

A Guide to the Structure & Types of Western Academic Articles Published in Peer-Reviewed Political Science Journals

Research in the subfields of political science is generally published in academic journals. A single article may be a chapter from a longer book and is often preceded and supported by what once was a “conference paper.” Articles may also be compiled into academic books in what are called edited volumes with many authors. Outlined below are the basic sections of an academic research article, without much focus on the process of submission/peer-review/revision/publication process. Keep in mind that academic journals are one step above “trade journals” (themselves above newspapers and magazines) which might still be accessible to non-professionals; the authors and intended audience are usually college professors and graduate students, with only some expected to be of interest and accessibility to undergraduate political science majors. Increasingly, scholars will collaborate with their colleagues, graduate student advisees, and even occasionally their best undergraduate students to do their research, and a “joint publication” is often a junior scholar’s formal introduction to the wild world of academia.

Abstract/Summary/Executive Summary – This puts all of the article’s contents into a single paragraph, including very concise background information, the research question/puzzle and methodology, findings and any other conclusions. The abstract will clarify whether the study uses a “large-N,” “small-N,” or single case selection. Note that many journals’ articles do not have abstracts; the introduction then serves approximately the same function.

It should be clear from the abstract whether the article is a “policy paper” or more focused on theory. While there is an expectation for all research papers to be “policy relevant” in some way, top journals tend to publish more theoretical research and may consider such a focus to make a greater or at least longer lasting contribution to the field. Interdisciplinary “area studies” journals, such as those focused only on China or Europe, fall under policy journals and are generally less prestigious than those publishing on general theories applicable to an entire subfield of political science. Theory papers may be divided into “theory generating,” “theory supporting,” or “theory infirming,” with the latter two almost always putting a hypothesis or subtheory to a kind of rigorous test. Theory generating articles may frame themselves, instead of a formal or rigorous test, as a “plausibility probe” to analyze whether a particular explanation for a phenomenon is plausible and generalizable to other cases. Critical theory journals, especially in IR, may focus instead on problematizing research with more positivist epistemologies rather than necessarily testing or building theories.

Introductions are often unmarked but generally begin after the abstract and end with the first section heading. In political science, unlike history, the introduction and conclusion contain almost all the key points a reader needs to understand the article. It’s not uncommon when skimming an article to read only the introduction and conclusion, which are quite repetitive. While a sentence or two may be spent on the importance of the research topic, these articles will assume that you’re already interested and quite familiar with the subfield in which they fit.

Either in the introduction or in its own section will be a literature review which summarizes and very briefly analyzes past studies on the same or similar topics. The goal in the review is not only to provide background information but also to situate one’s own study within the literature, preferably within a “gap” or understudied context/question which other scholars have attempted but not sufficiently answered.

Depending on the article’s objective, the research question and unit(s) of analysis will be given early in the paper, often after the literature review has established a need for the study. If not done previously, key terms should also be defined, especially if the way one is using a particular term or larger “background concept,” such as democracy, regionalism, or trade protectionism will be operationalized in a unique or unusual way.

Methodology sections are where readers without specific methodological training will start to get lost, as certain scholars in political science subfields are increasingly known for particular methodologies and theoretical approaches rather than specialties in geographic areas or even research topics. At a glance, a reader should be able to identify whether the methodology is quantitative (using statistics, especially multivariate regressions, to test hypotheses) or qualitative (primarily using words and descriptive statistics as evidence in case studies). Both may present their hypothesis (or competing hypotheses) to be tested in terms of a model, which may be expressed either in plain English or specialized language called formal modeling, borrowed from mathematics and economics. In graduate school, a good program will require years of various methodology courses, as they are necessary to understand articles fully and have one’s own research taken seriously by other scholars. This handout can only scratch the surface!

Perhaps the most common structure in small-N, qualitative research is to examine how well hypotheses and theories (which are considered more valuable the closer they are to universal applicability) fit particular cases. The methodological approach to these is often called historical institutionalism, less common but not absent in IR, delving deeply into specific history, culture, and perhaps the individual agents involved in creating institutions. Such case studies are expected to conform to either a “most similar,” “most different,” or “critical case” selection logic. Such studies strengthen or weaken theories in terms of whether a “most likely” or “easy” case fails to support a theory as expected or when a theory holds up even in a “most unlikely” or “hard” case.

Testing and Results sections show exactly how the data is analyzed, often with charts and tables (supplemented by appendices). If not done earlier, this section will define key dependent and independent variables. If one is familiar with both the topic and the methodology, this section will be of most interest and where others will challenge the analysis and the findings.

Many articles include a **discussion** section to interpret and explain the results of the test(s), very helpful for those who are not methodologically trained. Here the supported hypothesis of the study is often distinguished from previously or less supported ones. If any larger theories are corroborated, infirmed, or even falsified (but never proven!), this section will connect the research question to the results and back to the theory.

An article’s **conclusion** may also do each of those tasks but will also remind the reader why the study was important, especially connecting the results to “real world” and policy implications, to avoid the “so what?” question of having read through an entire article and not knowing what to take away or why to care. Conclusions also suggest how further research might build upon the present study.

Whether the citation style uses footnotes or endnotes, academic articles contain meticulous citations of outside sources, almost exclusively academic. Acknowledgments of those who assisted may either be a footnote at the bottom of the first page, similar to a book, or the first end note. With end notes, most articles have a final section called either **References** or **Works Cited**, whose equivalent is the bibliography in an undergraduate term paper.

If this was very dry and not very interesting, beware of graduate school! Note that your undergraduate essays (in English, at least) may contain some of the elements listed above but as “term papers” are unlikely to be nearly as rigorous. A single academic article may take years for a team of researchers to get published, while your time is much more limited. This is not to say that you can’t include “original research” in your papers. In fact, you’re strongly encouraged to do so to get a feel for it. The best undergraduate essays needn’t be structured like an academic article; most often, and after several rounds of editing, they are closer to something one might find in a serious newspaper, magazine, or even trade journal’s (i.e. Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, etc.) editorial section. Striving for something like a literature review as an undergrad would be a great challenge, and you’re welcome to try.