Preface

As the fifth edition goes to press, the research process is under attack on many fronts. The powerful are taking down data if they don't conform to expectations or to political narratives or needs. They have also slashed funding for research and undermined the idea that academics engage in a search for knowledge without bias. Since the last edition appeared, additional and more sophisticated sources of and tools for disseminating disinformation and misinformation have proliferated, and people's ability to detect them have fallen. In addition, students' capacity and desire to read and write have deteriorated as a result of multiple factors, including the educational losses incurred during the pandemic, their reliance on screens, the falloff in reading books, and the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) that allows them—with a few well-phrased questions—to produce in minutes or even seconds work that used to take hours if not weeks and months. Today seems to be a very bleak time for research.

This dismal reality means that learning about and engaging in the research process is more important than ever. While students benefit personally and professionally from writing a research paper (benefits spelled out in detail in the chapters that follow), their involvement helps promote their understanding of and respect for the endeavor. Specifically, conducting research and writing up the results demonstrates the utility and limitations of expert knowledge, the challenges and excitement involved in asserting new claims about the world, the creativity required to design a study, the centrality of thoroughly understanding the concepts involved, the importance of carefully and transparently collecting or generating data, and the need to honestly weigh the evidence against the claims. Engaging in the process underlines that the knowledge upon which this society operates is not simply what someone asserts or wishes. It has stood up to review and reconsideration, and when those ideas or processes fail to account for reality or ethical standards, then they should be changed.

While students are not finding the "Truth" in their research experience, they are developing respect for the process of doing one's best to enhance knowledge and promote truthful accounts. This process, as well as the role of honesty and undoctored data, are besieged today. Perhaps what is more disconcerting than the bald-faced falsehoods, destruction of truthful information, convenient creation of politically beneficial data, and undermining of long-regarded appropriate approaches to the research process is the acquiescence to these onslaughts by many, many people who should know better. It's my hope that this engagement in the research process will help students identify the disinformation and misinformation, and help them demand better. Our system depends on us all reacting to trustworthy data and having productive conversations about the

social consequences of various developments. As expertise, information, honesty, and the research process are undermined, so too is democracy. Ask the people in repressive states how important the truth is for the rule of law, economic progress, justice for those without power, and managing crises.

As we approach the 2030s and move beyond them, educators also experience serious challenges to learning and skill development. Students read, write, and engage with other human beings so much less than they used to. One source of this danger is AI and our attitudes toward taking the easy route. Our brains and skills are like muscles; if we don't train them and use them, then they will atrophy. Any athlete, artist, or musician can attest that time away from their activity means perhaps a welcome rest but also the deterioration of what they could once do. Getting it back takes time. And what happens if they had never trained? How to run that excellent race, create that beautiful sculpture, or play that hard piece? It is impossible without those hours of effort that prepare us to excel.

AI gives too many the illusion that they can do anything easily and can be a high-flyer without having to work. Certainly, AI offers many new opportunities—we'll be discussing them in the book—but alone it will not prepare people to engage with each other, achieve their best, and serve their societies. Hard work, steadfast determination, and a commitment to human dignity are still required.

Thus, at this juncture, learning to write a research paper—with all the many skills that it involves—is more important than ever. It is not only a personally advantageous undertaking for students, but it serves society. The goal of this book is to show why and how engaging in research and writing up the results will be beneficial for individuals as well as to make the process easier to undertake and more rewarding, if not enjoyable. The social goals are there too, as side benefits, that will be obvious to most faculty using this book. Some students will see them, and for others, they are additional offshoots that will, with luck, inform their engagement with others in the private and public spheres.

My hopes for the users of this book are both consistent with my belief in the potential of our youth to help society move forward positively and reflected in this book's dedication to my two children. Jack and Maria are now young adults who are moving on in their chosen professions. Each of them makes me proud on a daily basis about who they are as human beings and what they are accomplishing as professionals. Both live their lives by embracing the characteristics of good and successful researchers: they are committed to hard work, honesty, creativity, service to the public good, and to subjecting their deeply held beliefs to the evidence they carefully collect. They pivot and change as they seek to smartly, kindly, accurately, and beautifully (Maria is an artist, after all) follow through on their projects. In their efforts and by their examples they are making the world a better place.

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Chapter 1

Do You *Really* Have To Write a Research Paper Now That There's Artificial Intelligence (AI)?

Learning Objectives

- **1.1** Define what a research paper is according to this book
- **1.2** Explain why writing a research paper is still a relevant and uniquely valuable learning experience even though AI is ubiquitous
- **1.3** Explain how to use AI with integrity to improve your skills, provided you have your instructor's permission
- **1.4** List the conceptual parts of the research paper in the order they will appear and with a basic understanding of what each section accomplishes

Let's be honest. Seeing a research paper as a final project on a syllabus has at times evoked some unfortunate reactions. A first is horror. Many students dread the assignment because they don't know how to write a research paper or understand what one is. Some students with this viewpoint may drop a course to avoid the requirement. Others will be panicked about it all semester, ignore it until the last moment (as if it might somehow go away), and then turn "something" in. Increasingly, this ostrich approach is impossible because many professors break the assignment down. If students perceive those worksheets, bibliographies, outlines, or preliminary drafts as "busy" work, however, they will falter, despite their instructor's best efforts.

When the assignment is open-ended, another response is, "No problem, I'll just write a **report** on a topic I'm interested in." That path is one many have taken over the years, and it often disappoints professors who wish these papers were more analytic and organized in a "classic" article way. As of late 2022, a fourth answer emerged in which students, typically without permission, have thought, "No problem, I will have an AI tool do most of the work for me." With advancements in **large-language models**

(**LLM**s), this dishonest reaction is faster, less expensive, and far more difficult to detect than older deceitful methods of buying or somehow procuring an existing paper, paying a person to write one, or "writing" by copying and pasting material available on the internet into one document and connecting the passages with some original language.

Obviously, none of these responses is a good one. In addition to risking one's future through deception, each detracts from a student's education and personal and professional development. That last claim might startle you, but studies have shown that conducting a research project is incredibly valuable for building skills as a reader, researcher, problem-solver, analyst, and writer—all of which are competencies for most jobs many political science majors seek. The process even has personal benefits of enhancing efficacy, confidence, connection, and feelings of accomplishment. That's why education specialists call writing a research paper a "**high-impact educational practice**" (**HIP**), which transforms students socially, intellectually, and professionally.[1]

The goal of this book is to give you that high-quality experience. We also face head-on the 500-pound gorilla in every contemporary classroom: generative artificial intelligence *appears* to make writing a research paper and learning any of the skills that you need to complete that task unnecessary. Certainly, **artificial intelligence (AI)** is here to stay. Students use it, many faculty and administrators rely on it, and employers are increasingly looking to hire people who efficiently and effectively employ it. Therefore, Luddites can't wish the bots away. However, technophiles do themselves and others a disservice if they believe that AI means that people don't need the variety of skills that are central to research paper writing. AI is a tool that can make us more efficient, but its use should have limits.

If these tools replace our ability to read, think, uncover information, plan, write, and analyze, then we as individuals as well as all of humanity will be in deep trouble. Movies like *Her, Wall-E*, or *AfrAId* are instructive as glimpses of what might be lost and risked. In addition, environmentalists tell us that the energy requirements for AI contribute to the creation of greenhouse gases in ways that risk the long-term health of the planet.[2] Beyond the concerns that sci-fi horror and climate change raise, researchers are finding that our growing reliance on screens—from increasingly young ages—is having negative effects on overall reading comprehension, writing abilities, and attention spans.[3] AI will only worsen those deficits, with corresponding social consequences, if people do less of their own reading, thinking, writing, and creating. Because AI technology is everywhere—and it can be used productively—we have to find ways to embrace the new tools to enhance and actually democratize learning, boost skill development, and improve our lives, rather than using it to outsource jobs to bots and make societies less just.[4]

Other motives for a skeptical embrace of AI relate to its impacts on our own abilities to function. What happens when the internet goes down, our phone is dead, or we have no reception? Can we navigate with maps or communicate with others without outside help? Can we retain what we read two days or even 30 minutes before to complete a

process?[5] If AI writes your resume and cover letter, what happens when you actually land the interview and have to go in and present yourself? You can't speak the questions you're asked into your phone or use AI during the give-and-take of a presentation. Moreover, think of the risks to and the poverty of future civilizations if human creativity is lost as we each do less and less and allow our machines (which learn from what has already been done) to think, read, write, plan, and create for us.

Therefore, this book proceeds with caution regarding AI. Absolutely, AI is out there, and it is a tool that you can use to write a better paper. But the first priority is to develop your skills and not to use a bot to do the "big" researching, thinking, and writing for you. We'll even be careful about having AI do tasks typically defined as tedious, like basic editing. This "yellow light" approach[6] means that you use AI as tutor or coach, *not* as a **performance-enhancing drug** (**PED**). In this "helper," not steroid, mode, any time you use AI you analyze how it improved your work, analyzing your strengths and weaknesses to figure out how to be a better reader, thinker, writer, analyst, and communicator. Developing *your* skills and learning are the purpose of this endeavor, not getting the work done more quickly or "better."

Finally, regarding AI use, your instructor ultimately sets the parameters. Your professor decides if, when, and under what conditions you can use these tools. If your instructor has said or written nothing on the syllabus or assignment, don't assume you know the policy. If the policy isn't clear, *ask!* Realize some faculty might think you know what they expect because of other institutional, departmental, or course policies They might also assume you know how they expect you to document where you use AI or how they want you to reflect on what you have gained and potentially lost as a learner, researcher, and writer from employing AI.To be sure, look for the policy or ask for one if your instructor's view on AI is not apparent.[7]

What is a Research Paper? A Definition and a Few Helpful Metaphors

While different faculty define "research paper" in multiple ways, for our purposes, a research paper is a piece of written work that satisfies at least five essential characteristics:

1. A non-trivial question—one for which the answer isn't obvious or a broad-based consensus doesn't exist[8]—motivates the work.
2. The answer to that question requires multiple, distinct parts to fully develop.
3. The process of proceeding systematically and with integrity is more important than reaching a certain conclusion.
4. Many "good" sources and data are essential for success, and writers give their sources proper credit throughout the work via citations (in-text or as

footnotes). The paper includes a final source list that conforms to a recognized format.

5. The ideas presented, method of proceeding, data gathered, and analysis performed are unique to the author. Others may have asked this question or a similar one, but some combination of the concepts, cases, data, and method are different in this paper.

