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Jairo Nicolau

Brief guidelines for drafting a research project

Jairo Nicolau

Jairo Nicolau

is Full Professor at the Department of Political Science at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (*Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*)

Writing up a research proposal is a recurrent activity in the life of a professional social scientist. In most political science programs, a research project or proposal is a prerequisite in order to qualify for a PhD degree. In Brazil (and perhaps the same applies to most countries), researchers devote a considerable amount of their time to drafting projects that will be submitted and evaluated by government agencies and private organizations.

Some institutions provide guidelines in their calls for applications. This is not a rule of thumb, however. More often than not, researchers and students must decide for themselves how to structure the projects they submit. After spending quite a lot of time participating in evaluation committees and reading piles of projects and research proposals I have noticed a few recurring problems. Most of them could have been avoided if researchers had followed some simple precautions.

I believe there are two main factors responsible for projects that fall short of the expectation of evaluators. The first one, as mentioned, is the fact that agencies and graduate programs usually do not present parameters to establish what a good project is. The second one is that students never receive the proper guidance during their training in order to help them writing this kind of text. I have noticed that in certain quarters drafting such a text is taken almost as a natural matter of fact. Most versions go somewhat like this: once the student decides upon a subject (the research problem) the project will arise in almost spontaneous fashion. In other words, the project would be generated by *fiat*.

Unfortunately, good research ideas can be ultimately harmed by weak projects. The purpose of this text is to present a few brief guidelines that can help graduate students to elaborate a research project. It was mainly written with doctoral candidates in mind, although I believe it can be adapted to researchers who plan to submit projects to funding agencies.

The text is divided into two segments. The first one deals specifically with the several elements of a project: a summary, goals, justification, review of literature, hypothesis, methods and chapter outline. The second one explores three general topics: length, presentation and student-advisor relationship.

The elements of a project

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1. The summary

Making an effort to write the best summary possible is not a waste of time. It can be a precious shortcut for the evaluators of your project. A well-crafted summary keeps reader's attention and stimulates further reading.

Do not succumb to the temptation of copying and pasting passages from the proposal to patch together a summary. Write a short (somewhere between 100 and 300 words) and original text, emphasizing the three fundamental aspects of the research: what you plan to do; why doing so is important, and how do you plan to do it.

2. Research objective

The most important topic a project's reader will be looking for is: what is the purpose of this research? Do not let the reader wonder through several pages (usually the literature review) until he stumbles upon, hidden somewhere in the middle of a paragraph, the sentence he was looking for: "the objective of this research is..." Be explicit and dedicate at least one paragraph to explain what you plan to do.

Many projects insist on differentiating between general objectives and specific objectives. Such a distinction tends to be too subtle and provides very little clarification. My suggestion is that you concentrate your efforts on presenting the general purposes of the research, leaving aside any listing of "sub-objectives".

Some choose to create a specific section to describe research objectives. Others intersperse the objectives throughout a more general discussion about the research. Choose whichever you find most convenient. Be sure however not to forget what is most important: clearly inform your reader, as soon as possible, what you intend to do with your research.

3. The justification

The justification section is perhaps the most important one in a project. It is where the researcher must highlight what makes the research relevant. In other words, which are the intellectual and social reasons to make the research merit approval, and, in many cases, worthy of financing.

In social sciences, the discussion surrounding what relevant research consists of has more often than not led to sterile debate. I suggest students refer to one of the dimensions (social and intellectual) pointed out by King, Keohane, & Verba (1994, p. 15) to justify the relevance of the research:

Ideally, all research projects in the social sciences should satisfy two criteria. First, a research project should pose a question that is "important" in the real world. The topic should be consequential for political, social or economic life, for understanding something that significantly affects many people's lives, or for understanding and predicting events that might be harmful or beneficial. Second, a research project should make a specific contribution to an identifiable scholarly literature by increasing our collective ability to construct verified scientific explanations of some aspect of the world.

Whenever possible present the social relevance of your research. For some subjects, this is an easier task. A student investigating programs aimed at reducing poverty, analyzing certain social programs or discussing political participation models will not have a hard time doing this. For other research subjects, this can be a more difficult task.

