

How to Write an Introduction for a BA or MA Thesis

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Your introduction should include several sections. First, you need to introduce an empirical puzzle that illustrates the variation you would like to explain. Second, based on the puzzle, you must derive your research question. Then, you explain why finding an explanation for the research question is of normative significance. Finally, you must summarize the theoretical argument you will make in your thesis and outline the kind of evidence you will offer in support for your argument.

Puzzle All significant research begins with identifying the variation you want to explain. This can be achieved by introducing a particular puzzle involving actors (such as countries, firms, politicians, etc.) that chose diverging paths when faced with the same situation. Identifying such a puzzle is critical, but it is also one of the most difficult aspects of research.

A puzzle is a situation or phenomena that, on first sight, does not make sense. These can include all kinds of apparent contradictions, paradoxes or riddles. They may arise from comparing two units of analysis at the same time, such as two countries that have taken divergent paths despite very similar preconditions. Puzzles may also arise by observing units of analysis over time, such as actors that suddenly change actions or strategies seemingly contradicting their previous patterns of behavior.

Puzzles concern variation in outcomes (e.g. “why did peace hold in Mozambique but not in Angola?”). The thing you are trying to explain (here, whether peace held) is the dependent variable. Examining cases in which your dependent variable actually varies gives you leverage to answer your question because you can identify factors that held in one set of cases (where peace held) but not in others (where it did not). These factors that might explain the outcome are independent variables.

SOME EXAMPLES:

1. Colombia and Ecuador are two neighboring countries that are seemingly very similar. They are located in the same geographical region, have the same political system, same culture and language, same colonial history, etc. In 2013, China offered loans to both countries. Yet, only one of the countries (Ecuador) has accepted these loan offers while the other (Colombia) has explicitly rejected them.
2. Both Lithuania and Latvia joined the European Union in 2004. About a decade later, on January 1 2015, Lithuania introduced the Euro as their new currency. While the European Union needed to approve of this step, the initiative for the introduction of the Euro originated from the Lithuanian government. In contrast, the government of neighboring Latvia never asked the EU whether it could also introduce the Euro as their currency.
3. The large majority of Nigerian provinces is characterized by a population that includes both Muslims and Christians. Yet, instances of interreligious violence between Christians and Muslims do not occur in all provinces. Rather, violence seems

to occur primarily in the provinces of Jos, Barkin Ladi, and Riyom, but not in the neighboring provinces of Bassa or Bokkos despite a very similar ethno-religious makeup.

MOST COMMON MISTAKES:

1. Make sure that the outcome you are trying to explain actually differs across the units of your analysis. Proposing to explain why country A had a growth rate of 5.1% and country B a growth rate of 5.2% is not a good idea. In other words, the dependent variable must exhibit ‘true’ variation.
2. Make sure you compare two units of analyses (i.e. countries, firms, politicians, organizations, etc.) that are as similar as possible. Comparing the growth rate of the Germany to that of Antarctica is not a feasible comparison, but comparing Germany to France might be. Pick two (or more) units that are as similar as possible in many dimensions as possible.

Research Question Finding an appropriate question is often the most overlooked step in beginning a research design. Sometimes scholars get caught in disciplinary debates and forget that important research is always directed toward asking and answering interesting questions, not demonstrating that everyone who came before you is wrong.

You are asked to derive a research question from the puzzle you identified in the first step. Make sure that your research question is an analytic question, not a descriptive question. Descriptive research attempts to describe or identify what is, while analytical research attempts to establish *why* it is that way. The descriptive research uses description, classification, measurement, and comparison to describe what phenomena are. The analytical research usually concerns itself with cause-effect relationships. For your thesis, you must propose an analytic, not descriptive, research question.

As a general rule, ‘why’-questions are preferable to ‘how’ or ‘what’-questions. For example, asking “How did the US international trade balance fluctuate during the past decade?” is an example of a descriptive research question. In contrast, “Why did the US trade balance continuously deteriorate over time despite economic growth during the same period?” is an example of an analytical research question.