This definition is different from what you likely expected. Most students and some faculty conceive of the research paper as a long, descriptive report of some event, phenomenon, policy, process, or even person that requires library and/or outside research. As we are defining it, the research paper asks you to do more, to consider multiple answers to your question, land on one as "best" or "most compelling" after careful analysis, develop a plan for research, implement that plan, and determine what you learned. Throughout this process you are writing drafts and rethinking. Ultimately, the goal is not to be right, but to be a systematic and honest researcher who arrives at an answer to the research question based on careful theoretical and empirical analysis.

This type of research paper is also different from two other assignments you might have had, what could be called **think pieces** and **conceptual essays**. Both are usually shorter than a research paper, and your professors have likely used different names for them. In a think piece, the author asserts a position that is grounded in concepts or theories, but the writer doesn't take the time to explore and carefully analyze multiple competing arguments. Instead, that student proceeds by asserting a thesis and demonstrating why it is "right." A think piece also avoids self-consciously discussing its methods or systematically analyzing **data**. It presents its findings as sensible, based on the logic and facts presented and doesn't justify or explain its approach. In the second type, a conceptual paper, students explore, analyze, and/or critique a particular concept or theory, often with the expressed instruction to compare its suitability to other different theoretical constructs in order to explain, evaluate, or synthesize them. This type of essay is heavy on the conceptual and logical sides and light on data collection. To find the various arguments, a writer might do a good bit of research, searching databases for scholarly articles and libraries for monographs, but the analysis of or connections to the "real world" are usually more limited. Authors make them based on available information and might not be required to do much outside data collection and systematic empirical analysis. Both of these types of assignments are appropriate for a variety of courses and stages of the curriculum They give students practice in research, analysis, synthesis, and writing, but they are different from and less comprehensive than a research paper as defined here *even if they require research*.

Compared to these other assignments, this type of research paper asks for more independent research, thinking, reading, analysis, and writing. Think of these requirements as a challenge you are looking forward to meeting. Realize that this book and your professor give you the tools you need to succeed if you follow the advice and work

steadily through the process. To get into the proper mindset, think of the research paper as your academic marathon. Many people who aren't great runners decide to train for and then actually finish a marathon. To do so, determined novices find and follow a recognized training regimen;[9] they cannot get up on the morning of a race, go to the starting line, and run for more than twenty-six miles. While runners stretch, train, get the right nutrition and rest, and prepare mentally sometimes for months before the big race, research paper writing asks you to be similarly engaged in a process of preparation and planning. You will write the paper in parts as recommended and polish the paper over time, just like the disciplined but new marathoner trains, goes to the starting line on race day, perseveres through the tough moments, and crosses the finish line.

Because the marathon language can be alienating to some readers, let's offer another metaphor, that of meal preparation. Creating good food—at different levels of sophistication and complexity—also requires time, energy, skill, and perseverance. Anyone can succeed in serving a multi-course feast with proper guidance, appropriate skills, good planning, and careful follow-through.

Regardless of which image works for you, they both involve preparation, planning, performance, and presentation. Each of them, too, emphasizes that completing the task requires sustaining one's attention through drudgery, frustrations, and bursts of adrenaline. While not all of us are likely to run a marathon or create a gourmet meal, everyone who reads this book will write a research paper. By doing the work as spelled out, you will not only finish your paper but turn in something of which *you feel proud*. This book and your instructor will show you the way. Most chapters contain guides, as well as exercises for practicing the skills, "recipes" that clearly state exactly what you need to accomplish and how. A "mile counter" also gives you a sense of the progress you are making through this "marathon course."

One last distinction of a major project like a research paper that surprises students: integral to this process is reworking and rethinking as you proceed. Don't expect to "be right" at first, and get used to the idea that you'll be revising a lot. That you need to revise or change is not a "bad" sign. You are creating something original, so often at the beginning you are in a bit of a fog about your direction and path. Your instructor or another reader might give you some feedback, asking questions and pointing out issues. Time and your own thinking help you develop the project, but so too does constructive criticism. Remember that feedback is about your work product at that moment, *not* about you as a mind or writer or about your ability to ultimately do a great job. Virtually all published authors have received lists of ways to improve their work; it's normal to be criticized. So, adopt a can-do attitude and recognize that those comments are designed to improve your final paper. In fact, feedback is a sign of respect and belief in what your project can be; criticisms are not personal, but are designed to help you and your research reach their full potential. Thinking of our metaphors, feedback is the voice of the coach or the people at your meal. The coach tells the runner how to improve a stride, and cooks hear from their guests that some additional spices or ingredients

might make a dish better. In any endeavor, we do better with constructive criticism from knowledgeable (and kind) others.

Writing a Research Paper Now That AI is Ubiquitous

This discussion of writing papers and doing research might strike some of you as strange now that a variety of AI tools that can research, write, and refine texts are everywhere.[10] You may have watched classmates dishonestly use AI to complete their assignments in milliseconds, while you slaved away for hours to write papers and complete problem sets—and then received the same or even lower grades than the cheaters. Moreover, as AI has improved, detecting who is improperly using technology to do work is harder than ever and likely to become even more difficult.

One solution to the challenge of fairness and greater difficulty in detection is to eliminate out-of-class assignments. That answer, particularly when it means getting rid of research papers, negates the enormous value of the process. Experts call it a high-impact educational practice because it increases students' intellectual and social capital, better preparing them to succeed in college and life.[11] Some of you might doubt that engaging in a research project is so valuable. Not having had a "real" research experience, you might expect it to be drudgery. While completing the research paper is a good deal of work, it builds skills and creativity in ways that many traditional writing assignments don't. Therefore, giving up the experience would be detrimental to you intellectually, personally, and professionally.

The reality is, however, you likely know people who have used LLMs in unauthorized manners to transform the time-consuming process of writing an essay into a task that can be accomplished in seconds, if not minutes if a person bothers with continued refinement. The truth is, relying on AI alone will subvert the thinking and intellectual growth that writing papers and engaging in research projects are meant to accomplish. However, there are ways to use the tools to enhance your ability to research, write, and analyze. To abuse AI is to use it as a steroid with analogous dishonesty and risks to the user. Relying on the bots means that you ask AI to do the hard work. Using an LLM as a coach, however, gives you the opportunity to employ the tool for certain tasks, then analyze its product to become a more capable researcher and writer. Striking a balance between using the tools and building intellectual capacity is going to take concentration and willpower, but given what's at stake—your future and your integrity—you must do it.

Using AI as a Coach, Not a Drug

Still, how should we proceed with research paper writing now that artificial intelligence allows some to pass off work that a bot did as their own? The challenge is to convince you and your classmates that AI should be your coach and not a drug. Any college assessment is an exercise in training you as a professional, and the manner with which you approach it builds knowledge, skills, character, and reputation, all of which you benefit from today and tomorrow. While steroids might provide an ambitious athlete short- and long-term performance gains, they don't increase one's agility and skill, and their use risks serious negative impacts on physiological and psychological health, ability to participate, and reputation. As with taking steroids, improper use of AI wrecks your long-term success and well-being and can ruin relationships. If you question these contentions, just think about what happened to the lives of some great athletes like Lance Armstrong (cycling), Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens (baseball), gold medal–winning East German women swimmers of the 1980s, and Kamila Valieva (figure skating).[12] Would they have been superstars without the PEDs, and how are they remembered now? Was the shame of being outed as cheaters, the destruction of relationships, and (for some) the health damage worth it? The rewards of winning and fame are intoxicating and tempting, but there's a lot of life left after the competition ends. Please don't forget that lesson. Your future doesn't rest on the quick and easy way through your assignments, but on a foundation of knowledge, skills, and a reputation for integrity—acquired through your day-to-day efforts learning content and performing activities honestly.

These words don't necessarily mean that you can never use AI; the point is using it with integrity if your instructor allows. Of course, some professors will continue to ban the tools, and you must abide by their rules. For other faculty, you might have to acknowledge that you have used AI and even reflect about its use as specified.[13] Under these conditions, you are using AI as your *personal* **coach**, not a drug. That coach enhances your performance by giving you feedback, helping you identify and perform the various tasks you need to master to succeed, and pushing you to do better. The use is approved, above board, and fair to everyone. In that way you maintain your integrity because you are using the tool when your classmates are, with the knowledge of your professor, and with clear attribution. Steroid users, like those who cheat with AI, hide their activities in order to take advantage of honest competitors. They also violate fundamental principles of community and sportspersonship.

The cheaters may win a title or break a record, but when the truth comes out, they are usually shunned. Like those athletes named above, many have their awards stripped, their records appear with asterisks, or they are forever linked to dishonesty. In their pursuit of glory, they let down their biggest fans, their families, and perhaps worst of all themselves because they, in effect, sold their bodies and souls (or at least their integrity). Even when honestly won, adulation usually fades, so why damage yourself

with the deception? And that damage is not simply reputational. In the case of steroid use, consequences have been personally devastating, dangerous, and even deadly.[14]

In an academic setting, using AI in unauthorized ways to get a great grade and save yourself time is cheating the community in the short run and yourself in the long. First, cheaters hurt classmates and show them disrespect by taking advantage of their honesty. If reputable students know you are cheating, you fall in their regard. So brag about finishing an assignment in 3 minutes to classmates and risk the consequences. You never know whom your peers will tell and when they may be in a position to decide whether to include you in a club, vote for you for a leadership position, or even influence whether an employer hires you. Second, you abuse your instructor's trust. While you might feel smug about "outsmarting" your instructor, you live with knowing that you can never be sure if you could have succeeded on your own. Moreover, if your instructors ever find out that you are someone who is dishonest—and people do talk—winning back their regard is extremely difficult, if not impossible. If obligations and connections to the community don't affect you, then perhaps self-interest might. Third, just like in sports, training (physical and mental) prepares a person for performance, whether it's a game, job interview, or the daily grind at work. And just like with athletes, training gives you the analogous strength, muscle memory, and attitudes that serve you well throughout life. If you are overly reliant on AI, you're not developing those useful skills and practices.[15]

So, in practical terms, what's the difference between relying on AI tools as a steroid or a coach? When using improperly, as with a PED, you are employing the tool without the permission of your instructor, and you are hiding it from most others because you know that its use is cheating, against the norm, and unfair. Realize that what is allowed will vary by instructor and by assignment. On the extremes, you have the faculty who say that any use of AI is acceptable and others who reject it outright. For those who greenlight all AI, you are *never* using the tool improperly, and for the "red light" group, you are *always* using it illicitly. For those in the middle (which is the approach of this book), instructors will delimit where, when, and how you can employ AI. They typically also want you to attribute activities and text passages that AI produced and might have you reflect on the extent of the tool's benefits and liabilities. Arguably, more than the green lighters, the yellow light folks are concerned that without these limits on use and requirements for reflection, students are hurting themselves academically and professionally. They won't learn as much, and creativity and skill development will be lost. Green lighters are more confident that AI will allow for these positives. Perhaps the issue is that the cautious faculty fear the human temptation to do as little as possible for the most "advantage." How many times have humans integrated some great new technology to find that its benefits had many unintended consequences? Those fears motivate this book's caution.[16] Remember: your goal throughout your college journey is to develop skills, knowledge, and personal networks or experiences that set you on a path for success in life.[17]

Finally, one last reason to take the AI-is-good-only-when faculty-say-so and coaching (yellow-light) approach as opposed to banning it altogether is that employers and most graduate programs are going to assume that new members of their communities utilize these tools. Thus, preparing you to employ AI responsibly and with integrity is arguably incumbent upon university instructors. Still, you need to use AI not as a replacement for hard work and skill building but to become more adept at both and thereby be more capable researchers, thinkers and writers.