Yet a project must also indicate the research intellectual relevance. Try to make it clear for the reader how it contributes to a certain field of knowledge. To this end, I suggest the justification be associated to a review of the “state of art” of the literature and research concerning the subject.

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4. Literature review

Undertaking a careful bibliographical research is a prerequisite for solid research. To be able to contribute to the existing stock of knowledge in a certain field it is fundamental you become familiarized with the relevant literature. Being up to date with the “state of art” of the research already conducted in your field of study will reduce the chance you waste time either repeating someone else’s efforts or making an irrelevant contribution. Some unexplored subjects will require particularly careful bibliographical research. Some more canonical subjects have been frequently reviewed in journals and books¹.

As much as the review of the literature is crucial, I am of the opinion that it need not be exhaustively presented in the project. Carry out a detailed bibliographical research and look for the most recent references on the subject of your investigation. Organize these references according to your preferences: notes, summaries, reviews, lists. Share them with your advisor and colleagues. But do not forget that a research project is not the place to show off your erudition and knowledgeablebleness of a particular sub-field.

In the project, deal exclusively with the literature directly related to the subject of your research. For example, if a project sets out to investigate the internal structure of a political party in Brazil, there is no need to write a review of every single text ever written on party organization as a whole; or anything that would start something like “Since the times of Robert Michels to the present...” In this case, it is perhaps more relevant to locate recent texts discussing party organization in new democracies, or a typology that would include new kinds of parties in political regimes where party organization has low levels of institutionalization.

One suggestion is to connect the literature review to the project’s justification. The argumentation can follow this structure: my subject is Z; I have identified in the literature that there is a lack of studies on subject Z, or that existing studies are insufficient; my research seeks to fill in this gap by doing X.

There are no rules concerning the number of texts that must be analyzed in this effort to locate a research problem within an intellectual tradition. For some subjects, you will probably need a large numbers of authors. For others, a few references might suffice. If in doubt, be parsimonious and bear in mind that your research problem must be connected to the literature.

5. The hypothesis

In quantitative studies it is common for authors to present their arguments in the form of a hypothesis. In such texts we read sentences such as “my hypothesis is that there is a negative association between null votes and illiteracy”; “my hypothesis is that higher urbanization entails more votes for left-wing parties”. This kind of research sets out to “test” a set of hypothesis. The intent is to verify to which extent certain expected patterns of association among variable (because of common sense or a certain theory) are found (or not) by the investigation. The general pattern of proofs in social science research is quite well known. In general terms, in a final report, the research ultimately confirms the majority of hypotheses presented. But at the moment the report is drafted it is clear that hypotheses must be presented as questions to be answered.

If your research is quantitative, the presentation of hypotheses concerning a set of variables can help organize the research. However, be parsimonious and avoid listing (Hypothesis 1:..; Hypothesis 2:...) your research hypotheses. Even though this might apparently lend your text “scientificity”, in practice it hardly helps bringing attention to the fundamental aspects that define the relationship among variables (King, 2006).

I see all types of students in search for a hypothesis that can serve as a guide for their research. In this obsessive search for a hypothesis I have heard things such as “my hypothesis is the Weber’s concept of charismatic domination derives from . . .”; or, “my hypothesis is that the thought of Gilberto Freyre was influenced by . . .”. Outside the context of researches focused on variables (that is, quantitative research), the formulation of hypothesis almost never goes beyond the presentation of trivial propositions relative to a certain subject.

If you have a database and believe the presentation of the hypothesis will help in the development of the research, great. Otherwise, this is perhaps not the best format to present your arguments.

6. Research methods

Once you have decided what you want to do and why doing so is important, it is crucial to inform the reader how the research will unfold. In other words, the researcher must present the methods and sources selected for the research. This is one of the most important sections of a project, but, alas, also the one that traditionally receives the least attention.

It is common to read projects that, in the methods (or methodology) section, present a list of techniques for data collection. In a research about a certain labor union, for example, it will be possible to read something like “the research will employ interviews with political leaders, a visit to the union’s main offices and an analysis of meeting records”. Be a lot more careful and devote a few pages (at least two or three) to discuss the methods that will be used in your research.

A quantitative research project requires elaboration of a database. Today there are thousands of databases set up and accessible through several sites on the Internet. In case you select one, be sure to justify your choice. It is important to present a list of the variables that will be used in the research. Although changes will inevitably arise in the course of the research, this first listing will provide evaluators with a minimum of information to evaluate your project.