Importantly, your research question should be inspired by your puzzle, but not narrowly focused on your puzzle. Instead, you should generalize from your puzzle such that your research question is about the variation in the dependent variable in general, rather than the two units of analysis you introduced in your puzzle.

SOME EXAMPLES:

1. Why do some countries borrow from China while others do not? (Not: Why did Ecuador obtain a loan from China while neighboring Colombia did not?)
2. Why did some countries introduce the Euro while others do not? (Not: Why did Lithuania introduce the Euro while Latvia did not?)
3. Why does inter-religious violence occurs in some locations but not in others? (Not: Why does inter-religious violence occur only in Jos, Barkin Ladi, and Riyom, but not in Bassa or Bokkos?)

MOST COMMON MISTAKES:

1. Make sure that you pose an analytical (as opposed to descriptive) question. Most fool-proof way to ensure that that's the case is to ask a 'why'-question. To stick with the examples given above, the following would *not* be appropriate research questions:
 - (a) How did the debt portfolio of Ecuador and Colombia change over time?
 - (b) What was the process by which Lithuania decided to introduce the Euro?
 - (c) How does inter-religious violence look like in the Nigerian province Jos?
2. Make sure that your research question is not pre-determined. If you compare one basketball team whose players are all 7 feet tall against another team of 5 foot players, asking "Why does team A always win against team B?" is not meaningful. Your research question must capture a true *puzzle*.

Significance The next part of your introduction should explain why finding an answer to the research question identified above would matter 'for the real world.' There is no point to social science if it comes up with answers that do not matter.

SOME EXAMPLES:

1. Understanding the motivation for why some countries obtain Chinese loans (but others do not) will help in assessing the likely effects that these loans will have on economic growth and development. Identifying the motives is therefore key in predicting whether Chinese loans will help lift millions out of poverty, or just increase corruption among the elites.
2. The history of Europe is characterized by many and deadly wars. At the core of the European Union is the idea that common economic policies will help bring lasting peace to Europe. Analyzing why countries follow these ideas (or not) provides insights into the prospects of this approach.
3. Understanding what type of institutions might help prevent inter-religious violence between Christians and Muslims. This, in turn, might inform the design of policy interventions by governments and foreign donors, thereby significantly increasing the effectiveness of these interventions in reducing death and destruction.

MOST COMMON MISTAKES:

1. The importance of your research should pertain with respect to larger societal issues. In other words, do not stick to the narrow topic of your thesis. For example, stating that "Understanding why some governments borrow from China is important because then we know why governments borrow from China." Instead, derive the implications of why it matters that we know how governments make this decision.

Summary of your argument Your introduction should briefly introduce your answer to the research question. Here you introduce your explanation as to why we observe the variation in the dependent variable. Importantly, you must make this argument first in the abstract ("I propose that factor X can explain why abc happens"). In a second step,

you may illustrate your explanation with reference to the puzzle that motivated your introduction ("For example, factor X was present in one country which is why it did abc. However, factor X was absent in the other country, which is why did not do abc.").

SOME EXAMPLES:

