

PLS 343
Research project instructions

The research project is the main assignment in the course. Its primary purpose is to help you to develop your research skills, gain hands-on experience of conducting your own research, and, in the process, consolidate your knowledge and understanding of African politics. The project has three components: a research proposal and two drafts—initial and final—of the research essay.

In all three components, you will answer one of the following questions:

- 1) Jeffrey Herbst, Mahmood Mamdani, and Crawford Young offer very different assessments of the colonial African state. Which of these assessments provides us with the strongest analytical leverage to explain the nature of the African state?
- 2) According to many scholars, African states' control over hinterlands / political peripheries has historically been limited. Does this claim still hold today? Critically evaluate the scholarly literature on the subject and apply it to empirical evidence on contemporary projection of state power on the continent.
- 3) Why do some—and not other—social identities become politically salient in specific contexts? Identify the processes whereby identities acquire political salience, critically evaluate the scholarly literature on these processes, specify an argument that you find compelling, test it using 1-3 empirical cases in Africa, and explain the applicability of that approach to your chosen cases.
- 4) What explains the prevalence of civil conflict in Africa? Review the existing evidence on the subject, identify the explanation that is in your assessment most compelling, and explain the underlying mechanisms.
- 5) To what extent are the governments of postcolonial African states responsible for the current levels of economic development on the continent? Critically evaluate the scholarly literature on the subject, identify the explanation that is in your assessment most compelling, and explain the underlying mechanisms.
- 6) What explains subnational variation in the provision of public goods in Africa? Critically evaluate the scholarly literature on the subject, identify the explanation that is in your assessment most compelling, and explain the underlying mechanisms.
- 7) In the late 1980s nearly every African country was ruled by an authoritarian regime. Three decades later, half of the countries on the continent have democratized, and the others are autocratic. What explains this recent regime type heterogeneity and the trajectories of democratization and authoritarian retrenchment in Africa? Critically evaluate the scholarly literature on the subject, identify the most compelling explanation, and explain the mechanisms.

All components of the research project should be double-spaced with one-inch margins in Times New Roman 12-point font.

All citations should follow the American Political Science Association Style Manual (<https://connect.apsanet.org/stylemanual/>), which is the citation style used in the course syllabus.

Lists of sources do not count towards the specified assignment length. If you choose to include cover pages, they also do not count towards the assignment length.

Submission details and other assessment policies can be found in the syllabus.

Research proposal

The purpose of the research proposal is to assist you in selecting your essay question, locating sources, and organizing your ideas as well as to provide you with feedback about your work that you can use as you prepare your research essay.

The proposal should be 1 page long. It should:

- a) identify your selected question;
- b) state your thesis;
- c) outline the key arguments that you intend to advance in support of that thesis;
- d) specify your case selection, independent and dependent variables, and overall research design; and
- e) explain what scholarly and nonacademic sources you will draw on in your research essay, justify your selection, and provide your initial assessment of the literature.

You should attach a proposed bibliography to your proposal. The biography should include most of the academic sources that you will use in the research essay. You do not need to have read all the sources prior to proposal submission, but you will need to justify your choices.

The assignment is worth 5% of the course grade. It is due at by 11.59 pm on February 26.

Research essay

In the research essay you will build on the work you did while preparing the research proposal and develop a cogent and articulate argument that demonstrates your knowledge and critical assessment of the existing scholarship—both covered in the course and located through your own literature search—on the topic and ability to use empirical evidence found in secondary sources to develop your own explanation. The research essay must be on the same topic as the research proposal.

The essay should be 10-12 pages long and follow the standard structure of a university essay: with an introduction—and, crucially, a thesis statement—main body, and conclusion. Make sure that you clearly state your argument in the introduction, determine its scope, define the key concepts, explain your research design, support your assertions with evidence (citing any contrary views or evidence as relevant), and conclude by summarizing your findings and outlining any questions or avenues that may require future research. The essay-writing tips handout that I have provided to you offers suggestions on building your argument and structuring your essay that you should follow in this assignment.

The essay should draw upon at least 20-25 *academic* sources; you may also use nonacademic sources.

Assessment of the essay will be in two parts.

