RPOS695: Research and Writing Seminar

Professor Sally Friedman
Milne #221
Email: sfriedman2@albany.edu
Phone: 442-5278
Office Hours:
MWF, 12.45-1.30, Political Science Contact Office, Humanities #016(uptown campus)
Thursdays, 1:30-2:30, Milne #221
By appointment

Many thanks to my predecessors who have taught this course--Professors victor Asal, Anne Hildreth, David Rousseau and Mort Schoolman—not only for sharing their syllabi but for taking time to brainstorm and provide input. Also thanks to Professors Julie Novkov and Peter Breinner for helpful suggestions.

This is the first of the two courses in the year-long research and writing seminar required for third year graduate students in political science. This semester we will work on fundamentals. We will review the steps political scientists use as they go about doing research--building on the literature already out there to formulate and execute their own projects; the semester will culminate in the development of your own research proposal; research you will then conduct and present in POS696. Thus, you can view POS695 as the design stage in preparation for POS696, the execution stage. The expectation is that by the end of the year you will be well on your way towards a publishable journal article and/or a solid start on parts of a project that will turn into your dissertation.

More specifically throughout the sessions this semester, we will get ourselves on the same page by reviewing what it means to do research; the stages of the research process, (remember POS516!); and developing your own proposal.
Notes:

*Your work in this course should serve as both a review and an integration of what you have been doing in your first couple of years of graduate school. It is assumed that you have taken POS516 (Research Methods) as well as some combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. You should be reasonably familiar with what you learned there, but the process of formulating questions and developing research designs is important and takes practice! Also perhaps it’s the case you don’t remember every last detail? We will review the basics, bringing your existing skills front and center. We will also be taking them to the next level!

*Early on in the semester you will be asked to select a faculty mentor from your subfield of interest. It is the purpose of this class to review fundamentals, which will apply to most of you, and to support each other as we go through this sometimes intimidating process. In addition, you will work closely with your faculty mentor who will serve as an expert in the literature and methodology of your chosen field. Thus both aspects—working in class and working with your adviser-- are equally important. Work with your faculty mentor should enhance your substantive (and methodological) expertise in your chosen area of interest. Work on the assignments of this class will provide a structure for the process, help you review fundamentals and give you a network of support.

*Remember: Research and writing are a process. Your ideas will evolve/solidify over time, even small changes in your thinking can make a big difference, and we don’t expect you to get it all right in a week!

Course Objectives

--To review and bring to life the steps in the research process

--In stages to build on past scholarship to produce and fine-tune your own research question and research design

--To work with your faculty mentor, your peers and me to get feedback and hone your skills throughout the semester

Requirements

1) Short Assignments (1-1.5 pages ) 20%
2) Initial Literature Review (Approx. 8 pages; longer is ok) 20%
3) Initial Research Design (Approx. 10 pages) 20%
4) Preliminary Draft of paper (Approx. 20-25 pages) & Final paper 20%
5) Attendance, participations, and presentations 20%
Notes

*The readings preferred below are for the purpose of reviewing/integrating your research skills and helping you strategize ways to write a publishable paper. Individually each of you will additionally be reading widely in your substantive area of choice and sharing your expertise with the rest of us.

*Note also that all students are expected to have completed human subjects training prior to the course, most likely as an assignment in POS516. Please let me know if this is not the case; if there’s any possibility that you will be working with human subjects (via an experiment, a survey, in-depth interviews), you will need to complete the human subjects training, and as your project unfolds, you will need to allow time to get your specific proposal approved. Please discuss with me if there are any questions.

*I will set up a listserv; feel free to share your ideas, places you’re stuck, the specifics of what you’re working on, or if you really need to just let off steam.

Course Policies

Attendance: It goes without saying that, as in any other graduate seminar, you are expected to come to all classes and to engage as an active participant. This is particularly the case in pos695 as one of your roles will be to provide feedback and serve as a support system for your peers.

Of course we all know that emergencies and unforeseen circumstances arise; please let me know if at all possible prior to a class if you will be unable to attend.

Students with Disabilities: If you need any class accommodations due to a disability, please utilize University resources as needed, and please let the professor know well in advance of any assignments requiring accommodation(s). It is a function of the University to provide such accommodations.

Plagiarism and Academic Honesty: The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own without giving the original author credit by citing him or her. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please contact me before submitting assignments for grading. Plagiarism violations will result in disciplinary action; minimally you will fail the relevant assignment.

Additionally, it goes without saying that students are expected to meet the broader standards of academic honesty expected of students at a major university.

