

Guidelines for Writing a Research Exposé

Before you begin with the actual writing of your final thesis, the preparation of a research exposé serves to define the intended research project as precisely as possible and to render it practically feasible. Ideally, the exposé functions as a detailed roadmap for your thesis.

The research exposé should necessarily address the following aspects:

1. Research Topic, Research Problem, and Relevance of the Study

In the first section of the exposé, you should outline the broader topic of your thesis and its relevance. You should explain and justify the specific research problem you want to focus on in your study, within the broader topic you chose. The research problem may originate in academic controversies and/or real-world (political) issues.

Often, the research problem can be effectively framed as a puzzle that captures your curiosity (as well as that of your readers) and serves as a driving motivation for your research. Examples of such puzzles include empirical observations that appear inexplicable or require interpretation based on existing theoretical literature, or theoretical assumptions that, in light of current political developments, seem inadequate and therefore in need of revision.

2. Research Question

The research question of your thesis is derived from the research topic and problem. It should be formulated as concretely and precisely as possible. To ensure feasibility, it is important to focus on a single question rather than a set of interlinked questions. The research question is crucial, as it serves as a guiding principle throughout the writing process: the final thesis should comprehensively address everything necessary to answer the research question—and exclude anything that does not contribute to this objective.

There are different types of research questions concerning political phenomena (events, issues, ideas, norms, practices, institutions, etc.):

"Why?" Questions: These aim at causal explanations of a political phenomenon. They are typically addressed using positivist approaches, employing methods that seek to empirically test causal hypotheses.

"How (possible)?" Questions: These focus on understanding meanings and contextual relationships. Such questions are usually explored through qualitative-interpretative methods, including ethnographic, linguistic, and discourse-analytical approaches.

"How (ought)?" Questions: Another form of "how" questions seeks to evaluate or critically assess a political phenomenon. Answering these questions requires normative-theoretical or critical-theoretical frameworks.

At this stage, it is also useful to exclude types of questions that are generally unsuitable for final theses:

"What?" Questions: While defining key concepts is often an integral part of a thesis, purely descriptive "what" questions are typically insufficient. An exception is theoretical "what" questions aimed at constitutive theory-building.

"What should we do about this political problem?" Questions: Highly policy-oriented questions are usually unsuitable, as they shift the focus away from demonstrating independent academic research skills.

Some examples illustrate the different types of suitable research questions:

- **"Why" Questions:**
 - o *Why did the United States decide to respond to the deployment of Soviet medium-range missiles in Cuba with a naval blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis? (Allison 1969)*
 - o *Why do democracies not go to war against each other? (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999)*
 - o *Why do international organizations cease to exist? (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020)*
- **"How (possible)?" Questions:**
 - o *How was the national interest of the United States constructed in such a way that a naval blockade became a possible and seemingly appropriate response to the deployment of Soviet missiles during the Cuban Missile Crisis? (Weldes 1996)*
 - o *How did the COVID-19 Pandemic affect trust in international organizations?*
 - o *How have digitalization and virtual encounters changed the conduct of diplomacy (Bjola & Manor 2022)*
- **"How (ought)?" Questions:**
 - o *How has Democratic Peace Theory provided political decision-makers with new courses of action, and what political and moral responsibility does this imply for theorists of Democratic Peace? (Ish-Shalom 2006)*

3. State of Research

Which academic studies have already addressed your topic? Which research has investigated similar or identical research questions? In this section of the exposé, you should discuss the existing scholarly contributions and, where possible, provide an initial systematisation of the state of research.

You should also clarify how your own research relates to existing work: Do you build on the existing literature and further develop its findings, for instance, by applying established theories to new empirical cases? Do you integrate different debates and concepts to answer your research question? Could your study contribute to uncovering new insights or expanding existing theories? Are you critically examining a fundamental assumption upon which a specific theory or research field is based? Did you identify a research gap in existing research?

Unlike a doctoral dissertation, a final thesis at the undergraduate or postgraduate level is not expected to make an original contribution to research. Instead, you should demonstrate your ability to engage critically and systematically with existing academic debates and knowledge. And remember: whatever you write down in your own words on the basis of the theories you consulted and the empirical data you looked at – it will always be a unique, original piece of work.

Moreover, a well-reasoned reflection on the limitations of your study in relation to the state of research—What do I aim to demonstrate, and what am I unable to show?—is highly valued.

4. Planned Approach

Depending on the research problem you are addressing and the way your research question is formulated, you will undertake different analytical steps in your thesis. In your exposé, you should outline these steps, which may include the following aspects:

- **Theory:** Which theory or theories will you utilise in your study, and how will you do so? Will you operationalise and apply theoretical frameworks to empirical data, or will you use them to guide your empirical analysis? Will you critique one or more theories, highlight their limitations, or attempt to extend them? At this point, you should justify your choice of theoretical framework(s), identify their key arguments, assumptions, and concepts, and explain their significance and function in your research project.
- **Empirical Analysis:** If your thesis is not purely theoretical, what is your empirical object of study? Which case or cases will you examine, and how have you selected them? Justify your case selection and discuss its relevance to your research question.
- **Methods:** Which methodological approaches will you use to collect or generate empirical data, and how will you analyse them? Here, you should engage with the methodological literature and explain why your chosen methods are suitable for your study. Are there previous research studies that have employed similar methods, which could serve as a reference?
- **Data/Sources:** What materials—data, sources, and other resources—will you analyse in your study? Discuss the availability of these materials and provide a rationale for your selection. If certain data sources are limited or challenging to access, explain how you plan to address these constraints.

5. Structure and Work Plan

In this section, you should outline a draft structure for your thesis, either descriptively or in tabular form. Additionally, provide an overview of the planned work steps and allocate time for each phase of your research and writing process. A well-thought-out timeline will help you manage your workload effectively.

6. Open Questions

You are encouraged to raise any difficulties and unresolved questions you may have. The research colloquium is not intended as a forum where you must already have all answers and defend your thesis; rather, it is meant to facilitate constructive discussion and feedback on your developing research.

7. Formal Requirements

The research exposé should not exceed six pages (excluding references). As always, correct citation and bibliographic documentation are essential. Attention should also be paid to linguistic clarity, precise expression, correct grammar, and punctuation. The exposé may be written in either German or English.

8. Further Readings

For further readings, we have compiled a [selection of useful academic contributions, textbooks, and online resources on research methodology and academic techniques in International Relations \(IR\)](#). This overview is pluralistic in approach, encompassing contributions from diverse epistemological perspectives as well as various theoretical and methodological traditions within IR research.

We wish you success in developing your research exposé and look forward to discussing it with you!

Best regards,

Anna Holzscheiter and the Team of the Chair of International Politics

Sources

Allison, Graham T. 1969: „Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis“, *American Political Science Review* 63:3, 689-718.

Bjola, Corneliu; Manor, Ilan. 2022. “The rise of hybrid diplomacy: from digital adaptation to digital adoption”, *International Affairs*, 98:2, 471–491, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia005>.

Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce; Morrow, James D.; Siverson, Randolph M.; Smith, Alastair 1999: „An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace“, *American Political Science Review* 93:4, 791-807.

Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, M. 2021: “What kills international organisations? When and why international organisations terminate”, *European Journal of International Relations* 27:1, 281-310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120932976>.

Ish-Shalom, Piki 2006: „Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism: The Democratic-Peace Thesis and the Politics of Democratization“, *European Journal of International Relations* 12:4, 565-598.

Weldes, Jutta 1996: „Constructing National Interests“, *European Journal of International Relations* 2:3, 275-318.