First, you will prepare and submit to me an initial draft of your research essay. The initial draft should be a polished, high-quality essay that represents the best work that you can complete at the time of submission; crucially, it should not be a rough draft. The initial draft is worth 15% of the course grade. It is due by 11.59 pm on April 1. Following submission, I will read the draft, assign the first grade for the essay, and provide you with feedback.

Second, you will revise the essay into an even higher-quality final draft based on received feedback. The final draft is worth 20% of the course grade. It is due by 11.59 pm on April 29. The second grade for the essay will assess the improvement that you have made to the assignment as well as the quality of your research and presentation and the cogency of your argument.

Research proposal rubric

	Failure	Minimally acceptable	Acceptable	Good	Excellent
Thesis statement and argument outline	The proposal does not address the question and / or shows limited or no understanding of the topic. The thesis statement and argument outline are missing or not comprehensible.	The proposal seems to respond to the question, but the thesis and argument outline are unclear.	The thesis answers the question and is focused, but could be stated better and in a more focused way. The outlined argument may not be compelling.	The thesis answers the question and is focused. An outline of a reasonably compelling argument is developed.	The thesis is focused, clear, and directly answers the question. An outline of a compelling argument is developed.
Sources	The proposal does not explain what sources will be used in the project. Inadequate citations and / or insufficient number of sources.	The proposal includes a list of sources, but does not explain their relevance or value. Referencing does not follow the required citation style. In some cases excessive use of quotations. Sufficient number of sources.	The proposal includes a list of sources and provides a poorly developed explanation of their relevance or value. Referencing follows the required citation style, with some errors. Sufficient number of sources.	The proposal includes a list of sources and provides some explanation of their relevance or value. Mostly correct referencing, with a few minor errors. Sufficient number of sources.	The proposal includes an extensive list of sources and provides comprehensive explanation of their relevance and value. Correct referencing. Number of sources which is at least sufficient and likely exceeds the requirements.
Research design	The research design is not explained.	At least one of the following research design components is identified: overall research design; case selection; independent and dependent variables.	Some of the following research design components are identified: overall research design; case selection; independent and dependent variables. Justification of the research design choices is not entirely convincing.	Most of the following research design components are identified: overall research design; case selection; independent and dependent variables. Justification of the research design choices is mostly convincing.	All of the following research design components are identified: overall research design; case selection; independent and dependent variables. Justification of the research design choices is convincing.
Literature outline	The proposal does not include an outline of the existing literature.	The proposal includes an outline, but it is excessively short and/or shows limited understanding	The proposal includes an outline and demonstrates some understanding of the existing literature.	The proposal includes an outline and demonstrates good understanding of the existing literature.	The proposal includes an outline and demonstrates excellent understanding of the literature.

		of the existing literature.			
Literature critique	The proposal does not address the limitations of the existing literature.	The proposal addresses the limitations of the literature, but does so excessively briefly and/or in a reductive, superficial, or confusing way.	The proposal addresses the limitations of the literature, but does not provide a proper critique of the existing literature.	The proposal provides an interesting, but not fully developed (or deficient in some other way) critique of the existing literature.	The proposal provides a compelling and well-developed (given the nature of the assignment) critique of the literature.
Organization, writing style, spelling, and grammar	Weak or no organization. Random expression of ideas. Thoughts are expressed in a disjointed or incomprehensible way. Writing style, spelling, and grammar need major improvement. The proposal is too short or too long.	The proposal needs better transition and flow between ideas. Some awkward and confusing passages detract from a thorough understanding of the argument. The proposal follows the length / page count instructions.	Mostly logical progression of ideas, but the writer must do more to make connections. Some awkward and confusing passages detract from a thorough understanding of the argument. The proposal follows the length / page count instructions.	Mostly logical progression of ideas, but the writer must do more to make connections. A few distracting errors or awkward phrasing. The proposal follows the length / page count instructions.	Good flow or progression of ideas and good presentation of how the points made fit into a broader argument. Eloquent expression of ideas with no distracting or obvious grammatical or mechanical errors. The proposal follows the length / page count instructions.