What Research Paper Writing Entails

From the earlier discussion about what a research paper is, you already have a sense that writing one is a multiphase endeavor. This book breaks down the process into manageable steps over a period of time. When you start, you're typically not sure what the project will actually look like and what you will find. Even experienced researchers produce papers that are different from what they initially expected.

Each of the following chapters helps you make progress on a portion of the research paper writing process, as Table 1.1 shows. The first part is the preparation, a variety of activities and knowledge that serve as a foundation for conducting the **empirical** (i.e., real-world) research. This preliminary work is analogous to the runner following a sleep and running regimen, eating right, stretching, and working out with weights or the cook's efforts to choose the recipes and buy the ingredients for the big feast. You will work on four preparatory activities:

1. Developing a research question.
2. Finding scholarly sources that answer your question and classifying those answers into groups that have commonalities.
3. Writing an essay that evaluates the quality of those groups of answers and draws a conclusion about which response is "best" or "most interesting" for your purposes.
4. Creating an additional short section that spells out exactly what this concluding best or most interesting hunch is.

Table 1.1 ▪ Overview: Mapping the Paper and Its Big Parts onto the Book Chapters

Conceptual Parts (approximate "mileage")	Specific Tasks	Chapter Number/ Name of Process
Prepare (Miles 1–12)	Develop a "good" question	Chapter 2 Research Question (RQ)
	Find and classify scholarly sources into distinct groups (schools) that share a common answer to the Research Question (RQ)	Chapter 3 Annotated Bibliography (AB)
	Write an essay, based on the RQ that answers: How have other scholars responded to my question? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their answers?	Chapter 4 Literature Review (LR)
	Based on your conclusion in your LR, develop a hunch about what the "best" or "most interesting" response is and think very carefully about the concepts involved and how they affect each other.	Chapter 5 Thesis and/or Model & Hypothesis (TMH)
Plan (Miles 12–16, although consideration of these planning issues often starts earlier)	Determine how you will conduct your study, which sources you will use, and why this is a good plan for evaluating this answer given your interests, resources, and constraints.	Chapter 7 Research Design (RD)
Perform (Miles 16–22, empirical knowledge gleaned throughout contributes to this task)	Analyze information systematically, according to your plan, to assess whether or to what extent your hunch is consistent with the data.	Chapter 8 Analysis and Assessment (A&A)

Conceptual Parts (approximate "mileage")	Specific Tasks	Chapter Number/ Name of Process
Present (Mile 22 to the end for writing the conclusion, introduction, and title, but you've been constructing and adding to your source list and revising and editing since you started)	Develop an appropriate conclusion, introduction, title, and perhaps an abstract and presentation.	Chapter 9 Conclusion, Introduction, & Title (CIT)
	Revise and edit your paper.	Chapter 6 Revising & Editing
	Create a bibliography.	Covered in Chapter 3, though the final bibliography is different from an AB.

The second part of the process involves making a plan for answering your question. Following the running metaphor, these tasks are analogous to how you will approach the various sections of the course and handle the weather conditions on race day. Cooks will be concerned with making sure they spell out the times to complete each task and determine the right order of doing them (beyond any single recipe) so that the whole meal will be done on time. For the research paper, the planning involves writing a section that explains five essential elements of your project:

1. Which instances of your phenomenon you want to research[18]
2. What the key concepts mean for your project
3. What data you need
4. How you will collect and analyze them
5. Why your approach is both a good and fair strategy for evaluating your hunch, given your constraints

The next phase of the project is the one that you have likely thought is the *whole paper*. It's the performance phase, equivalent of running the race or actually making the meal. In this section, you write a section that examines the appropriate data for the purposes of evaluating whether your hunch is actually "right." Just like with the race or with the meal, you stray from your plan at your peril, although you may have to adjust as you proceed. You cannot predict every challenge you will face, and you will likely make mistakes along the way. Such problems are analogous to how a runner copes with unusual weather or a cook makes do if there's a missing ingredient or two. This part

of the paper applies your plan to see whether your hunch is upheld by evaluating the relevant information as previously specified.

Finally, the last part is making sure the project is clearly communicated and documented. This element is about presenting your achievement so that your work is easily understandable and impressive to an outsider. After the race, you present your version of how you did to your family and friends by emphasizing how you feel, how proud you are, how you perhaps achieved a personal best, or how you are doing really well considering the race conditions or your age and injury status. For cooking, the analogy is enjoying your food with others. For the project, presentation means:

1. Writing a conclusion, introduction, and title that together make the research something others are interested in learning about and gives them an overview of what you have done, why, and what a follow-on investigation might be.
2. Potentially creating an abstract and presentation if required, but recognizing that accomplishing these tasks is highly beneficial to turning in a great project.
3. Polishing the previous work so that the sections of the paper flow nicely, each section achieves its goals, and sources are appropriately cited and listed according to an accepted format.

You'll actually be citing and polishing all the way through the process, otherwise you'll lose track of sources and have too much to do at the end when you have the least energy for those details. You'll likely get advice from your professor, and improvements will occur to you as you work through the paper. Although you can't see and sometimes can't understand the whole process while in its early stages, what needs to be done and what is "good" will become clearer as you proceed. You'll adjust by engaging in the research, thinking, and writing spiral.

Three elements of Table 1.1 might be striking. First, some important tasks don't have their own sections. A research question is just a sentence, but it is absolutely essential for your paper and takes time to develop. Your bibliography and the annotations—notes you take and thinking you do—are the foundation for the paper's bibliography and essential to the literature review. Second, this preliminary work (RQ, AB, and TMH) takes a good deal of time, but it doesn't necessarily show up in a lot of writing. You are learning, taking notes, establishing an intellectual foundation (both conceptual and empirical) for your project, getting used to your citation style, and starting your source list. Don't think that this part of the paper is "easy" because you aren't doing much writing yet. Without a strong foundation, your paper will suffer, just like your race or meal will be lesser if you don't train for your race or buy quality ingredients. Third, you won't work through the tasks in the precise order in which they will appear in your paper, as Table 1.2 shows.

Table 1.2 ▪ Parts of Your Paper, the Typical Order, and Their Purpose

Section Number	Part of the Paper[a] (in order of appearance)	Brief Purpose (When covered in the book)
-	Title Page	Communicate your research question and answer in an appealing way (**Chapter 9**).
-	Abstract	Optional: Provide a brief overview of the elements of the paper (**Chapter 9**).
1	Introduction	Introduce readers to your question and its importance, and provide an overview of argument, method, and findings (**Chapter 9**).
2	Literature Review	Explain the most important scholarly answers to your research question and assess their strengths and weaknesses (**Chapter 4, and reliant on Chapters 2 and 3**).
3	Thesis and/or Model and Hypothesis	Develop and explain with precision your hunch—that is, your preferred answer to your research question (**Chapter 5**).
4	Research Design	Communicate your plan for conducting your research and justify it as a "good" one given your opportunities, talents, and constraints (**Chapter 7**).
6	Analysis and Assessment[b]	Analyze how well your hunch accounts for the data that you collected according to the methods and sources that you specified (**Chapter 8**).
7	Conclusion	Discuss what you have learned from answering your research question, as well as why and how your endeavor provides insight into the scholarship and the empirics in which you were interested (**Chapter 9**).
8	Bibliography	Give credit to and communicate your sources to others interested in similar research (**Chapter 3**).

[a] Throughout, you'll be revising and editing (Chapter 6), engaging in the research–thinking–writing spiral.
[b] Under some conditions, you include an additional Findings section after your Analysis and Assessment to have a distinct discussion of what your results mean. Consult your faculty member for when that might be appropriate.

While these tables and the discussion should give you a better picture of what is to come, you'll find clearer instructions for each task in the chapters that follow. Because

understanding how all these pieces come together is challenging, each chapter contains within it tools (similar to worksheets) and/or examples of student-written efforts. The chapters also conclude with a summary of what you have learned (Practical Summary) *and* provide a guide to what you need to do for that part of the process (Recipe). Be sure to consult each of these resources; they truly are time savers!

As you proceed through the book, you will find that you are often being asked to make progress before you feel ready. Some of you might be frustrated that the student examples differ from your project. But taken together (all of these tools, plus the chapter summaries) help you figure out what to do. And they combine for a final goal—empowering you for the future. As you move on to increasingly harder courses and to your careers, you are going to see that you have to work through challenges on your own. Here, you are not alone. You have all of these resources, plus your instructor, and your classmates. They can't write your paper for you, but they are there with guidance and support. Still, you supply the creativity and effort.

While Table 1.1 gives you a sense of the timing, your professor will establish deadlines for completing specific sections of the paper (Table 1.2), and those intermediate check-ins help you reach the end successfully. Although these tables make the process *appear* to be linear, it isn't. As previously mentioned, the **research–thinking–writing (RTW) spiral** will have you looping back—adding insights, information, and sophistication as you make progress. A guiding assumption here is that your paper benefits from reconsideration and iteration, and by coiling back through some ideas, you make progress toward completing your goal. Think of a spring: compressing it will make it bounce back like our RTW spiral will propel you forward. To stay in one place to perfect a section can impede finishing the project. So, get started, work steadily, follow the deadlines your professor provides, and do not be ashamed to rethink and change earlier thoughts.[19] Realize you are often going to be writing before you feel ready; that's OK. That's how you move through this project in a timely manner and how you activate the RTW spiral. Instructors know you don't feel ready and aren't expecting "final quality" work at early stages. Just keep moving along, and you will be fine. Virtually every student who has succeeded with this method has felt discomfort at being forced to write seemingly too soon—but then, in the end, has been so happy with what they have accomplished.

