

PLSC 497  
Baumgartner  
Fall 2005

Notes concerning your term papers

From the syllabus:

Term paper assignment: During the semester you will learn how to use the data from the agendas project web site. This will provide the background you need to do your own independent research project concerning a great number of possible term paper projects. Most of you will likely choose to analyze the development of a given policy, such as energy, education, health care, or defense over time, from 1947 to present, using the Agendas Project datasets as the main data source for your analysis. (You will need to supplement this with bibliographic material and relevant statistical indicators specific to your case.) Others may choose a different type of topic, such as an analysis of the distribution of federal government spending over time, across all policy areas. In any case, you should work on choosing your topic early, in the first 4 weeks of the semester, and keep in touch with me about your progress and plans. Papers should be at least 15 pages, double spaced, not counting figures and tables, which should be presented in an appendix.

So by now you should have a topic. See me or email me by next Monday if you do not.

The main thing about the topic that I'll be worried about is FEASIBILITY. Does it correspond to the pre-defined categories of the agendas project? If not, that's fine, the agendas project is not perfect and it doesn't suit all needs—I don't take that personally! But if your project requires customization, that adds some time. Most of you, in fact, probably will require some combination of more than one agendas-project category, or a subset of some of them. That's fine and you should easily be able to do it, BUT NOT IN ONE ALL-NIGHTER THE WEEK THE PAPER IS DUE! So come talk to me or email me with your topic. I'll ask you some questions about feasibility, including whether there are books in the library on the topic. If there aren't, it's going to be hard. One caution: don't do today's news. It's difficult to get the relevant information about stuff that is too current. Study longer-term trends. That's our point in this class.

Second, you need to do some preliminary work on the web site, finding all the stuff that MIGHT be appropriate, and learning about it in some detail, and deciding what to use and what not to use. That will further refine and define better your topic. It may involve creating some custom-made graphs and figures that have to be made by downloading the datasets and manipulating them in Excel rather than doing it all on line over the web. Start early!

Third, you need to go to the library and identify relevant books and read up on your topic so you know the history and background of your policy area. This may lead you to decide to revise your use of the datasets, or to look in greater detail at certain laws or periods in history when lots of stuff happened. Note that the CQ Almanac can be extremely useful here. The library has all the copies going back to 1947 and probably before then.

You should email me your bibliography. I'm a professor, so I don't like to see Time Magazine and US News as a bibliographic reference. I like to see real books, and real journal articles in academic journals instead! Duh!

Fourth, depending on your topic, you may need to look for some other data, such as the unemployment rate, the population size, the poverty rate, or something else not available from the agendas project but appropriate for your paper's topic. Start on that early. Try the web sites listed in the Kraft book, and use official US government web sites if at all possible. You may be surprised by what you can find on these web sites.

Fifth, you should outline your paper with major headings, sub-heads, and your tables and figures of data, including what goes in what order. Make your graphs in Excel (not just on line) and import them into your Word document. Make them look nice. Don't print them in color because at the end of the day they're going to be printed out in black and white most likely. If a graph is too busy or confusing to read and understand in 15 seconds, fix it. Show it to your room-mate and see if they can understand it. Feel free to show it to me. I want you to learn how to present quantitative material.

Sixth, write up your results. Combine the bibliographic material you have with descriptions of the quantitative results you got. Analyze whether your quantitative material helps explain the key question you posed at the beginning.

Seventh, go back and fix the grammar, the spelling, the punctuation, the pagination, the look of the graphs and figures, and make it look professional from the title page to the list of references.

I don't care whether you use footnotes or citations like (Jones 2004) in the text with a bibliography at the end. Pick whatever you want as format, but be consistent in the format. Make sure all facts and figures are cited. For stuff from the agendas project, for this class it's ok just to cite it as "Source: Agendas Project."

See me before or after class with your questions...

Make this the paper you would show as a writing sample if you were going to apply to grad school.