

Developing the Research Paper: Topic Selection, Title, Research Question, Thesis, Abstract, and References

5/18/2006

1



- Select a Topic
 - What Subfield Interests You?
 - e.g., IR, Comparative, American, etc.?
 - What General Topic Interests You?
 - e.g., Law & Courts, Congress, African Politics, U.S. Foreign Policy, etc.?
 - What Specific Topic Interests You?
 - e.g., Immigration Reform, Campaign Finance Reform, Education Reform, Darfur Conflict, U.S. Anti-Terrorism Policies, U.S. Relations with North Korea, etc.

5/18/2006

2



- Select a Topic, Continued
 - Narrow it Down
 - Start Literature Review BEFORE Refining Topic
 - Locate Relevant Textbook, Chapters, or Articles
 - Skim Literature in the Field
 - Identify Prominent Debate Related to Your Topic
 - e.g., White Attitudes Toward Racial Issues: Symbolic Racism or Principled Politics?
 - E.g., The 'Bush Doctrine' (Preemptive Strikes Against Terrorist States)
 - *Choose a Side and Argue it*

5/18/2006

3



- Select a Topic, Continued
 - Use Library Search to Narrow Down Topic
 - Make List of Relevant Keywords
 - Do Keyword Searches in ASP, Galileo, JSTOR, LexisNexis Academic, etc.
 - e.g., "Interest Groups and Advocacy," "Interest Groups and Lobbying" "Interest Groups and Legislation"

5/18/2006

4



- Select a Topic, Cont.
 - Scan Article Titles
 - Skim Abstracts of the Most Relevant Articles
 - Note Article's Subject Terms – Use Them
 - e.g., “Political Science Literature,”
“Associations, Institutions, etc.,” Membership,”
“Pressure Groups”
 - Start Broadly, Then Narrow Down
 - Combine Keywords



- Select a Topic, Continued
 - Pay Attention to Nature of Sources
 - If Possible, Focus on Political
Science and Scholarly
 - Topics and Nonscholarly Sources



- Sources, Cont., Continued
 - Using Nonscholarly Sources
 - Discern Quality of Sources
 - e.g., *Economist*, *Atlantic*
 - e.g., Council on Foreign Relations
 - Discern Biases of Sources
 - e.g., *Nation*, *National Review*
 - e.g., www.brookings.org, www.aei.org



- Select a Topic, Cont.
 - Download (Locate) Full Text of Relevant Articles
 - Obtain Relevant Books
 - Skim Now, Read Again Later
 - Articles: Special Attention to Introduction,
Literature Review, and Discussion
 - Take Notes
 - Track Down Cited Sources
 - Remember This Process Can Take a While



- Develop a Working Title
 - What is the Paper About?
 - e.g., “U.S. Relations With North Korea Under President Bush”
 - Neither Too Broad
 - e.g., “The U.S. and North Korea”
 - Nor Too Specific
 - e.g., “U.S. Relations With The People’s Republic of Korea are on the Wrong Track”



- Develop a Research Question
 - Ask “Why?” or “How?” Questions of Topic
 - e.g., Why do people join interest groups?
 - e.g., What explains white Americans’ attitudes toward racial issues?
 - e.g., Is the Bush Doctrine a good strategy for combating terrorism?



- Develop a Research Question, Cont.
 - Neither Too Broad
 - e.g., What is the Role of Interest Groups in Modern Democracies?
 - Too Much Literature to Cover Well
 - Nor Too Narrow
 - Why do People Join Greenpeace?
 - Not Enough Literature for a Research Paper



- Develop a Thesis Statement
 - The Main Argument of Your Paper
 - Answer Your Research Question
 - e.g., “In this paper, I argue that the Bush Doctrine is an (in)effective and (in)appropriate strategy for combating international terrorism”



- Develop a Thesis Statement, Cont.
 - Take a Stand!
 - e.g., “The literature on interest groups suggests that people join groups because”
 - e.g., “Research to date weighs in favor of the the conclusion that white Americans’ attitudes toward racial issues derive from symbolic racism more than principles.”
 - Your Research Paper is an Extended *Argument* for Your Thesis Statement



- Develop an Abstract
 - Short Description or Summary of (Proposed) Research Paper
 - Problem
 - Purpose or Motivation of Research
 - Why Should We Care?
 - e.g., Debate Over Illegal Immigration
 - Approach or Method
 - e.g., Review Research on Both Sides
 - Thesis
 - e.g., “I argue ...”
 - Implications or Significance
 - Broader Significance
 - e.g., For American Values



- Implications/Significance
 - Practical Significance vs. Academic Significance
 - Practical: Help Solve Real-World Problem
 - Academic: Contribution to Knowledge
 - Don’t Grope for Practical Significance



- Writing Assignment
 - (Read Booth et al. ch. 1-4)
 - Title
 - Topic
 - Question
 - Abstract
 - Thesis