With this overview, you now have a sense of what a research paper is, why you should still write one in this age of LLMs, how to use AI with integrity *if your professor will allow it*, and how the research paper is structured. You are even acquainted with each part of the paper; certainly, the tasks will become clearer when you are working through them. These basics are meant to reassure you that each section has a clear purpose and boundaries. If you find yourself getting nervous or foggy about the process and what has to be done along the way, you can (1) turn back to Tables 1.1 and 1.2 and (2) remind yourself:

To write this paper, I have to prepare, plan, perform, and present the research. Each of these tasks is well-defined and laid out in this book. After I finish a task, I can check it off, realizing that I will be building on these accomplishments as I write future sections. Throughout the process, I have the chance to improve upon what I have already done,[20] and each chapter has worksheets and/or examples, summaries of what is important, and recipes for exactly what I need to do. Thus, every part of the paper is manageable, particularly if I work on this project over time. By following the directions and the advice spelled out here, I can turn in an impressive paper of which I will be proud.

Key Terms

artificial intelligence (AI)
conceptual essays
coach
data
empirical
high-impact educational practice (HIP)
large-language models (LLMs)
performance-enhancing drug (PED)
report
research–thinking–writing (RTW) spiral
think pieces

Chapter 2

Getting Started

Finding a Research Question

Learning Objectives

- **2.1** Define the characteristics of a good research topic using a variety of inspirations
- **2.2** Generate questions from one of those topics
- **2.3** Revise possible questions and arrive at one "good" query

Starting a research project is a formidable task because uncovering a reason to write can be very challenging. At the extremes, some students find too many topics compelling, while others can't dig up anything appealing enough. Most, however, just don't know what is an appropriate one. This chapter introduces you to a process that makes generating a **research topic** and then question easier. To design a good project in political science, you need to investigate a phenomenon that is interesting, important, and controversial—not only to you, but also to researchers, policymakers, and even citizens. Realize that simply researching something you don't know about and reporting it back in a paper is *not* satisfactory. Your project has to engage and inform multiple communities, not just you.

Second, your topic needs to become a question that you can investigate. Perhaps surprisingly, the query should be one for which *you* don't have an answer, *and* you should explore something for which there also isn't an expert consensus that you can uncover. Answering these types of questions contributes to the overall knowledge base because your research provides insight into issues that specialists are debating. The idea that you might inform experts might sound strange or intimidating, but you will see that there are many questions on which specialists don't agree and many aspects of politics and policy that haven't been studied definitively. You aren't expected, however, to revolutionize the field. Your goal is to make an incremental contribution to knowledge through your investigation of some specific political developments.

Third, asking the question appropriately is enormously important for both making clear what you are exploring and delimiting precisely what you have to do. Such inquiries are short and direct. Part of this framing involves designing a question that is actually

answerable. Many great questions exist that no one can answer—perhaps because they seek to predict the future, the data do not exist or are unavailable, or techniques for study haven't been developed yet. There's also the constraint of resources and time on what you can accomplish. So, we will be mindful that any question generated is doable.

Characteristics of a Good Topic

All good political science research topics and questions share certain qualities. They are

- *interesting* to you, **scholars**, the **public policy community**, and, ideally, ordinary citizens and
- *important* and *controversial*, meaning that members of these varied audiences are arguing over both the subject and answer in nontrivial ways.

Using course resources, reflecting on your life—what motivated you to study political science, what activities you enjoy, and what your aspirations are—as well as consulting a variety of sources, even contemporary media, can all lead you to an appropriate topic if you proceed in the search in a systematic fashion.

Finding Something Interesting and Important

Let's start by acknowledging that finding a research topic (first step), transforming it into a question (second step), and revising so it's a "good" one (third step) take serious thinking, reflection, and research. The right one won't simply pop into your head, and taking this effort seriously keeps you from getting stuck with a topic that will frustrate or even bore you later on in the process. Finding background information in this preliminary phase will make later tasks much easier too. Some of you are probably thinking that you can use AI to find a topic and write your question, but remember, some faculty will consider such actions an honesty violation. Moreover, AI won't create a "good question" for your purposes without serious **prompt engineering**, in other words, asking the bot many well-crafted follow-up questions. Not only do you need to guard yourself from errant "hallucinations" of large-language models (LLMs), but what you'll gain intellectually from working through the process as specified here will be invaluable as you proceed.[1]

You might be surprised to learn that the more freedom you have to choose your question, the more challenging is the task, particularly when you are a new researcher. You are actually lucky when your professor provides you with topics—even better when you receive possible **research questions**! Having direction is a huge time-saver if you are willing to trust your instructor and not chafe at constraints. Honestly, you should take these suggestions because your professor is an expert and knows what is interesting (as

well as important, controversial, appropriately posed, and doable) in the context of the class you are taking. So, if your instructor offers you some options, take them seriously. Choose based on how compelling the concepts, theories, and/or **cases** (instances of policy or politics) embedded in those suggestions are to you. If you aren't sure what various topics or questions might entail, go talk to your instructor.

Identifying a Topic Using a Course Theme

A step up in difficulty is having to identify an interesting subject of inquiry with no prompts and few guidelines besides things like the required length and number and types of sources required. Sometimes students take a particular course because they are very interested in that issue and might even have an idea of a subject for research at the outset. In that case, zeroing in on a topic is easier. Often, though, you take classes that are generally interesting, satisfy requirements, and are conveniently scheduled. Perhaps, as the course proceeds, something will spark fascination—but often, finding a topic takes effort.

The resources from the class can help. The syllabus sets out the logic, themes, and questions (and often competing arguments or concepts) of the course, and you can benefit greatly from thinking carefully about what your professor assigned and why. The readings, podcasts, videos, activities, essays, quizzes, exams, and other materials also identify interesting subjects that you could explore in more detail. With an assigned book, let the table of contents, photos, maps, illustrations, and tables inspire you. Think about the structure, arguments, and controversies laid out in other course resources. Remember that if you're neither a big fan of the class nor of doing research, you're unlikely to find something *fascinating*. So, lower your standards a bit on the "interesting" scale and adopt a self-centered approach. What would *you* like to learn about that is related to this class? Can *you* use this research to help you in future courses, internships, study abroad experiences, or jobs? Stay positive, and keep in mind that this experience *will benefit you*. Research paper writing will enhance your transferable skills and increase your independence and efficacy.[2] Moreover, some students who start without excitement about writing a research paper and their topic become enthusiastic about both as they proceed. More knowledge often opens the door to more interest, and a sense of great accomplishment also enhances personal satisfaction. You'll gain both working on this project.

Let's look to see how a course can lead you to a good research topic. Figure 2.1 can get you started; you'll see several such illustrations and tables in this chapter and throughout the book to walk you through the processes you have to perform. To begin, identify the central theme or point of the class. If you can't name it, look at the course title and description. The description might also contain questions that can help you. These three elements—course title, description, and foundational questions—are your "North Star" for finding and then narrowing your topic, and later crafting a question that will impress your professor.

FIGURE 2.1 ▪ Finding a Topic Appropriate for a Course

Central Theme (Title of Course):	Your Answer
Motivating Question(s) of the Course (see description):	
Interesting Empirical Categories:	
Key Concepts, Theories, and/or Explanatory Factors (name all identified):	
All Outcomes/Instances of the Theme (Covered in Course):	
Putting those ideas together to arrive at topics . . .	
If Professor asks you to write on something already covered in the course: Write down here what is also supposed to be different about your topic, and brainstorm a few topics that are on point, different enough, and interesting to you. It's helpful to think through what you perceived to be *fascinating* in rows 3–5 (as relevant) and use them as inspirations for identifying a few topics that conform to central theme and description (rows 1 and 2). Justify your choices.	
If Professor asks you to write on *something not covered but related to the course*: Write down here what is supposed to be the same, and brainstorm a few topics that are on point and interesting to you. It's helpful to think through what you perceived to be missing in rows 3–5 (as relevant) and use them as inspirations for identifying a few topics that conform to course theme and description (rows 1 and 2). Justify your choices.	

Next, take the structure of your course (you can usually see that on the syllabus and/or in your assigned materials) very seriously. Your course might be organized around empirical categories. These might include historical periods, geographic spaces, institutions and organizations, groups, individuals, and/or policies. Among those empirical categories that are central to your class, write down the ones that are most interesting to you. Another way to organize the course is around concepts and theories that explain phenomena. Sometimes these conceptually oriented courses or parts of classes revolve around factors or drivers of politics. Identify as many of these (concepts, theories, and/or drivers) as you can and think about which ones might be interesting to you. Finally, look for outcomes, events, political achievements, or policies that the course identifies.

If you have filled out Figure 2.1 as suggested, you can now reflect on what you identify as central elements of the course. Consider the guidelines the professor has given you for your paper, and try to develop topics based on course characteristics, filling in one of the last two rows. The goal is to arrive at some appropriate and interesting-to-you topics. Because you're working from the class, you know that these topics are interesting to scholars, policymakers, and citizens too. Your professor always shows you how the course engages a variety of interested communities and reflects their concerns.

To show you that the tools shared really are helpful, throughout the textbook you will meet students who have used them to their benefit. The first student is Hannah. She needed to investigate a topic related to her class (called Law and Social Change). Hannah's paper had to answer the core question of the course through the lens of a contemporary issue the class had not studied in detail. That basic question was: Is

the Supreme Court the best agent for transforming American society? Hannah took this course because she was extremely interested in activism; she cared about and was involved in campus groups that promote gender and racial equality and raise awareness about climate change. Because Hannah knew she could be happy investigating a number of different issues where activists had pushed the Court in ways she defined as forward, her challenge would be to focus on one alone. While mulling her possibilities, Hannah attended a special lecture (required for her class) by noted African American scholar, feminist, and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw.[3] Crenshaw exposed Hannah to many ideas, and the one that resonated most to her was the far higher incarceration rates of and more punitive sentences awarded to young people of color. With this inspiration, Hannah went back to her assignment and saw that "juvenile life without parole" (JLWOP)[4]—this very issue—was one of the potential legal campaigns she could study; in fact, her professor had actually given the class a list of topics, but Hannah had as yet not paid great attention to it!

Table 2.1 is Hannah's filled-in version of our generic Figure 2.1. Working through the steps she saw that JLWOP would both meet the professor's requirements and allow her to study something that satisfied her interest in racial justice.

