



## How to write a term paper in comparative politics?

### 1. Basic facts

Comparative politics is mostly about tracing certain phenomena (dependent variables) to certain independent variables by comparing cases (e.g. countries - but smaller units like counties are also possible).

In doing so, research often follows a certain **logic of comparison** in order to arrive at findings: Ideally, a distinction is made here between "most similar with different outcome" (MSDO, also most similar systems design MSSD) and "most different with same outcome" (MDSO, also most different systems design MDSD). In the MSDO comparison, an attempt is made to use the differences between very similar systems as an explanation for the independent variable. The MDSO comparison, on the other hand, attempts to draw out the similarities between very dissimilar systems and use them as explanations for the independent variable (Berg-Schlusser and Cronqvist 2012, p. 114). By comparing cases that are similar in certain ways but different in others, we can better understand the reasons why our phenomenon occurs.

There is an important difference between **theoretical and empirical papers**: In an empirical paper, a research object (e.g., ability of a constitution to produce consensus) is analyzed using a research methodology. Usually, the aim is to ask about causality between a dependent variable and an independent variable. A theoretical paper, on the other hand, involves analyzing and interpreting various sources (text, film, other theories, etc.) or theoretical problems (e.g., representation in a democracy) using a previously introduced theory (e.g., liberal democratic theory).

In empirical work you can use either **quantitative or qualitative research methods**: quantitative research is "theory-testing", that means you investigate whether a theory and the corresponding hypotheses are generalizable to the whole population. The theory is tested by a standardized measurement. Sometimes researchers also use these methods to test hypotheses derived from everyday knowledge. Qualitative social research is theory-generating, that means you want to find reasons for a certain phenomenon, which is explained insufficiently so far. Usually, interviews with open questions are used to try to capture the subjective meaning of the investigated phenomena that the participants have (Flick 2020, p. 24).

### 2. Finding ideas/topics

In order to narrow down your topic within the complex of "Comparative Politics" and to develop a research question in the next step, you should first ask yourself which topic you particularly liked in the seminar and where you still need clarification. Most of the time the topic will still be very broad (e.g. the political system of the USA). In a further step you should narrow down the topic. To do this, you can ask the following questions about your topic: What interests me about the topic? What irritates me about the topic? (Esselborn-Krumbiegel 2017,



p. 50). This will allow you to be even more specific about which aspect of the topic you want to address. Many students tend to want to cover topics that are too large. Here applies: the smaller the better.

### 3. Research question

The research question reflects the topic of your paper. It indicates what you want to find out within your topic, that means it narrows down your **research interest**. To get to your research interest, you can ask yourself the following guiding question: *What contribution should the paper make to the solution of a (scientific) problem? What is unclear, problematic, incomprehensible, unknown, contradictory, doubtful about my research topic?* (Kruse 2005, p. 174). The research interest may be to find a contribution to the understanding of a problem, to gather knowledge, to bring clarity to a controversy, etc. You should pose your research question as a how or why question. This has an advantage over "closed" yes-no questions that you automatically work analytically, because you really have to explain something. In general, the more detailed and precise your question is, the easier it will be for you to find material and to evaluate and structure it.

### 4. Literature research

To get started with a new topic, it is a good idea to search the Viadrina **library catalogue (OPAC)** for keywords related to your topic. Since the university library is structured systematically, i.e. according to subject areas and topics, it is always worthwhile to look at the books that are around the book you are interested in. Also suitable for an overview of the relevant literature is internet research in **external databases**: Here you can use Google Scholar or look up in [subject-specific databases](#). For comparative politics, [Pollux](#) is the leading subject database. Many articles that are offered as open access can be found at [BASE](#). For current research and articles, it is always worth taking a look at the relevant **journals** (e.g. European Journal of Political Research, Democratization, Comparative Political Studies, Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft) and especially at the bibliography. The bibliographies of the **seminar literature** and possible optional literature from the syllabus are also a good starting point.

### 5. Structure - how do I create an outline?

An outline forms the basic structure of your paper and contains the **main steps of your argumentation** and presentation. It serves as an orientation during the writing process and provides a common thread. The outline should therefore be determined provisionally on the basis of your research question. Provisionally means that the outline will most likely change during the research and writing process. This is not a bad thing, on the contrary, it means that you can now be even more precise about where you want to go with your work.