If the research sets out to organize a new database, present the source from which data will be collected and a list of variables that will be part of it. In case a survey is a decisive piece of the research, I suggest you attach a questionnaire (even if a preliminary version) to the project. By doing this you can clearly lay out what you plan to find out and also receive suggestions from evaluators in order to improve the questionnaire.

Avoid presenting an analysis of the data in the project. Tables, graphs and statistical test should only be included in the project in extreme cases, i.e. when their results are substantively associated to the research problem. But in any circumstance dedicate at least one paragraph to present the statistical techniques that can be used for the analysis of the database: descriptive statistics, inferential statistics; time series; multivariate analysis (linear regression; logistical), etc.

Political scientists tend to naturalize the use of methods for non-quantitative data collection. There is abundant literature on the use of ethnographies, interviews, document analysis and historical sources in political science. Collecting evidence and treating qualitative material adequately requires proper training. Read the main references in the field relative to these techniques and make it clear you have a solid grasp of those who intend to use in the research.

If your research involves a case study or a comparison of a few cases, I suggest you present a clear justification. Be careful in indicating the motive of such a selection for your cases. Remember that the choice of a specific case or a number of cases will inevitably raise a few questions. For example: what can be learned from comparing how presidentialism works in Brazil and Argentina? Why these two countries and not their neighbors Chile and Uruguay as well? Why not the entirety of Latin American countries? Why not all countries where there are presidentialist regimes?

There is today extensive literature on the virtues and limitations of case studies and on how to select them in a careful manner (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2006; Gerring, 2008). Read these texts and try to make the connection between the presented methodological problems and the choice of your case (or cases).

7. The time line and the chapter outline

Towards the end of the project proposal present a timeline of the activities that will be carried out during each month of the research. One suggestion is to organize the information in a chart, preferably within a single page (see example below). Presenting the timeline as a single unit not only facilitates reading but provides a general overview of all planned activities as well.

For students who are preparing a research project for a doctoral dissertation a chapter outline with a brief description (just a few lines) of each one is fundamental. This brief exercise helps students gauge the work load involved in the research. I remember one student who, after organizing a timeline chart, realized that it would be impossible to write 12 chapters in two and a half years remaining in his doctorate.

Example o chart presenting a time line for the research:

Months	Activity
January - April	. Bibliographical research . Organization of database
May - September	. Drafting of a first version of the first chapter . Data analysis and first statistical tests
October - December	. Drafting of Chapter 2 . Review of first version of Chapter 1

8. The products

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In case you plan to submit your proposal to a funding agency make sure to indicate, in detail, how you plan to publicize your results.

With the consolidation of academic publication portals² it has become easier to access the best scientific journals in many countries. They are today the most popular vehicles for the dissemination of social science research.

This is why, in addition to traditional seminar and workshops where research results can be shared with colleagues, it is important to put an effort into submitting at least one manuscript containing the research's main findings for publication in an academic journal.

9. The bibliography

There was a time when a student had no choice but to spend days organizing a bibliography. This is no longer necessary, as there are several softwares capable of organizing your notes, attaching texts and – best of all – automatically generating bibliographies.

If you still do not own software for bibliographies it is about time to acquire one. There are many programs of this nature. Standouts are *Zotero* (<http://www.zotero.org/>) and *Mendeley* (<http://www.mendeley.com/>). Both are free, can be synchronized in different devices and are widely used by the academic community all over the world. Install either one of the programs and spend a day learning how to use it. This will spare you from hearing on the day of your defense that “several references in your project are not in the bibliography,” or “names and date do not match.”

Some institutions require projects to conform to a specific bibliographical format (ABNT, Chicago, Turabian, APA). In this case there might be no way around the norm. If, however, you do have freedom of choice I suggest you adopt one of the many “author-date” formats in which the year a reference was published (and sometimes the page where the citation is found) follows the author's name: (Dahl, 1956: 27). Follow the same system in your footnotes. This format is simple and avoids the unbearable abbreviations *idem*, *ibidem*, *op.cit.*, that will likely confuse more than clarify. Another advantage is that this favors a “cleaner” text without notes that fully or partially transcribe the bibliographical reference.