Table 2.1 ▪ Hannah's Search for a Topic

Step	Answer
1. Central Theme (Title of Course):	Law and Social Change
2. Theme or Motivating Question:	In post–World War II American politics, are litigation campaigns the most effective way of achieving social change?
3. Empirical Categories (General):	Civil rights (racial equality) Women's rights LGBTQ+ rights Disability rights
4. Key Concepts, Theories, and/or Explanatory Factors (Name all identified):	Bring about social change via ● Electing sympathetic candidates to change legislation ● Changing public opinion to demand legislative change from elected officials ● Engaging in a litigation campaign, with attorneys bringing cases in a systematic process to change the legal landscape

(*Continued*)

Table 2.1 ▪ Hannah's Search for a Topic (*Continued*)

Step	Answer
5. All Outcomes/Instances of the Theme Covered in Course (Specifics):	Civil rights: Access to quality education Women's rights: Reproductive rights Disability rights: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) LGBTQ+ rights: Marriage equality
If professor asks you to write on something not covered but related to *the course*: Write down here what is supposed to be the same and brainstorm a few topics that are on point and interesting to you. Helpful to think through what you perceived to be *missing* in rows 3–5 (as relevant) and use them as inspirations for identifying a few topics that conform to course theme and description, rows 1–2. Justify your choices.	Sentencing disparities between people of color and Whites Seeking to eliminate juvenile life without parole Mitigating environmental racism

What's noteworthy for you to consider is that Hannah (1) benefited both from attending an extracurricular lecture that her teacher had mandated and (2) initially ignored some of the resources at her disposal. Too often faculty give students many ways of finding inspiration, but students think of them as wasting or not worth their time. Use everything to your benefit! Think about it: events are expensive and faculty are *really* busy. Your institution wouldn't use its resources (money and time involved in organizing an event) and professors wouldn't post supplementary information if it wouldn't be beneficial to you. They have other things to do besides plan events, publicize them, and create Google Docs, course announcements, or emails to guide you.

Generating a Topic from Your Experiences and Priorities

Compared to identifying topics on course-related subjects, finding a theme when you can choose anything you want is hard. Such a challenge typically faces students doing independent studies (if they haven't carefully defined the course) or writing theses. To start with, some of the previous ideas for topic-generation (Figure 2.1) work in this open-ended situation when you go back to your favorite courses to think through what was interesting. If you have a particular mentor, examining that person's courses is a smart starting place. In addition, an essay, paper, or final exam from one of your previous classes can be a great jumping-off point for more research. To maintain your reputation

for honesty, be sure to share with your mentor if you want to continue an investigation started earlier.

Beyond those sources are other founts of inspiration:

- what motivated you to become a political science major,
- your career aspirations,
- extracurricular activities, or
- other interests, for instance things you like to read, places you'd like to go, or issues you find interesting.

Many students find inspiration in activities or interests they hadn't thought of as political. Because **politics** is both the process of deciding and outcome of decisions that determine who gets what, when, why, and how, *politics is everywhere*.[5] Many interesting developments take place outside of formal institutions or "important" countries, groups, or individuals. Whether you learn about a topic that is about decisions or the distribution of outcomes ("goodies" and "baddies") on TikTok, the *New York Times*, the *American Political Science Review*, or your course materials, take it seriously if it's interesting to you.

Let's look at a few students who used this more general advice to their advantage. Proceeding through her political science major, Gabriela has become increasingly alienated from politics in America and so she dreaded coming up with a thesis topic. When she started her undergraduate career, she had been convinced that she wanted to be a legislative staffer or even run for elective office. Back in high school, Gabriela volunteered on campaigns, and in college, she interned in a senator's district office. She took classes on parties and elections, American political development, and more, but found herself becoming uncertain about her future because of the vitriol and the inability of politicians to get along. As she reflected on that fact and on her courses, she realized that there's a name for what has been turning her off to politics: **polarization**. Gabriela remembered that this topic and many theories for explaining it came up in several of her courses. As she went back through course materials and her experiences, she also noted that the topics that seemed to divide Americans more than others were related to gender and immigration. As a first-generation Latina, she was primed to think about those issues. Moreover, when she interned, she saw first-hand constituent fury over those subjects. The numbers of communications and the intensity of emotions expressed increased when "her" senator took a stand on any identity issues. Gabriela then thought, maybe polarization is a good topic for her and maybe understanding it better will help her overcome her alienation.

Another student, Kevin, chose political science as his major because he has always been a news junkie. Since he also loved to write, Kevin joined his school newspaper and honed his journalistic skills. From a young age, he had an account on X (back

then called Twitter) and followed political organizations, commentators, and leaders on Instagram. Coming of age in an era when social media sites became such important political tools, Kevin was already predisposed to see both their value and danger; he even interacted with some bots on Facebook trying to confuse his grandparents. And then, in an introductory comparative politics class, his professor played the PBS video *Revolution in Cairo*, which he found really intriguing. Kevin vaguely remembered hearing about the Arab Uprisings in 2011, when citizens in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) revolted against their authoritarian leaders. This film showed how activists used new media to inform citizens of repressive regimes, propagate and hone their messages, and ultimately challenge these regimes. Seeing the potential positives of these connections was refreshing after all of the more recent negatives about social media. Maybe a research project on the media could be fun.

Last in this set is Max, who came to his major because he was always interested in the world. At a very young age, he started poring over maps, examining flags of the world, and learning about different regions. From the time he was a kid, Max enjoyed watching the Olympic Games, when he would see his two interests—countries and sports—come together. Because he was also an athlete and being involved in sports meant so much to him, Max thought that political science might allow him to combine his interests in a future job. Maybe he would teach social studies and coach high school athletics, or maybe he would go to law school and become a sports agent who represents clients from all over the world. Thinking through his political science "origin story," Max noticed that international sporting events had political overtones. In particular, he observed that Russia seemed particularly involved in cheating in these contests in order to achieve "greatness." Max also noticed that Russia had started or increased its aggression toward neighbors in and around some recent Games. He started to think that maybe these insights could lead him to an interesting topic centering on either the Olympics or Russia as a global actor.

In Table 2.2, we can see Gabriela, Kevin, and Max using a variety of factors to zero in on a topic. By using the prompts in the left-most column, you could use a version of this table too. Remember that if you are writing for a particular course, Figure 2.1 and Hannah's experience (Table 2.1) are likely a better guide.

Table 2.2 ▪ Finding a Topic: Students Using Motivations, Activities, or Aspirations

Item to Identify	Gabriela	Kevin	Max
Why the major/interests	Electoral politics	News junkie	Early geography buff Sports and international competitions

Item to Identify	Gabriela	Kevin	Max
Extracurricular activities[a]	Partisan politics	School newspaper Debate	Athletics Coaching
Career aspirations	Elected official Staffer or political aide	Media or communications professional	Teacher and coach Sports agent
Interesting topics	Polarization in American politics Identity (gender and race) as **wedge issues**	Media and elections globally Media and political revolts (the Arab Uprisings)	Olympics and politics Cheating and international competition Russia and greatness

[a] Being involved in organizations or activities sometimes brings politics or political issues to the fore. No matter what you participated in, consider your activities good sources for questions.

Finding Inspiration from Popular Media

Sometimes, however, using your classes, experiences, or ambitions hasn't led you to something interesting to study. In that case, turn to recent issues of newspapers and journals of opinion or radio, TV, or online news coverage for ideas. For instance, the news might be filled with talk of **tariffs**, which brings to mind global trade, the global international economic order, and trade wars for the internationally minded, or heavy industry, the rust belt, unions and working-class voters, parties and constituency building for those more focused on the United States (or other countries, for that matter). "Tariffs"—one word—can lead you to multiple topics that are appropriate for a variety of courses. So, zero in on the terms that you find interesting. Just note: if you followed the approach above for finding a topic from a course, but yours still seems too broad, you can also benefit from this path. So, keep reading to help you narrow your focus.

Then, take that term and learn about it in contemporary news. When you consult journalism, use the best. If you're interested in international or national news, examine recent issues of the *New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times*, or *Wall Street Journal*. For local news, go to the best papers and radio station websites in the region. You will want to look at not only the headlines and main news articles but also the editorial pages, where you can see what the editors think about controversial issues as well as read what columnists and outsiders (typically scholars, practitioners, and other important people) have to say in the op-ed ("opposite the editorials") essays. Many contributors in the national sources also write for prestige news magazines like the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Review of Books*. Some are even scholars whose work can be useful to you at a later stage of the project. Each of these outlets will give you an excellent and relatively quick primer on important and controversial contemporary issues.

While these are legacy journalism sites, students are more likely to look at what comes across their feeds. Depending on what and who you follow, however, you might have to be more intentional in seeking information for the purposes of topic generation.

Check out talk radio, TikTok, podcasts, Substack postings, and shows on Fox News, MSNBC, Comedy Central, and YouTube on issues that you think might work. While such sources can be great for introducing you to interesting topics, realize many of these are explicitly designed to entertain, confuse, inflame, or even misinform you. Interestingly, outlets that advance ideological positions opposite to yours are often most helpful in finding topics. Apparently, getting annoyed by claims or interpretations makes us want to find out more. Finding those topics also tells us that an important subject is interesting and controversial, and if it comes from one of these sites, you need to be very careful about what the facts are. But that's OK; this approach has piqued your curiosity. Just be careful: hard-to-believe stories and those that involve conspiracies should be approached with caution; still these sources can lead you to politically important issues.

Some of you might be wondering why, in thinking about topics for political science papers, you are exploring these contemporary sources. First, sifting through history to find something compelling and controversial is very hard and can feel overwhelming. Moreover, contemporary developments are usually related to, or are instances of, some long-standing phenomenon. Second, because your goal is to perform some *original* empirical work, picking something relatively new can help you have one of the first takes on a subject. Now, doing an original study does not mean that you must work on contemporary topics. In fact, excellent research is always being done in history, political science, and sociology (and other disciplines) that reexamines the past. However, when students choose a topic about something in the past (typically one they think they know a lot about), they often fall into the "report trap." They seek to describe everything they know already with some insights from a few additional expert sources. Usually, they also split the difference between two prominent explanations, arguing that the best way to understand their issue is to somehow combine the existing views. Because this approach is problematic for a variety of reasons, we are going to avoid it. Finally, if something resonates and even makes you angry, then you might *need* to find out more. Being compelled by some internal spark to conduct the project is the best motivator.

Finding contemporary controversies, then, and entering into them is a way of encouraging you to identify the kinds of topics that are interesting, important, and contentious—criteria for generating good questions. Of course, sometimes those contemporary debates lead you to reconsider issues of the past. In the research paper–writing process, you will learn to be a scholar or policy analyst and assess your argument with information that you interpret. Don't worry; you aren't going to do this alone. At every step you will have guidance.[6]

Making Sure Your Topic Is Important and Contentious

Once you have a topic, keep exploring it to make sure it's a good one for you to research. Your next job is to uncover why any issue is important and controversial to both experts and ordinary people. If you have found it in the media (traditional or otherwise), you know that it is important to policymakers and citizens in this moment. You can also

see—given how much is said and how inflammatory is the rhetoric—how contentious the issue is. Topics generated from your courses will likely be controversial too since faculty want to expose you to the biggest questions of the day. Arguments you'll find in courses are typically related to scholarly debates about the causes, consequences, and definitions of politics and policies. Sometimes these debates also revolve around what are better or best policy outcomes given particular priorities or constraints. Your course work—and paying attention to theories and concepts embodied in them—will be extremely helpful in finding out why other informed people care about your issue.