### 6. Structure of a scientific paper - what must it contain?

#### 1. Introduction

The introduction should offer an interesting start and narrow down the topic. It is essential for an introduction to answer the questions why the work is **relevant** and what the exact **research interest** is, i.e. what the reading person can expect. For this purpose, the **research question** should be introduced in an explanatory manner and possibly a hypothesis should be stated,



which will be verified or falsified in the course of the work. A short overview of the approach and the outline completes the introduction.

## **2. Main part**

The main part serves to answer the question raised or to test the thesis posed. It is important that you work through the outline systematically, argue coherently, and offer a common thread (for example, by explaining at the beginning of each subchapter what it contributes to your argumentation). The main body serves a bridging function, as it connects the introduction to the conclusion. Depending on the paper (theoretical or empirical), the main body is structured differently, but there are a few points that should be present in every main body:

### **2.1 State of research**

You are probably not the first person to do research on your topic. Therefore, you should provide a brief overview of relevant books and articles that have discussed your topic before.

### **2.2 Method/Theory**

Depending on the thesis, the methodological approach differs. In an empirical paper, you should outline the hypotheses and explain your method of analysis that you will use to approach your research subject. In a theoretical paper, you should shortly summarize the theory or theories you will use to answer your research question and for discussion in the main body.

### **2.3 Case selection (empirical work)**

Your case is your research object (e.g., a nation-state). It is important that you justify why you have chosen this particular research object from the infinite number of possibilities and what you hope to achieve by this choice.

### **2.4 Presentation of the results (empirical paper)**

In an empirical paper, you present the results of your evaluation concisely and without references in the main part. You show your readers how to read the data obtained. You only mention data that relate to your research question and you will discuss later (Esselborn-Krumbiegel 2017, p. 144).

### **2.5 Discussion**

Empirical work: After presenting the results, you interpret the data obtained in relation to your research question/thesis. Is your thesis verified or falsified? Why? It is also a good idea to discuss your results with existing research in the field. Some papers also combine the presentation and discussion of the results.

Theoretical paper: The discussion in a theoretical paper deals with your thesis raised at the beginning and illuminates it with the help of relevant literature.

## **3. Conclusion**

The conclusion is a summary of the results of the main part and a final conclusion of the seminar paper. You should try to elaborate on the main points of your paper and specifically address and answer your research question. The conclusion is the counterpart to your introduction. In a



successful term paper, the person reading can read the introduction and conclusion in succession, understands the core thesis of the paper, and can clearly see both the research question and your answer. An outlook with open questions and questions that still need to be answered rounds off the conclusion.

#### 4. Bibliography

The bibliography contains **all sources** that you have used and cited during your work. Books that are important for your topic, but to which you do not refer, do **not** go into the bibliography.

#### 7. Citation

In scientific work, statements must be substantiated and verifiable. There are many different citation methods, but it is important that you cite consistently. For the creation of a bibliography, we recommend the use of a literature management program, such as Citavi or Zotero. The university library has compiled an overview [here](#). We particularly recommend Zotero, as it is free to use and will stay so after you finish your studies.

While some disciplines use foot- and endnotes, in Political Science references should be inserted into the body text. Which style you employ is, as stated above, less important; but once you pick one citation style it is crucial that you stick to it throughout your paper.

#### 8. Writing order

Every person writes differently - but a typical writing order for an **empirical** paper might look like this:

- State of research
- Data, operationalization and methods
- results
- introduction
- discussion
- summary and outlook
- abstract
- title

You start from the state of the art of research, outline and justify your methodological approach, but write the broad lines (introduction, discussion) only after the description of the results.

Possible writing sequence of a **theoretical** paper:

- Theory chapter (state of the research)
- discussion chapter
- introduction
- Summary and outlook
- Title



## 9. Evaluation criteria

The main evaluation criterion for term papers is the quality of the content of the paper. This includes a clear research question, appropriate use of technical literature and terms, as well as an independent and logically comprehensible argumentation and analysis. In addition, the formal and stylistic design of the work is also evaluated. Depending on the course (e.g. in method or theory courses), there may be particularities in the weighting – in this case there is further information in the syllabus.

## Bibliography

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