See link on University policy: http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/penalty.htm
See also the UAlbany Library “Plagiarism 101” Tutorial: http://library/albany.edu/usered/tut.html

**Course Schedule (subject to revision as the process unfolds)**

*Articles/book chapters available on blackboard or online.*

### Part I: The Basics

9/1. Introduction; overview: remembering how to think like a researcher


9/8. Review of the basics: approaches, theories, questions, concepts

write a 1-1.5 page paper connecting the ideas in the reading to a research question of interest to you.)

- Johnson, Janet and H.T. Reynolds, Ch. 4

Bring in article of your choice you think helps us think about these issues.

9/15. Approaches/Research Designs in Action (reading on topic of class choice)

9/22. No class. Start gathering information/articles on topics of interest. Start thinking about possibilities for your topic.

### Part II: The Literature

9/29. Mentor, literature review and 3 possible topics

Write 1-1.5 pages organizing what you learned so far from your literature review.

Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Doing a Literature Review”
Pick your mentor.
Start collecting relevant articles and books—at least 10!
Come in with 3 possible topics/questions you think haven’t been answered by the literature. If you studied each, what would be your contribution? Let’s just brainstorm.

10/6. No class but each of you will via e-mail report to the group what you’re working on. What’s next? More reading? More collecting info for your literature review? More clarifying your research question? Each of you will use the week to make some progress on your paper.

10/13. Defining Concepts, a review (we will use some of the below)
Write a 1-1.5 page reaction paper applying some aspects of the reading to a dependent variable you are potentially interested in.


*Report progress on your literature review!

Part III: your project

10/20. Draft of literature review due and class presentation. Approx. 8 pages.

10/27. Time to settle on your research question/topic, at least in a preliminary way. Write a 1-1.5 page paper justifying what you’re thinking. Why is the topic important? What’s your research question? Maybe a couple paragraphs as to how you’re thinking about answering it. You will be presenting to the class/receiving feedback. It’s still about brainstorming but you’re narrowing things down. Also, be thinking about possible research designs.

11/3. No class, but turn in a final topic statement (1-1.5 pages). What’s your research question? Why is it important? What’s your contribution to the literature?
11/10. Research design review. Here we will review a variety of research designs. Each of you will be assigned a research design that might be relevant to your project, and you will be expected to present a review of some literature describing that design to the class. For what questions is it appropriate; what are some of its advantages/disadvantages; how has it been used? How can it help you?

11/17. Brief meeting about progress.

11/24. Thanksgiving!

12/1. 10 page draft of research design and in class presentation.


12/15. Final paper due. (An introduction; literature review; your research design).
Steps in Research Process (rough guide)

1. Project Conceptualization
   a. Project justification: Why is this an important topic?
   b. What’s your contribution to the literature already out there?
   c. The Research Question: often and not always a "why" question asking about explaining variation in your dependent variable or phenomenon.
   d. Concept Definition: Define the major concept of your project (usually this means defining your dependent variable). Be clear about your definition. Think about the potential extent of scholarly agreement on your definition, think about possible alternative definitions and explain why yours is best.
   e. Theory/hypotheses/mechanisms/process: for instance, what independent variables explain variation in your dependent variable? Be clear about the direction and type of relationship, e.g. Positive/negative, linear/curvilinear, and give three reasons why each independent variable should be related to your dependent variable.
   f. Rival theories/hypotheses: This will be more important later, but after you have done a great job with previous steps, give some thought as to alternative explanations and the role of “control” variables in your model.
   g. Keep things simple: Really understand the basics before adding in complications, conditions, other variables, etc.
   h. Remember this is a process and your thinking will evolve.
   i. Consider the broad approach(es) used in your analysis (rational choice, behavioral etc.).
   j. Appreciate the importance of the outside context.

2. Research Design
   a. What type of research design is best suited for answering your research question? (Surveys, aggregate data, observation, experiments, content analysis, etc.)? Think about the advantages/disadvantages of alternative approaches? A multi-method approach?
   b. Operationalization/measurement of major concepts: Consider reliability, validity and level of measurement. Develop appropriate measures of concepts and justify why they are good measures.
   c. Issues of sampling and picking cases
   d. Other concerns

3. Collecting Data

4. Data analysis
   a. Univariate statistics, particularly on the dependent variable and discussion of what is learned from them. Raw data, frequencies, central tendency, dispersion, etc.
   b. Bivariate statistics which test your hypotheses.
   c. Multivariate statistics which test rival hypotheses.

5. Conclusions/implications

6. Is the theory/hypothesis supported or not? Explain.

7. What has been learned, and what are the political/social/policy implications?
8. What has been learned about the methods you used? Next steps? What should future research do?