Scholars tend to be most interested in explaining or interpreting events in light of larger academic or conceptual debates. They often seek to show that their argument or preferred theory is better at explaining and/or predicting politics or behavior than others. In your early political science courses, you have probably been exposed to these disagreements in each of your classes, but perhaps your Introduction to International (or Global) Politics most explicitly evaluated "dueling paradigms," with adherents of realism, liberalism, and constructivism—among others—arguing about the best way to account for global developments. All of the **subfields** have overarching debates (though perhaps not as prominently taught as the one in **international relations**), and no matter which research question you pick, you can be sure that scholars will be on multiple opposing sides of your query. If you are skeptical about the pervasiveness of debates, go back to your syllabi or past exams, discussion questions, and papers to see how faculty asked you to compare different arguments or positions on what you were studying. Moreover, use your course materials to identify what experts were saying about any of your potential research topics.

In addition to thinking like a scholar, imagining you are a public policy professional helps pinpoint important and controversial issues. While some of the topics that academics pursue might seem esoteric (e.g., arguing over which perspective on politics is best), public policy analysts and policymakers tend to take a more applied approach and seek solutions to real-world problems.[7] Each solution tends to be "better" at addressing different problems or satisfying an alternative set of priorities. Finally, although citizens are sometimes also policy professionals and scholars, ordinary people often care about how issues directly affect their lives. So, ask yourself: How might my topic affect people's pocketbooks, sense of self, ability to plan for the future or go places, and even their moral sensibilities? How might my research speak to citizens' concerns? Just as consideration of the scholarly debate on your issue is valuable, these insights into policymaker and citizen perspectives also help you identify why your topic is interesting and controversial to multiple parties. Keep track, as our example students have done in Table 2.3, of why varied audiences care about your topic. While you'll soon be doing much more research on these controversies to identify the actual scholarly debate, this brainstorming session will not only make doing that research easier, but it will also likely feed directly into your paper's introduction. So, fill out Table 2.3 as an investment in your future. You will use this work at the end of the project, in Chapter 9!

Table 2.3 ▪ Determining Why Topics Are Important and Controversial to Target Audiences: Answers from Example Students

Items to Identify or Answer	Gabriela	Kevin	Max
Possible topics	Polarization in American politics Identity (gender or race) as wedge issues	Media and political revolts (the Arab Uprisings)[a]	Russia and greatness[a]
Scholars find compelling because	Scholarship reveals big debates over the sources and implications of polarization and the roles that identities play in creating it.	Scholars debate the nature of revolution in general and why the Arab Uprisings occurred and failed in particular.	Scholars debate the sources of Russia's foreign policy and the meaning of its attempts to alter the structure of the contemporary international system.
Policymakers find compelling because	Polarization appears to help certain political projects and hurt others. Some officials want to fuel polarization, and others seek to quell it.	Policymakers in repressive states usually want to squelch democratizing political change and others (usually on the outside, such as dissidents) seek to promote it. Sometimes, U.S. policymakers seek to support democracy too.	American policymakers have to interpret and respond to Russian initiatives in the security and economic spheres. Are these initiatives detrimental, neutral, or helpful to achieving policy goals of other countries, groups, and people?
Citizens find compelling because	Americans can become frustrated when governments can't solve problems; they might get frustrated, angry, or worse toward other members of the community; and they might become alienated from democratic and all politics.	Citizens in repressive states often want to stay on the "right side" of state[b]-sponsored violence, but they also might want to seek change and justice. They search for answers regarding when and how to engage in activism. Americans might wonder how these developments overseas will affect them. To what extent and how will the United States get involved?	Americans need to make decisions about what policies are good for their state[b] as it confronts or partners with Russia. They might suffer or benefit from Russia's actions (what happens to the supply of oil and gas) and their state's response.

[a] As you can see, for simplicity, just one topic appears for each student.
[b] FYI: Kevin and Max use "state" to refer to territorial entities that have sovereignty, not the constituent parts of the United States.

In sum, take care in coming up with a research topic. If your faculty member offers some, then investigate the ones that are most interesting to you before you make your choice. Use Hannah's experience and Table 2.1 as guides if you need to develop a topic appropriate for your course. Realize that nowhere will you find a flashing neon light that says, "Here's a great topic; take it!" For those with even more free rein, follow any or all of the methods described here, considering (1) why you chose your major, (2) what your extracurricular activities are and how they might be related to politics and political issues, (3) your career aspirations, (4) course resources and prompts from your

favorite classes, (5) your personal concerns, and (6) current events and debates. Fill out both Tables 2.2 and 2.3 to be sure your topic will satisfy you and other audiences.

Making a Topic a Question

Now that you have an appropriate topic, you need to transform it into a "good" research question. Some of you may have a few topics at this point, so try to zero in on one now to reduce the complexity of your task. Realize that you're not being pushed into a too-small box, because from any one topic can come many different questions. Moreover, figuring out those questions is a process in itself. Pick the topic you think is most interesting, but please do not simply settle on the first idea that pops into your head—you may regret your haste later.

Finding Out More

At first, most people don't know enough about their subject to ask an interesting question. Of course, you're going to spend a semester (or more) learning about it. But the truth is that crafting a good question requires some knowledge—not only of what has happened that's relevant to your issue, but also of what experts are writing or saying. Now, those of you who had to dig into your course material or current events have already amassed some information and, perhaps, a sense of some controversies. Still, it's likely everyone needs to find out more about the topic.

While you are going to be doing serious research in scholarly sources in the not-too-distant future, at this still preliminary point, the best place to start is with background information on your issue. First, find a simple chronology of the events and identify key players involved in, and the challenges, obstacles, and opportunities related to your topic. Let's say you are fascinated and horrified by the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians that burst (again) onto the international stage on October 7, 2023. Well, you'll have a hard time understanding that issue if you don't know a little something about the previous 90 years (at least) of that relationship! To find out these basics, going to Wikipedia or another kind of encyclopedia can be a good start, *but it's only a start*. Please realize that these tools are not sources for your research paper. They are simply providing you with background information; they might also give you sources (check out the footnotes) from which to learn more.

Other great sources of information at this early stage are quality news organizations, think tanks, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and government agencies that specialize in your issue. From this point on, however, you need to be careful about partisan or ideological bias. How to know whether and how your source slants its coverage? Consult an online media bias checker. You can simply search "X [for the source's name] media bias" or go to MediaBiasFactCheck.com, AllSides.com, and AdFontesMedia.com. Going to multiple evaluators is a good strategy so that you can see whether

there's consensus from the checkers and be sure of the way a source leans. While reported bias shouldn't turn you away from the information, it should give you a sense of your source's perspective and limitations. You might want to look for a complementary source with a different view to see the way bias can affect a discussion and analysis. If the source has problems with accuracy, then certainly be wary of the facts—but realize that the issues it is discussing are politically very important to its target audience.

In this search through background information, students can often get sidetracked or feel overwhelmed by all there is to learn. Realize that you don't need to know everything. Moreover, as you search through information about the who, what, and when, be sure to keep in mind the concepts you're most interested in. Gabriela is thinking about immigration reform and polarization, but she's not clear if she's most interested in the *impact* of polarization *on immigration* or on polarization itself. Kevin highlighted the Arab Uprisings along with the media and political revolts. Does he really want to do research on those 2011 revolts, or is he interested in the media and politics in the United States or somewhere else? Max seems to be zeroing in on Russia as an Olympic competitor and foreign policy actor. As these students do basic background research, they'll learn more and make some choices. They should keep notes on what they are finding, and we'll see next how this information and some careful thinking helps them arrive at queries.

Finding a Puzzle and Using That to Create a Question

In your search through information, sometimes you are lucky enough to find a **puzzle**—that is, a development that doesn't seem to make sense *given what we know.* Another way of thinking about this kind of intellectual dilemma is that either it lacks an obvious answer or the conventional wisdom appears to be incorrect. You're lucky if you find a puzzle because that tells you that how experts have been thinking about the world isn't helpful, so you have an open door for exploring and offering a new answer. Often, identifying a puzzle is challenging and closely related to your decisions about which cases (e.g., events, years, people, locations, and policies) you will study.

For instance, for Gabriela, Congress's inability to pass comprehensive immigration reform in the 2000s and 2010s is puzzling. During that time, opinion surveys showed that most voters and some powerful groups (like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce) supported giving children brought by relatives to the United States without documentation and grew up here a pathway to citizenship. With the executive order on Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) because Congress couldn't pass the bill, many believed a legislative follow-on to fix the immigration "mess" was coming particularly because of that popular support. More recently, Gabriela noted that the issue of immigration and attitudes toward immigrants had hardened and become central to partisanship. Where did the desire for compromise go?[8] Now, perhaps those of you who are well-versed in American politics and policymaking have some ideas about the answers to that question. Even if you don't think this result is puzzling, what happened to atti-

tudes on immigration certainly raises questions about how voters develop opinions and how those opinions matter. Starting insights can help Gabriela ask a question about American immigration and might help *you* find parallels with any number of policies in a variety of countries and issues at the state-level in the U.S. too.

Another of our students, Kevin, after doing some reading about the Arab Uprisings, still remained fascinated with Egypt's story but also wondered why Algeria was relatively calm during the unrest in MENA. Has Kevin noticed a puzzle, that Algeria was relatively immune to the regional protest wave when Egypt wasn't? His reading might have led him to other potentially surprising developments: Why did activism in Egypt initially appear to succeed in 2011 when it hadn't in the past? How come Tunisia's democratic success fell apart in 2022?[9] Kevin's musings led him to potentially surprising political developments. If he does some preliminary research, he will find that experts are debating some of these questions too.

The Importance of Starting Words

The next step is to state a question; starting with the "right" word really helps. While your basic information search led you to ask who, what, when, and where for background, answering those questions alone usually won't be enough for your research paper. *Who, what*, and *when* can work if you are investigating someone or something that people have ignored *and* you want to show its political significance, or if your discussion will inform the reader about *who was involved, what was really going on*, and *where the real action* occurred. These starting words are great if events unfolded differently or meant something not captured in the standard interpretation, and you will additionally explain *why* and/or *how*.