Research essay rubric

	Failure	Minimally acceptable	Acceptable	Good	Excellent
Thesis statement and argument outline	The essay does not address the question and provide a thesis statement, or the thesis statement is not comprehensible. The scope of the argument is unclear. Key concepts are not defined. The essay shows limited or no understanding of the topic.	The essay seems to respond to the question, but the thesis and argument outline are unclear. The scope of the argument is addressed, but may not be clear. Definitions of key concepts are provided, but may not be clear.	The thesis answers the question and is focused, but could be stated better and in a more focused way. The outlined argument may not be compelling. Definitions of key concepts are provided, but may not be clear.	The thesis answers the question and is focused. An outline of a reasonably compelling argument is developed. The essay defines the scope of the argument and key concepts. The essay shows a moderately good understanding of the topic.	The thesis is focused, clear, and directly answers the question. An outline of a compelling argument is developed. The essay defines the scope of the argument and key concepts. The essay shows a very good understanding of the topic.
Research design	The research design is not explained.	At least one of the following research design components is identified: overall research design; case selection; independent and dependent variables.	Some of the following research design components are identified: overall research design; case selection; independent and dependent variables. Justification of the research design choices is not entirely convincing.	Most of the following research design components are identified: overall research design; case selection; independent and dependent variables. Justification of the research design choices is mostly convincing.	All of the following research design components are identified: overall research design; case selection; independent and dependent variables. Justification of the research design choices is convincing.
Literature outline and sources	The essay does not address the existing literature or identify the sources on which it is based.	The essay addresses the literature and sources, but shows limited understanding of them and does not explain their relevance and value.	The essay provides an outline of the literature and a list of sources. It demonstrates some understanding of the literature and data.	The essay provides an outline of the literature and a list of sources. It demonstrates good understanding of the literature and data.	The essay provides an outline of the literature and an extensive list of sources. It demonstrates an excellent understanding of the literature and provides a comprehensive explanation of the relevance and value of the data

					on which it is based.
Literature critique	The essay does not address the limitations of the existing literature.	The essay addresses the limitations of the literature, but does so excessively briefly and/or in a reductive, superficial, or confusing way.	The essay addresses the limitations of the literature, but does not provide a proper critique of the existing literature.	The essay provides an interesting, but not fully developed (or deficient in some other way) critique of the existing literature.	The essay provides a compelling and well-developed (given the nature of the assignment) critique of the literature.
Cogency of the argument	The argument is simplistic and/or poorly developed. Analysis indicates little understanding of the topic and no originality of thought.	The essay is somewhat developed, but may not have a clear focus and be logically constructed and internally coherent. Analysis displays some understanding of the topic, but little originality of thought.	The essay is somewhat developed. Analysis displays some understanding of the topic and, in some cases, some originality of thought.	The argument has a clear focus. It is logically constructed and internally coherent, but not fully developed or deficient in some other way. Analysis displays a solid grasp of the topic and some originality of thought.	The argument has a clear focus. It is logically constructed and internally coherent. Analysis displays a solid grasp of the topic and originality of thought.
Organization, writing style, spelling, and grammar	Weak or no organization. Random expression of ideas. Thoughts are expressed in a disjointed or incomprehensible way. Writing style, spelling, and grammar need major improvement. The essay is too short or too long.	The essay needs better transition and flow between ideas. Some awkward and confusing passages detract from a thorough understanding of the essay. The essay follows the length / page count instructions.	Mostly logical progression of ideas, but the writer must do more to make connections. Some awkward and confusing passages detract from a thorough understanding of the essay. The essay follows the length / page count instructions.	Mostly logical progression of ideas, but the writer must do more to make connections. A few distracting errors or awkward phrasing. The essay follows the length / page count instructions.	Good flow or progression of ideas and good presentation of how the points made fit into a broader argument. Eloquent expression of ideas with no distracting or obvious grammatical or mechanical errors. The essay follows the length / page count instructions.
Citations, quotations, and bibliography	Missing or inadequate citations, insufficient number of sources.	Referencing does not follow the required citation style. In some cases excessive use of quotations.	Referencing follows the required citation style, with some errors. Sufficient number of sources.	Mostly correct referencing, with a few minor errors. Sufficient number of sources.	Correct referencing. Number of sources which is at least sufficient and likely exceeds the requirements.

		Sufficient number of sources.			
Proposal / initial draft feedback	Feedback is not addressed.	Some effort has been made to incorporate feedback into the essay.	Feedback has been incorporated into the essay, but issues identified in the proposal have not been fully addressed.	Feedback has been incorporated into the essay and there is some evidence of critical reflection about the feedback.	Feedback has been incorporated into the essay and the student has evidently reflected on the feedback.