

How to Read Social Science Research Articles

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Many students may not have prior experience to reading substantive social science research. To mitigate these concerns, I prepared the following questions that students may rely on to assess and critique the political science research that we will encounter in this course. This guide can also be used to identify key components of articles that can then be used to develop the thesis statement required for your response paper and final essay exam. I **strongly** recommend using this template to assess the literature that we are assessing in this course and more generally across the social sciences.

1. **Assessing Theory:** What is the research's (i.e., article or book) main argument?
 - ★ What political phenomena does the article or book **ask** try to explain/address? (i.e., what is the research question?)
 - ★ What is the theoretical model advocated by the book in terms of the main **independent variable(s)** and **dependent variable(s)**.
 - ★ What is the main causal mechanism(s) argued in the piece with respect to how the **independent variable(s)** exerts an effect on the **dependent variable(s)**.

2. **Assessing The Point:** How does the research fit in the overall literature?
 - ★ What standing literature in political science does the piece try to speak to?
 - ★ How well does this research add to our collective understanding of this literature?
 - ★ Are there any implications of this research that speak to a **broader literature** within political science?

3. **Assessing Research Methodology:** What research design is used in this research?
 - ★ What is the **dependent variable(s)** in the study?
 - ★ How well is the **dependent variable(s)** measured?
 - ★ How do the authors **operationalize** the **dependent variable(s)** in the survey? For example, on what scale is the dependent variable derived from a survey question measured?
 - ★ What are the **independent variable(s)** in the study and how well are they measured?
 - ★ What are the main **independent variable(s)** in the study as opposed to simple "control" **independent variable(s)**?
 - ★ Does the research design try to make a **causal** argument or a **correlational** argument in terms of inference?
 - ★ What specific **method** (i.e., specific statistical model? causal identification? qualitative methods?) is used in the research design?

- ★ What data is used to assess the research design outlined in the work?
 - ★ Is the method appropriate given the research question asked, any strengths or weaknesses?
4. ***Assessing Research Significance & Quality:*** If you had advice for the author(s), what would you suggest?
- ★ Are there any shortcomings to the study in terms of the ***theoretical argument*** or ***research design***?
 - ★ Are there alternative explanations to the research findings of this work and are these alternative explanations accounted for in this searcher?
 - ★ What are the implications of this research?
 - ★ Are there any future avenues of research that this study points us to?
 - ★ Should this study be replicated, either in terms of ***theoretical argument*** or ***research design***, in other contexts?