Remember, the goal is to engage in research that enlightens *not just you* but many others. So, while Kevin might start out not knowing, for instance, in which MENA regimes there were uprisings in 2011, this information is easily knowable with a few searches. However, interest in this topic can lead to other questions, for instance, about *why* these uprisings occurred, *how* the responses of state leaders affected the course of the challenges, and *to what extent* (if any) these revolts succeeded in achieving the goals their initiators hoped to attain. In answering any of those questions (and note the "good" interrogatory words used above), Kevin will learn what happened. Additionally, he will find and enter debates that will require consideration of theoretical issues and collecting evidence to evaluate an answer.

Some students balk at these recommended starting words. They want to pose and then respond to questions that begin with *should, ought*, or *what should* or *ought*. Gabriela, in fact, started out by asking, "Shouldn't Congress have acted on DACA given that the majority of American voters in the 2010s said they support allowing these people to stay?" or "What should be done for the DACA recipients now?" Questions that start this way are **normative questions**. They are excellent ones for identifying the issue(s) you find compelling. Their answers, however, are likely not to be settled on

the basis of empirical evidence but rather on ethical, ideological, or even political arguments. If you are writing a research paper in **political theory**, those "should/ought" questions can be great for your research as you develop theoretical arguments, building on the works of other key thinkers, to answer an ethical problem or conceptual challenge. Future-oriented questions can also be good when your professor wants you to think through scenarios.[10]

Most readers of this book, however, are doing empirical research with the goal of evaluating something that has already taken place. So, while Max might want to ask "Will Russia be banished from the next Olympics?" or "Will Vladimir Putin seek to annex other parts of the former Soviet Union beyond what Russia has already taken from Ukraine?," he's better off asking "Under what conditions have global sporting organizations decided and imposed penalties on powerful countries?" or "Why has Russia acted with sustained violence toward former Soviet states?" Both of these questions allow Max to address issues interesting to him and evaluate what has happened. In other words, they are both conceptual and empirical. While they're not predictive, answers to these questions will satisfy his interest in what could happen, although past developments do not foretell the future.

Drafting Questions

So, after learning from our students' experiences and reflecting on the work you have done, you can draft some questions. Many of you don't feel ready, but the only way to get the creative juices flowing is to try. Use Figure 2.2 as a worksheet and proceed through the steps. As suggested, put your topic and the basic details that you learned at the top. Also include any key concepts from courses or other related ideas that have occurred to you as a result of your other academic or professional interests. Now, assuming that most of us need an empirical question, move to Step 2. Reflect on what you wrote with the goal of asking a question with the recommended words. Spend 15 minutes really thinking and trying to post a question. Don't check your phone or talk to a friend or do anything else. If you feel stuck, say a question word out loud and see where your brain takes you. Try to generate a query using each interrogatory word. Don't worry if you can't come up with a question for all of them or whether what you wrote is "good." Focus on writing down some questions. If you generated something appealing, then stop.

If you have nothing, move to Step 3. Try these starters on for size and see what they might inspire. Think hard and play around with the query words for 10 minutes. If you still don't have a question, write down what you have been thinking about, what is interesting and important about your topic, why you think this topic is worthwhile, and why experts and citizens should care about it. After you give yourself a bit of a break, you might want to try the RTW spiral to give yourself some new information to help you arrive at a question. You might even talk to a classmate or your professor, but don't use those routes of consulting something or someone else until you have given the job

Figure 2.2 ▪ Pushing Yourself to Draft a Question or Two

Step 1: Record basic information.	
Topic:	
Important and interesting things I learned from my background research:	
Who	When (provide basic timeline below)*:
What	
Where	
Other concepts (from courses) or academic interests:	
What's puzzling or surprising:	
Step 2: Spend 15 minutes pondering the background information and trying to use it to state a WHY, HOW, TO WHAT EXTENT, or UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS question. NOTE: *You don't need a question under every starting word.*	
WHY	
HOW	
TO WHAT EXTENT	
UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS	
Step 3: If you have nothing after 15 minutes, spend 10 minutes seeking a question that starts with one or more of these words or phrases.	
WHAT	
WHO	
SHOULD	
OUGHT	
WHAT SHOULD	
WHAT OUGHT	
WILL	
WHAT WILL	
Step 4: If you have no draft questions, write down what you have been thinking about; what seems interesting or important to you and why?	

*Add lines or space as needed for your project.

some effort. Outside resources can't find a topic that is compelling to you. Try one more time to generate a question or two.

Revising Your Question

Gabriela filled out Figure 2.2, and she moved from her should/ought-style questions into queries with the recommended starting words. Remember, her priorities were thinking about polarization and DACA. She came up with three questions:

1. To what extent is polarization undermining immigration reform?
2. How has polarization affected acting on DACA?
3. Why is the United States so polarized now?

Similarly, Kevin spent his time (30 minutes, actually) with his version of Figure 2.2 and also generated three questions:

1. How did social media affect the uprisings in MENA in 2011?
2. Why did the Egyptian government fall in 2011?
3. Why did 2011 Arab Uprisings happen?

First, we need to say hooray to these two students (don't worry, Max is working too, and we'll get back to him later) for sitting down, thinking through what they have learned, and asking questions. Moreover, they developed their questions without AI. Yes, I am asking you *not* to use the tool here. Why? Because these efforts in learning about your topic and thinking through what you're interested in are really important for finding something you want to research and write about. When you are learning about your topic, you might have AI help; it's almost inevitable when anyone does an internet search these days. But still, you can't always trust what you find from AI, and the bot isn't you! It doesn't know what you find compelling. So please, try the steps spelled out above to think through the research process. This investment in researching and thinking pays huge dividends in the future. We can see it with Gabriela and Kevin. They couldn't have arrived at this point if they hadn't done preliminary research to find out more about their topics, then pondered, and finally tried to write actual questions using "good" starting words. They're on their way, but unfortunately, they aren't done yet.

Taking the Key Insight Out of the Question and Being Aware of Imprecision

While Gabriela's and Kevin's queries are good, three different issues plague these candidate questions: first, putting what you really want to use to explain the phenomenon into your question; second, having imprecise concepts; and third, asking about one particular event.

In research papers, you're seeking to answer a question, *and* you're looking for an interesting (maybe even "the best") factor to account for that issue. With her first two, Gabriela is putting her key insight into the question. Because Gabriela doesn't really know much about her issue yet, identifying that answer in her question is a mistake. It will skew how she examines the expert debate, a later task in which she will have to engage.

Moreover, Gabriela's terms need precision. What does "undermines immigration reform" mean? Is she interested in when immigration legislation gets passed or when the Congress, Executive, Judiciary, or even societal actors have different perspectives and take actions that impede reform? And what does reform mean? While reform means change, advocates often assume that reform means to act in ways consistent with *their* preferences. So, it's better to specify the thing to be explained more carefully (let's assume she's really interested in congressional action to expand pathways to citizenship) but eliminate the possible answer in the question. Revising her question to address these two weaknesses (answer inside and conceptual imprecision), Gabriela posited some others:

1. Under what conditions has Congress passed legislation to expand pathways to citizenship for immigrants? *or* How has Congress passed legislation on immigration to expand pathways toward citizenship?

With these two possible questions, Gabriela can still (at some point down the line) answer that polarization has been impeding congressional action. What's great (for reasons that will become more apparent in Chapter 3), is that these questions allow Gabriela to *consider* other answers too. Note the emphasis on *consider*. Gabriela can still explore the effects of polarization in her research paper if she makes that choice after careful investigation. You'll also note that Gabriela has two versions of the question. Potentially, the "Under what conditions" start emphasizes that multiple conditions affect the outcome, and "How" highlights the process.

Kevin's first question has a similar problem. He's interested in what factors caused the 2011 uprisings in MENA, and he wants to focus on the effects of social media. When he starts to do more research on those uprisings, he's going to learn that scholars have lots of ideas about what affected the political earthquakes in that region in 2011. So, to learn from everyone, Kevin is better off asking why those uprisings occurred and later, after he benefits from this wisdom, focusing on the role of social media in bringing them about. He is also going to have to think more clearly about what is an uprising and what is the "fall" of a leader or a regime later on in his process.

Not Too Narrow, and Realizing That Broad Is Your *Temporary* Friend

The second question that each student asks is very focused. Gabriela is interested in the failure of Congress to provide that pathway for undocumented children and Kevin on

the fall of the Mubarak regime in 2011. These are great starting topics for the research paper; however, they will both be better off by investigating the general variant of these items, "pathways to citizenship for immigrants" or "authoritarian regime collapse." Certainly, you need to get specific and study some instances of those phenomena, and both students have found good ones—DACA and Egypt in 2011. But in order to learn more about the general concept and what affects it, they need to study a number of instances or cases of it. They might even choose to do a statistical study, in which they'll have many (ideally, at least 30) cases, or they might decide to perform a comparative case study (at least two, carefully selected instances) to better understand their phenomenon.[11]

Because their course requires them to create a question with more general applicability, each student needs to transform their questions to take out the specifics (DACA and Egypt 2011), while remembering, "Yes, those are the instances that are most important to me. I will make sure I study them when I design the project." You might also have such a requirement where you can't zero in on one single outcome and find all of the factors influencing it alone. Still, both students and you will likely be able to keep your favorite case and compare it to at least one similar instance. We'll explain more how to pick the comparisons or decide on a large number of cases in Chapter 7, when you are writing your research design. Keep in mind that in making comparisons of just a few instances, you want to look for places that seem similar (for Kevin, two similar MENA countries) but where the outcomes are very different (e.g., the regime falls in one and doesn't in the other) or very different and the outcomes turned out the same. Keep an eye out for such phenomena when you do your background research—and don't worry, we'll define what "similar" and "different" are in more detail in Chapter 7, too.

Below are examples of how Gabriela and Kevin proceeded to move from an inquiry focused on a single occurrence to a more general query:

> **Gabriela:** Under what conditions has Congress enacted immigration bills that expand pathways to citizenship and when has it not passed them?
>
> **Kevin:** Why did Egypt's government seem to collapse in 2011, when it had been incredibly stable previously?

Finally, what about those third questions that the students began with? Those queries seem overly general and too big, aren't they? Recall that Gabriela stated one about why the United States is so polarized and Kevin asked about why the 2011 uprisings occurred in MENA. Yes, these are giant questions, but they are actually useful if you realize that you *might* study many cases through a statistical study *or* you will *later* specify a few well-chosen cases that share some special similarities and differences. As we will learn later, a great way to find your pair is to find that puzzle—two things that seem similar that turn out differently or two instances that seem so different and then apparently have a similar outcome.

So, those "giant" questions—for Gabriela, why is the United States so polarized now? and for Kevin, why did 2011 Arab Uprisings happen?—are both really good starting questions for this phase of the research. Many of you will be thinking for the next several "miles," until you get to the research design, about what would be those good comparison cases. But questions such as these will serve you well in the Annotated Bibliography (AB), Literature Review (LR), and Thesis and Model and Hypothesis (TMH) phases.

