods that will allow them to strengthen the explanations for the phenomenon they want to explore.

Once researchers have greater clarity on the structure and process of their research, and eventually on their findings, they will need to effectively communicate these to as large an audience as possible. For most scholars, this means publishing in well regarded journals. Participants will engage with the process of publishing their research by thinking about rigorous and innovative research designs, strong and clear academic writing, and effective communication.

Course delivery

Course participants will have two substantive sessions on each day – 1 in the morning and 1 in the afternoon – that will each be followed by hands-on learning and group work sessions in which they will apply the material to their own research projects using their prepared concept notes, with the help of the facilitators. Each day will end with participants presenting the day's progress on their research projects.

Participants will work as part of peer-based support groups to expand their exposure to how designs might change with different research questions. The group work sessions are designed around the course content and allows participants to engage immediately and deeply with this for better learning and assimilation. Both the group work and plenary sessions are designed to provide critical feedback and constructive critique from colleagues to help strengthen participants' research concept notes.

Outcomes of course

At the end of the course, participants should have:

1. An expanded critical imagination of their own and other people's research, and of the research design process;
2. The ability to use latest developments in concept formation to modify, redefine, or create new concepts;
3. Developed rigorous causal models, and an ability to move back and forth between different notions of causality and their implications for research design;
4. The ability to better communicate their research to academic audiences;
5. Developed their research concept note to a higher level of refinement.

Course structure

	Morning (9:30-1:00)	Afternoon (2:00-5:00)
DAY 1	<i>Session 1: Research design and research questions</i>	<i>Session 2: Hypothetical strategies and causal models</i>
	1. Critical imagination, puzzles and research questions	1. Understanding causality
	2. Gaps in the literature	2. Hypotheses and causal models
	Group work: Formulating research questions	Group work: Constructing causal models
	Morning	Afternoon
DAY 2	<i>Session 3: Defining the research terrain – forming good concepts and frameworks</i>	<i>Session 4: Thinking about variation</i>
	1. Concepts and frameworks	1. Exploring variation
	2. Conceptualisation and operationalisation	2. Typologies and theory
	Group work: Operationalising concepts	Group work: Constructing typologies
	Morning	Afternoon
DAY 3	<i>Session 5: Research strategies and mixing methods</i>	<i>Session 6: Selecting cases and methodologies</i>
	1. Mixing methods for causal explanations	1. Connecting questions to methods
	2. Some causal strategies	2. Case selection
	Group work: Constructing a strategy	Group work: Choosing cases and methodologies
	Morning	Afternoon
DAY 4	<i>Session 7: Writing for academic audiences (language and argument)</i>	<i>Session 8: Writing for academic audiences (sources and structure)</i>
	1. Avoiding <i>academese</i>	1. Engaging with the literature
	2. Creating a reasoned argument	2. Writing analytically
	Group work: Peer-to-peer editing	Group work: Peer-to-peer editing
		Wrap up and evaluation

DAY 1

9:30-11:00 – Session 1: Research design and research questions

Objectives

The module starts with interrogating the particular puzzles and intriguing phenomena that participants want to explore through their research projects. The focus here is on making explicit the normative framework and critical disposition (or imagination) that underlies their research. The session will allow participants to critically examine widely accepted definitions of a problem/question, the categories or techniques used for its analysis, and the interpretations possible. They will move towards refining techniques for making explicit assumptions underlying research questions, drawing on general observations, grounded theory, and most importantly, identifiable gaps in the broader literature situated in other subjects and contexts. The main aim of the session is to provide participants with the skills to pose analytically sharp research questions that are compelling *and* researchable.

Contents

Participant-led discussion of what constitutes rigorous social science research and the challenges involved in developing a critical but analytically productive perspective. Among other things, this involves making explicit not only one's own assumptions and possible explanations or hypothesis, but also rival ones in the literature or in other media.

Research questions define the analytic and/or empirical terrain of a study. Based on the participants' own research projects, we discuss the fundamentals of formulating research questions, and accompanying hypotheses. This includes identifying a study's relation to an existing body of knowledge (*the literature*), including to theory, and its relation to the empirical phenomena of interest. By analysing concrete suggestions, we discuss what the implications are of posing questions in different ways. What are the (implicit) assumptions? What body of literature does it feed into? Where lies the novelty of the research (theoretical/methodological/empirical)? Is the research doable?

Session Readings

Eidlin, F. (2011) 'The Method of Problems versus the Method of Topics,' *Political Science*, 44(4), 758-761.

Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2011). Generating research questions through problematization. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2), 247-271.