I particular like the format adopted by the *American Psychological Association* (APA) adopted in this text. In fact you can significantly improve the presentation of your project by consulting the *APA Style Manual* (APA, 2006).

Remember: the bibliography should contain only the texts cited in the project. Texts you plan to read or read in the past that have not been cited should not be part of the bibliography.

Other general topics

Project Length

Many institutions still have a high regard for long projects (anywhere from 12 thousand to 20 thousand words) which usually include a long literature³. I prefer shorter projects (around 8 thousand words). This length is more or less equivalent to the limit established by some of the most important international political science journals⁴.

There can be several reasons for a shorter, more synthetic proposal. First among them has to do with the very nature of a research project. Metaphors can be cliché but here goes: the project is a navigation map, an itinerary of a journey. It must advance a clear vision of what

the research consists of, the reason it is important and the general lines of how it will be carried out. Rarely will this task require more than 8 thousand words (about 20 pages).

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A second reason is pragmatic. Researchers must bear in mind that in many situations their project will be competing with others for a limited amount of resources. Picture, for example, an evaluation committee responsible for selecting from among a pool of 50 candidates. The evaluators will have to read 50 projects, not to mention the same number of portfolios. Concise and objective projects are more likely to stand out in this context.

A third reason has to do with the precious time of the people involved in the evaluation process. Academics are typically swamped with a backlog of unread dissertations, projects to write, articles to review and e-mails to reply. A 20 thousand-word project takes up at least half a day...

Presentation

Use the standard presentation format for texts. Choose a font, in size 12; either single or 1.5 spacing. Some authors like to subdivide the texts into numbered sections (1,1.1, 2, 2.2, 2.3...). I am partial to using larger fonts to differentiate sections and smaller fonts for subsections. Choose what suits you best.

Do not get too creative with your presentation. Avoid distractions such as plastic covers or binder, exotic fonts or trivial illustrations.

Do not forget to review. If you are not a clear writer, do not rely exclusively on spell checking tools. Hire a professional for a thorough revision. It is never pleasing to hear from a committee member during a defense or from a reviewer that your text is not well written or contains grammatical mistakes.

Remember that a badly written and presented project is very likely to irritate readers. This might inevitably distract them from what they are supposed to do: read and criticize the content of your research project.

The advisor

One question always present in the mind of students is knowing when the timing is right to send a version to his or her advisor. Many of them stipulate specific rules for receiving and commenting the versions written by their students. Recently I participated in a committee in which the advisor confessed to have read 14 versions of her student's project!

E-mail has facilitated communication between students and advisors. On the negative side, students, especially in initial stages of writing, tend to submit every modification to their advisor's appreciation. Even if there were time to spare, this is not a good option for a simple reason. Rereading a similar version of the same text usually means the reader will pay less attention in each subsequent reading. It is no wonder banal mistakes go unnoticed when we work on the same text for a long time.

I suggest that your first step be discussing the overall structure of the project with your advisor. Spend the next few weeks (or months) preparing a first version. A complete version would include a bibliography – along with notes and attachments if necessary. This will allow your advisor to have a more complete perspective of your work and thus be able to make relevant comments.

After receiving back a commented version of the project from your advisor (preferably accompanied by a face-to-face meeting) you will be ready to draft a last or penultimate version of the project. Of course, this will only be true if you answer the three basic questions that should serve as guidelines throughout the process: what will I do? Why will I do it? How will I do it?

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Notes

1. See, for example: Boletim de Informação Bibliográfica (BIB); Annual Review of Political Science; e Annual Review of Sociology.
2. In Brazil, the most important one is Scielo (www.scielo.br).
3. In Brazil limits are usually defined as a certain number of pages. The problem is that students end up manipulating font, page formatting, and spacing in order to meet this parameter. A standard page (Arial, font size 12, 1.5 spacing) should be approximately 400 words long.
4. In the US and UK, journals and the university system as a whole usually establish a certain number of words as a guideline. The European Journal of Political Research, for example, established a 8 thousand word limit for submitted manuscripts; Comparative Political Studies, sets the limit at 10 thousand words; the British Journal of Political Research suggests the article is longer than 5 thousand and no longer than 12 thousand words.

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