1. I argue that Chinese loans have distinct distributional consequences across different constituencies in the recipient country. For example, Chinese loans often fund specific infrastructure projects. These can provide job opportunities for workers, even if not all jobs go to locals. Consequently, I expect workers to be in favor of Chinese loans. In contrast, the domestic financial sector is likely to be negatively affected by Chinese loans. After all, domestic finance provided most funding for infrastructure projects in the past, but now faces strong external competition. As a result, I expect the financial sector to be opposed to the government taking out Chinese loans. Against this background, I hypothesize that governments will implement the preferences of the strongest societal interest group. Consequently, if Labor is more politically influential than Finance, I expect politicians to borrow from China. In contrast, if Finance is politically stronger than Labor, I expect politicians to decline Chinese loan offers. I argue that this explanation can be applied to Colombia and Ecuador, where Finance is strong in the former while Labor is politically influential in the latter. This explains why Colombia turned down Chinese loan offers, while Ecuador accepted them.
2. My theoretical argument assumes that politicians respond to voters preferences. If the population wants to join the Euro, then politicians will initiate the process. However, this implies that we need to explain popular opinion in some countries is favorable towards joining the Euro, while the popular opinion in others is less favorable. I argue that a public discourse that emphasizes the economic arguments for joining the Euro (such as ease of doing business and lower price levels) does not increase a population's willingness to join the Euro. Instead, I argue that a public discourse emphasizing the historical dimensions of tighter economic integration (specifically, that tighter integration might imply lower likelihood of wars between European countries) leads to higher support for joining the Euro. I argue that Lithuania's more tumultuous history of wars with neighboring countries lead to a public discourse that emphasized the non-economic benefits of joining the Euro. In contrast, public discourse in Latvia focused primarily on the economic benefits. Consequently, this explains why there was not much support for joining the Euro in Latvia.
3. Previous explanations focused on the actions by politicians, as some might use inter-religious hatred as an electoral strategy. However, not all politicians in Nigerian districts use hateful language that could incite violence. To explain the differences across Nigerian politicians, I point to the differences in institutions. For example, some electoral laws might require two candidates from opposite ethnic and religious groups to run together on a joint ticket. In these cases, it is unlikely that the two candidates would use hateful language for electoral purposes, as their joint electoral success depends on the support from both ethnic and religious groups. In contrast, if electoral rules allow individuals to run on single tickets, hateful language might be an effective electoral strategy to rally one's own ethnic and religious groups behind the candidate. I argue that the differences in inter-religious violence across Nigerian

districts corresponds to the differences in electoral laws. Specifically, laws in the districts of Bassa and Bokkos require joint candidacies, while electoral rules in Jos, Barkin Ladi, and Riyom do not. I argue that this explains relative peace in the former districts, while the latter experience frequent inter-religious violence.

MOST COMMON MISTAKES:

1. Make sure your summary of your argument is brief. No need to explain all nuances of your argument. Leave this for the body of the thesis. Instead, focus on what is most important to give readers a general idea of your explanation.

Summary of your evidence Finally, you should summarize the kind of evidence that you will present supporting your argument. Briefly tell the reader what you did (e.g. a qualitative case study, a statistical analysis, a survey experiment, etc.) and what findings you uncovered.

SOME EXAMPLES:

1. In this study, I conduct a 2x2 "most similar" case study comparing four countries, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Bolivia. The analysis is primarily based on interviews with governmental decision makers I conducted in person or online. I find that the relative strength of societal interest groups matters. Chinese loans have generally positive effects on domestic Labor but negative effects on domestic Finance. Consequently, politicians will implement the preferences by Labor (i.e. borrow from China) in countries where workers have much political influence. This is the case in Ecuador and Bolivia. In contrast, countries in which Finance dominates typically do not borrow from China, as evidenced by politicians in Colombia and Peru turning down Chinese loan offers.
2. This Thesis presents the the findings of a survey experiment. Using MTurk, I designed a survey experiment to understand how respondents' attitudes towards the introduction of the Euro varied if exposed to different information about the monetary, historical, and political aspects of the monetary union. I find that respondents become significantly more supportive of their country to join the Euro when exposed to information that tighter economic integration might imply lower likelihood of wars between European countries. In contrast, I find that merely providing economic arguments, such as improved efficiency or lower prices, do not increase respondents' support for the Euro.
3. To answer these questions, I collected monthly data on instances of inter-religious violence by coding local newspaper articles published between 2015 and 2022. I then combined these data with information on the ethnic composition of the population, the political dynamics, institutional characteristics, and economic situation within Nigerian districts for this period of time. Using this dataset, I implemented a logistic regression analysis with district fixed effects to identify how electoral rules affects the likelihood of inter-religious conflict. I find that districts whose electoral rules require two candidates from different ethnic groups to run on a joint ticket are significantly less likely to experience inter-religious violence in comparison to districts that allow candidates from a single ethnic group to run for office individually. This is likely driven by the fact that such joint campaigns are less likely to use hateful language

towards other ethnic groups, as this would undermine the electoral chances of both candidates.

MOST COMMON MISTAKES:

1. Make sure that your summary of your findings is short. No need to explain all details of your empirical strategy. Leave this for the body of the thesis. Instead, focus on what is most important to give readers a general idea of where you are headed.