Recommended Readings

Creswell John W. 2003. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. 6

11:00-11:30 – Coffee/tea

11:30-12:30 – Group work

12:30-1:00 – Plenary presentations

Exercise – Participants form small groups of three or four, and first introduce their latest research to each other, and then select one research project from among the group to interrogate:

- a) the research question and its assumptions;
- b) its main purpose;
- c) its relationship to the body of knowledge that it seeks to address.

Groups can move on to discuss a second and third project only after the first has been discussed adequately. The first question from each group will then be presented in a plenary session for further feedback from colleagues and facilitators.

The same pattern of group work will be followed in each session. With each successive session, participants will be expected to discuss and develop a new project from within their groups. In this way, each participant's research project will be covered through successive sessions. The idea is that participants whose project is not covered in class on a given day will work on this later in the evening on their own, to make sure that the project is ready for discussion the next day, at the next stage of the research process.

1:00-2:00 – Lunch

2:00-3:30 – Session 2: Hypothetical strategies and causal models

Objectives

Participants will return to formulating hypotheses, and connect these initial explanations to drawing out causal models that they will need to design and investigate in order to provide complete and rigorous answers to their research questions. Social science research can be separated between descriptive research that seeks to provide details of a phenomenon, and causal research that aims to explain why that phenomenon occurs. Research that deals with social problems usually attempts to establish some type of causality, and policy focused research seeks to intervene on causal relations to, ideally, solve social problems and produce better social outcomes. Research designs, therefore, flow in large measure from the type of causality we are interested in exploring. This session discusses a range of notions of causality found in social science research, and in particular, how these influence choices in research design and the types of statements or claims that can be made.

Contents

Drawing on examples from their own work and from studies in different theoretical traditions, participants will identify and discuss different forms of causality, from the widely known probabilistic causality used especially in survey and other Large-N research, to the less well known conjunctural causation found more often in Small-N case studies. They will also cover what types of statements or claims can be made using descriptive, causal, interpretative, and correlational analysis.

Session Readings

Steven Sloman. 2009. *Causal Models: How People Think About the World and Its Alternatives*. Oxford University Press. Ch. 1&3

Palinkas, L. A. (2014). Causality and causal inference in social work: Quantitative and qualitative perspectives. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 24(5), 540-547.

Recommended Readings

Gerring, J. (2012). *Social science methodology: A unified framework*. Cambridge University Press. Ch. 9&10

3:30-3:45 – Coffee/tea

3:45-4:30 – Group work

4:30-5:00 – Plenary presentations

Exercise – Participants will continue to work in small groups to develop causal strategies for one project in their group. This includes identifying:

- a) the possible outcome of the study;
- b) the potential causal factors;
- c) the main causal mechanism that exists between these.

DAY 2

9:30-11:00 – **Session 3: Defining the research terrain – forming good concepts and frameworks**

Objectives

This session will introduce participants to advanced techniques in concept formation and illustrate how one can modify, redefine, or create new concepts that capture with greater accuracy the empirical events, actors, or processes that are being investigated. The aim here is to introduce participants to conceptualising the major outcomes and key explanatory factors of their research project. The session will focus on moving from research questions to conceptual frameworks through the development of concepts, and from concepts to measurements (where appropriate) through the operationalisation of these concepts. The session will make active use of different pieces of research to help participants develop an understanding of conceptual frameworks and their role in research design by illustrating the various steps and challenges of the conceptualisation process.

Contents

Examine the different criteria that can be used to define concepts, as well as the different structure concepts can take. The definition of key concepts plays an important role in demarcating the boundaries of a research project and specifying what factors or processes are important to the project. The class discussion examines some of the concepts present in the participants' own research, and moves these towards the development of appropriate indicators and measures.

Session Readings

Goertz, G. (2006) 'Introduction', in *Social science concepts: a user's guide*, Chapter 1. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 1-24.

Goertz, G. and Amy G. Mazur. (2008). Mapping gender and politics concepts: Ten guidelines, in *Politics, Gender and Concepts: Theory and Methodology*, Chapter 2, edited by Gary Goertz and Amy G. Mazur. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., pp. 14-43

Recommended Readings

David Collier and Steven Levitsky. (1997). Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research, *World Politics* 49(3): 430-451.

Cornwall, A. (2008) Unpacking 'Participation': models, meanings and practices, *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 43(3), 269-283.

11:00-11:30 – Coffee/tea

11:30-12:30 – Group work

12:30-1:00 – Plenary presentations

Exercise – Participants work in small groups to develop their research designs by applying the tools of concept formation to their research project, including:

- a) selecting key concepts and their boundaries;

- b) operationalising concepts to develop indicators and measures.
- c) creating a useful conceptual framework for their projects in the process.