The takeaways, then, for you:

1. Take your favorite explanation out of your question. Don't worry, you'll be able to study it later if that focus makes sense based on what you learn.
2. Identify a concept or event you want to understand, but state it in generic terms. Gabriella has several candidates, immigration bills, legislation on undocumented kids, or polarization, in each question. For Kevin, the 2011 MENA uprisings (yes, specific, but there were multiple countries experiencing these events so he is referring to a large group). Kevin also identifies the collapse of authoritarian states.
3. Realize that once Kevin took his preferred explanation out of his first question, he arrived at the third one that he initially posited. You might do something similar.

Table 2.4 breaks down a process for making sure your questions don't suffer from those typical errors by interrogating the questions and showing how to revise Gabriela's and Kevin's queries.

Table 2.4 ▪ Revising Questions

Issue to Fix	Old Question	New Question
Take key factor/cause out of the question:	To what extent is *polarization* undermining immigration reform?	Under what conditions has Congress *passed immigration bills that expand pathways to citizenship*?
Take key factor/cause out of question *and* specify outcome more generally	How has polarization affected acting on *DACA*?	Under what conditions has Congress *passed immigration bills that expand pathways to citizenship*?
	How did social media affect the uprisings in MENA in 2011?	How or why did the *2011 MENA Uprisings* happen?

(*Continued*)

Table 2.4 ▪ Revising Questions (*Continued*)

Issue to Fix	Old Question	New Question
Specify outcome more generally	Why is the United States so polarized *now*?	Under what conditions does *polarization* in the United States get better or worse?
	Why did the *Egyptian* government fall in *2011*?	Why did the *Egyptian government fall* in 2011 but was stable at other times? *or* Why did the Egyptian *government fall* in 2011 but the governments of other MENA states didn't?

Remember, those broader questions in the rightmost column will likely be narrowed as you learn more through the research. Gabriela might ultimately arrive at "Why did Congress pass the Immigration Control and Reform Act in 1986 but fail to pass something related to DACA in the 2010s?" And Kevin might compare the experiences that two countries had with uprisings in 2011 like, "How were Egyptians able to oust their long-timer leader, but Algerians weren't?" These are "gold standard" questions that find a paired comparison that allows you to investigate two seemingly similar events that turn out differently (immigrant-friendly reform legislation for Gabriela and MENA uprisings for Kevin).

Another interesting element to this question-asking exercise is that we see Gabriela is actually trying to decide between focusing on what Congress has done regarding immigration bills and the phenomena of polarization. It's fine to have two interests at the outset, but she's going to have to decide on one soon. If you find yourself in this predicament, realize: *I can always study another one in a future course or via other activities and my issues are (usually) interrelated—so I will be learning a bit about each, no matter which question I choose.*

Making the Question Short and Direct

Have you noticed how concise the questions that Gabriela and Kevin have generated are? Even in their first iterations they were short, and the revisions are brief too. To be honest, they didn't start out that way. Gabriela wrote a lot of preliminary "stuff" that wasn't really a question and submitted that at first, basically sharing what she wrote in the final box in Figure 2.2. She then had to go back and force herself to use the starting words to ask a real question. Kevin came into the office and talked for about 15 minutes, sharing thoughts. After pushing him to state some questions and *use those starting words*, he came up with his candidates. Do what you need to do, but ask an appropriately phrased and relatively concise question.

Max, too, had more of a monologue going before he arrived at a question. You'll recognize this tendency if you think back to attending a public lecture and recall that questioners often make an argument instead of asking a question. That's OK when you're starting out. Make your argument, because those preliminary words will often find themselves in the Introduction to your whole paper. You are setting the stage for your question. Write those ideas down in Figure 2.2 (either at the end of Step 1 or in Step 4). You will use that information later.

Max was stuck on the question generation, so he wrote some background and justification for his interests in his version of Figure 2.2 under Step 4:

> Vladimir Putin has impressed people all over the world with his tough talk and gruff style. He has been enormously successful in helping Russians feel pride again in their country. Important to that renewed self-respect was Putin's successful hosting of the Olympics in February 2014 and Men's World Cup in 2018. Many people thought the 2014 Olympics would be a disaster, that there would be terrorist attacks, that the facilities would be inadequate, that LGBT competitors and spectators would be harassed or arrested, and that protests would mar the games. Contrary to these fears, the Games were a wonderful spectacle; however, instead of ushering in the peace the ancient Greeks had hoped would arise from these competitions, Putin used this time to foment greater unrest in the Ukraine. As a result of Russian efforts, which included a disguised military operation, and those of separatists in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, about a month after the Olympics' end, Russia had annexed that peninsula and seemed to have designs on more Ukrainian territory. He also attacked Ukraine again in 2022 just after the close of the Beijing Winter Olympics, and Russia provoked a war with Georgia in 2008 as the summer Olympics were just getting underway, again in China. There seems to be something connecting the Olympics to Russian aggression in the Post-Soviet space.

Questions that Max can generate from his argument are how did the Olympic Games affect Russia's foreign policy behavior in the Putin era? Do these territorial grabs mean that Russia will continue to expand and take land from other post-Soviet states? Will Russia attack others in 2026 or 2028 when the Games are held again?

How would you transform these questions, if at all? Do they have good starting words? Do they include answers in the questions? Are they short and direct? Are they doable? Well, they are certainly concise, and one has a good starting word. They all raise the question about the role of the Olympics in Russian aggression. If Max thinks the Olympics are indeed the key cause, then he should take it out of the question. If he's interested in how Russia has previously behaved when the Olympics are going on, well, then he's delimiting his cases, but he can't just study those in which Russia acts aggressively but must look at all or some carefully chosen instances when the Olympics occurred and Russia did not attack. Max's last two questions are future-oriented, so he

should transform those unless he has permission to study scenarios, trying to look at the conditions under which attacks are more or less likely.

Because Max needs a typical empirical research question, he might want to ask: In the post-Soviet era, under what conditions has Russia engaged in inter-state aggression? Or, a bit more specifically, under what conditions does Russia commit aggression against former post-Soviet states? Both of these are good, and both are in the broad category and will be narrowed in future, as we have seen with Gabriela and Kevin. Realize that with these questions, Max is leaving behind that earlier fascination with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). He needs to think: do I really want to focus on Russia and Russian aggression or am I more interested in looking at what and why the IOC does what it does? Like Max, you'll have some decisions to make too. Sometimes talking with your instructor about these choices can be very helpful.

Summing Up the Question-Generating Process

Finding a topic and then transforming it into a question can be a challenge. When you have advice from your professor, use it and adjust if necessary to fit the course and your interests as Hannah did. Those adjustments won't just pop into your head, but they come after careful reflection and some research. Students who have much less direction in selecting a question or topic have even more work to do, but the job is manageable if you follow the steps outlined. These figures and tables are guides for you. Your interests will likely be very different from these students', but the various processes identified for finding topics and modifying queries will work for you. Remember, getting started on any phase of the project is always daunting. So, push yourself to tackle it, one step at a time. Realize that you'll be spiraling through the project—researching, thinking, and writing to achieve each intermediate goal until you are done with the whole paper.

Practical Summary

This chapter has provided several methods for generating research questions. We met four students (who will return in other chapters as we work through different stages of the research process) who uncovered interesting topics and transformed them into actual questions. Finding such queries took effort, but it wasn't impossible. You will be able to repeat their success with the help of the advice outlined here. Perhaps the hardest part in determining the question is uncovering a source of inspiration if you have no prompt. Some possibilities to use are (1) why you are majoring in political science, (2) your extracurricular activities, (3) your career ideas, (4) topics you enjoyed in earlier classes, (5) your personal concerns and hopes, and (6) contemporary issues and controversies.

To guarantee success, fill out the tables, just as our example students have done, and follow the advice. Use the recommended starting words, take your answer out of your

question, focus on one concept or phenomenon, and, if possible, try to find an empirical puzzle regarding how that subject of interest has turned out. Make your question concise, easily understandable, and focused on events that have already occurred. Once you have some good candidate questions, try to decide which one would be most fun, interesting, and possible for you to do. You should also consider which one best satisfies your professor's criteria for the assignment. Remember that your question will likely be refined as you proceed, but without a start you have nothing to improve upon. With the question stated, you are on your way.

Recipe 1: The Research Question

Ingredients

- Figure 2.1 and Table 2.1 or Tables 2.2 and 2.3 (as appropriate), and Figure 2.2 and Table 2.4.
- Access to all of Chapter 2, with particular focus on how Hannah, Gabriela, Kevin, and Max handled the process.

Instructions

1. Using the work of the four students and the techniques explained above, fill out Figure 2.1 and then Table 2.1 if you are developing a topic for a particular course but you don't have a prompt. Others working with freer rein should build out your versions of Tables 2.2 and 2.3. Always use the student examples as guides, but none of these students is likely "perfect" as a model for you. As you work through the tables, *make sure that you keep copies*, as your research and notes on the background will come back to help you at the end of the project, when you need to write your Introduction and Conclusion. Spend about 30 to 45 minutes maximum on this task. Then take some time away.
2. After at least an hour (preferably more) of not doing this work, return to the tables. Make any necessary changes to better represent your thoughts and ideas. Then turn to Figure 2.2 to start generating a question and fill it in to the best of your ability, using that earlier work and the student examples. Spend about 30 minutes max on Figure 2.2, then take some time away. Pay close attention to starting words.
3. Go back to Figure 2.2 and see whether you have abided by "good question" criteria. Make revisions.
4. Do a final check by using Table 2.4 to look for the issues identified (leftmost column). If you need, make the changes using Gabriela's and Kevin's efforts to guide you.

Exercises

1. Pick up a recent newspaper. Find a controversial issue or event that you care about and develop a research question based on a news article or editorial selection. Be sure your query starts with an appropriate word, is concise, and is doable. Explain why others—scholars, practitioners, and citizens—would find your question compelling. Remember that they each will have different reasons for liking your question.
2. Consult a book from one of your previous political science courses. (A textbook is often best because they have the most content, but any book will do.). Go to various sections of the text that you found interesting and think about why they were appealing. Look at pictures, graphs, or tables to spark your mind; at the end of chapters, "Questions for Further Study" might provide inspiration. Develop a research question with the book's help. Be sure your query starts with an appropriate word, is concise, and is doable. Explain why others—scholars, practitioners, and citizens—would find your question compelling. Remember that they each will have different reasons for liking your question.

Key Terms

bias checker
cases
international relations
normative questions
polarization
political theory
politics
prompt engineering
public policy community
puzzle
research questions
research topic
scholars
subfields
tariffs
wedge issues