1:00-2:00 - Lunch

2:00-3:30 – **Session 4: Thinking about variation**

Objectives

One of the most exciting aspects of social science research is the exploration of differences in structure, behaviour and outcomes across units – countries, regions, institutions, populations – in the search for stronger explanations for why certain phenomena occur. Typologies are a particularly effective tool for investigating such differences across time and space. This session focuses participants' attention on exploring variation in their context and concepts by strengthening their ability to construct analytically meaningful typologies; and to use typologies to delimit the logically possible empirical manifestations of a study's subject by defining the typological space that bounds their inquiry.

Contents

Typologies are important analytical tools and play a substantial role in the design of research and in explanation. This session works through the construction and use of typologies and typological theories by revisiting some classic examples of these in the literature. Participants then lead a critical discussion of typologies that they have developed for their research.

Session Readings

Collier, D., Laporte, J & Seawright, J. (2008). Typologies: Forming concepts and creating categorical variables. In J.M. Box-Steffensmeier, H.E. Brady & D. Collier (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political methodology*. Chapter 7. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 152–173.

Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett. (2005) *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Chapter 11. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 235-262.

Recommended Readings

Peter P. Houtzager and Arnab Acharya (2011) Associations, Active Citizens, and the Quality of Democracy in Brazil and Mexico. *Theory and Society* 40(1): Pp. 1-20 only.

Collier, D., LaPorte, J., & Seawright, J. (2012). Putting typologies to work: Concept formation, measurement, and analytic rigor. *Political Research Quarterly*, 65(1), 217-232.

3:30-3:45 – Coffee/tea

3:45-4:30 – Group work

4:30-5:00 – Plenary presentations

Exercise – Participants continue to develop their research designs in small groups by applying the tools of concept formation and typological theory discussed through this day. They will focus in particular on the exploration of variation in their key concepts.

DAY 3

9:30-11:00 – Session 5: Research strategies and mixing methods

Objectives

This session introduces participants to the principles of mixed methods research design by looking at how vastly different methods can be combined in creative ways to strengthen the explanatory power of their research projects. The session will include a discussion of how to decide on issues of mixing versus sequencing based on the research question and design, as well as the different ways in which methods can be mixed at different points of the research process. It will also provide a discursive exploration of the advantages that mixed method research designs can have over single-method work, including the trade-offs involved in doing such research, as well as in choosing one method over another.

Contents

Through a combination of a lecture, open discussions and group work, students will be expected to think through the benefits and costs of combining methods in their work – the practical implications of a mixed methods approach for their research design, implementation and analysis. The session will use two studies that used mixed method research in very different ways to lead this discussion. Participants are expected to have a stronger basis for making critical decisions about mixing research methods by the end of the session.

Session Readings

Lieberman, E. (2005) Nested analysis as a mixed method strategy for comparative research. *American Political Science Review* 99(3).

McBride, D. E. and Mazur, A.G. (2010). Integrating Two Cultures in Mixed-Methods Research: A Tale of the State Feminism Project, Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research, March 10th 2010.

Recommended Readings

Bennett, A. and Braumoeller, B. (2006) Where the model frequently meets the road: Combining statistical, formal, and case study methods, Draft paper, APSA.

Ozawa, S. and Pongpirul, K. (2013). 10 best resources on mixed methods research in health systems. *Health Policy and Planning*, 2013: 1–5

11:00-11:30 – Coffee/tea

11:30-12:30 – Group work

12:30-1:00 – Plenary presentations

Exercise – Having worked through the details of their research questions and key concepts, and having thought about the type of variation they may want to explore, participants will now work in their small groups to think through which combination of methods may work best for their particular study. They will focus on:

- a) a workable mixed method strategy that fits their question and resources, with details of the particular sequence or integration of methods;
- b) additional skills required to execute this strategy;
- c) challenges in collecting or analysing data for multiple methods.

1:00-2:00 - Lunch

2:00-3:30 – Session 6: Research methodologies and case selection

Objectives

Participants will be introduced to a few methodologies that define the new frontiers of mixed methods work, including comparative case analysis, experiments, process tracing and QCA. Choices around appropriate methodologies will be connected both to the research question, and to the selection of the particular case(s) in which the investigation will be carried out. This is an important part of research design, and in most research projects much, in fact, hinges on the criteria used for selecting cases. The session will cover both within-case analysis conducted in a single case, such as process tracing, and cross-case analysis conducted across multiple cases, such as in experiments and QCA. Participants will learn about the types of causal claims and interpretive analysis they allow. They will also learn to distinguish between comparative analysis and studies that use multiple cases, and about the trade-offs involved in cross-case, within-case, and combined strategies.

Contents

Participants will return once again to thinking about the range of notions of causality found in different methods, and the implications of mixing methods on causal inference. They will assess how these ideas of causality influence key decisions in participants' and other scholars' research designs and choice of methods. The session will provide some details on a few methods used with greater frequency in the social sciences, and will apply these to participants' own concept notes. Participants are expected to have a stronger basis for making critical decisions about their case selection and how to investigate these by the end of the session.

Session Readings

MacLean, Lauren Morris. 2002. "Constructing a Social Safety Net in Africa: An Institutionalist Analysis of Colonial Rule and State Social Policies in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37(3): 64-90.

Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett. (2005). *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Chapter 10. pp. 205-33.

Recommended Readings

Collier, David (2011). 'Understanding Process Tracing', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 44(4): 823-830. [To be read in conjunction with Arthur Conan Doyle's (Sherlock Holmes story) 'The Adventure of Silver Blaze', First published in *The Strand Magazine* in December 1892. Summary available in Philip Weller (1992), *The Life and Times of Sherlock Holmes*, Avenel, NJ: Crescent books].

Mahoney, J. (2003). Long-Run Development and the Legacy of Colonialism in Spanish America, *American Journal of Sociology*, 109(1): 50-106

3:30-3:45 – Coffee/tea

3:45-4:30 – Group work

4:30-5:00 – Plenary presentations

Exercise – Participants will work in their small groups to finalise their research design by:

- a) selecting cases that will best help them establish the type of causal claim their research design seeks to establish;
- b) identify the particular new method that they think can contribute to this effort.

DAY 4

9:30-11:00 – Session 7: *Writing for academic audiences (language and argument)*

Objectives

To get published, researchers are expected to demonstrate that their work has a clear argument that is directly communicated, simple enough to be understood by as large an audience as possible, and to the point. The aim of this session is to build on participants' skills in academic writing to strengthen their work, and make it more accessible, clearer, and thus more publishable.

Contents

The session starts with a discussion of why *academese* – a confusing form of communication prevalent in higher education – still dominates much of academia. Participants then go through a series of exercises, working on style, tense, voice, jargon, and language, to improve their concept note. They then evaluate what a reasoned argument is and its importance in academic writing.

Sessions Readings

Pinker, S. et al (2014). Why Academic Writing Stinks and How to Fix It. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

Recommended Readings

Gastel, Barbara and Day, Robert (2016). *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* (8th edition). Santa Barbara: Greenwood. Chapters 30, 31, 32, and 34.

Silvia, Paul (2007). *How to Write a Lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing*. Washington: American Psychological Association.

Turabian, Kate (2013) *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (8th edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 5.

11:00-11:30 – Coffee/tea

11:30-12:30 – Group work

12:30-1:00 – Plenary presentations

Exercise – Using their updated concept notes, participants will edit each other's work, focusing on: (a) voice; (b) hedging; (c) jargon; and (d) verbosity. In the second part of the exercise, participants will analyse each other's concept note taking into consideration key elements of critical writing.

1:00-2:00 - Lunch

2:00-3:30 – Session 8: *Writing for academic audiences (sources and structure)*

Objectives

All academic writing involves the use of secondary sources and the ability to review literature effectively. This is a key requirement for getting published, but all too often, academics tend to cite the relevant literature, rather than really engage with it. Good academic writers indicate the existing community of scholars working on their issue and demonstrate how their work both fits into that community and carries the conversation forward. The main aim of the session is to provide participants with the necessary skills to critically engage with the literature as well as to write more analytical pieces of research.

Contents

In this session, participants will enhance their ability to situate themselves within the literature. They will devise strategies to show how their work builds on that of others and further advances the literature on the subject. Making use of their updated concept notes, participants will then individually restructure their paragraphs and edit each other's work in order to make these analytically stronger.

Recommended Readings

Graff, Gerald and Birkenstein, Cathy (2009) *They Say, I Say: the moves that matter in academic writing*. London: W. W. Norton and Company.

Hartley, James (2008). *Academic Writing and Publishing: A practical handbook*. London: Routledge.

Turabian, Kate (2013) *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (8th edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 3 and 4.

3:30-3:45 – Coffee/tea

3:45-4:15 – Group work

4:15-4:45 – Plenary presentations

Exercise – In small groups, participants will use key components of critical reading skills to better engage with the required literature in building their future arguments. In the second part of the exercise, participants will edit each other's work, so that they can revise them afterwards into a more analytical format.

4.45-5.00 – Wrap up and Evaluation