

PS 597 Preparing Future Faculty

Spring 2026
Thursdays 9:30 - 11:50 a.m.
404 David Kinley Hall
0 Credits / S/U Grading

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PS597 is a companion course for PS522 (Research Design and Techniques). Roughly speaking, PS522 will be run as a conventional seminar with plentiful readings and discussion thereof, while PS597 will operate more like a workshop, with a focus on individual projects. PS597 will consist of a mix of group meetings and individualized meetings with the instructors.

The first-year research project provides an opportunity for doctoral students to gain hands-on experience in the research process. Each student will design and carry out a research project over the winter, spring, and summer. Projects will be presented in a conference format in September, and a final research paper will be due in advance of that public presentation.

Students are expected to interact regularly with members of the faculty as part of the first-year research project process. Most importantly, each student should consult regularly with one or both of their first-year advisers and/or other members of the faculty with interests that align with the project. And of course, all students enrolled in PS597 will use this workshop to refine the project, getting regular feedback from the faculty instructors that should facilitate progress.

Additional information about the first-year research project is available in [a departmental document](#). As a brief overview, in terms of length and scope, the project should be comparable to a conference paper or journal submission. The successful first-year project will include the following: a well-crafted research question; justification and anchoring in the relevant literature; a logical and well-argued theoretical account; the design and implementation of an appropriate research strategy; and the effective presentation of results or insights. Please note that there is *not* an expectation with respect to the nature of the project's results. Some projects will generate mixed or null findings; that is to be expected, and it is perfectly acceptable. Lastly, although it is possible that the topic

tackled in first-year projects will evolve into dissertation, this is absolutely *not* a strong expectation or requirement. Most graduate students pursue multiple research projects during their time in the program, often including projects that are wholly unrelated to one another.

In addition to work on the first-year research project, this course also will include some discussion of other topics in the profession. Students are encouraged to ask questions about any aspect of the profession. Examples include questions about the job market, types of academic and nonacademic positions, tenure expectations, publishing in journals, publishing books, teaching expectations, etc. Given the workshop nature of the course, this is a perfect opportunity for us to field such questions. Anything that will help guide students towards careers they can enjoy is fair game.

Student Responsibilities

Grading for the course is on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory scale. To receive an “S” grade, you must fulfill the basic course requirements:

1. Attend and participate in class meetings and meetings with instructors.
2. Submit drafts of written work throughout the semester.
3. Read and comment on classmates’ written work.¹
4. Present a research design during the last week of the semester.
5. Submit a final research design paper.

Required Materials

There is one required book for PS597:

Howard S. Becker. 2020. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Third Edition. University of Chicago Press.

An impressively large number of people in the discipline – including previous PS522/PS597 students – have found Becker’s advice on how to approach writing and his diagnosis of some of the underlying anxieties that get in the way of writing useful.

★Please read the entire book by the second week of class.★

General Policies

Emergency Response

The University of Illinois has a set of guidelines and policies relating to emergencies. Please review these here: <https://police.illinois.edu/em/run-hide-fight/>

Students with Disabilities

¹ We are working on a [template for reviewing](#).

The instructors will attempt to make appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities. As described in the University of Illinois Student Code, these accommodations can be coordinated through the Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES). The DRES Student Services Office is reachable at 217-333-4603 or disability@illinois.edu. Students must notify the instructors and provide proper documentation during the first week of class.

Academic Integrity

Any act of academic dishonesty or misconduct will be penalized. Please refer to Art. 1, Part 4 of the Student Code at the University of Illinois.

Student Conduct

Students are expected to behave in accordance with the penal and civil statutes of all applicable local, state, and federal governments, with the rules and regulations of the Board of Regents, and with university regulations and administrative rules. For more information about the student code and handbook, see the CITL course policies page.

Inclusivity

In line with the Department of Political Science's commitment to create a community of care and inclusivity (A Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion | Political Science at Illinois), it is our conviction that our shared learning experience is greatly enriched when students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives find a positive and safe environment. Respect for different viewpoints must be a chief principle during this class, and we expect all students to maintain and nurture this environment.

Land Acknowledgement

As a land-grant institution, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has a responsibility to acknowledge the historical context in which it exists. We are currently on the lands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Peankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Chickasaw Nations. It is necessary for us to acknowledge these Native Nations and for us to work with them as we move forward as an institution with Native peoples at the core of our efforts.

Student Wellness Resources

The University of Illinois strives to promote student success through the support of student psychological and emotional well-being. Please take advantage of the resources listed on the Student Affairs website.

Sexual Misconduct Policy and Reporting

The University of Illinois is committed to combating sexual misconduct. Faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct to the university's Title IX and Disability Office. In turn, an individual with the Title IX and Disability Office will provide information about rights and options, including accommodations, support services, the campus disciplinary process, and law enforcement options. A list of the designated university employees who, as counselors, confidential advisors, and

medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found in the Confidential Resources section. Other information about resources and reporting is available at wecare.illinois.edu.

COVID-19 Classroom Policy

Following University policy, all students are required to engage in appropriate behavior to protect the health and safety of the community. Students are also required to follow the campus COVID-19 protocols, as they evolve.

AI and Fair Credit Policy

This class aims to help you write your first serious research paper and thus to kick off your development as a scholar. Since the point of the class is your own development and productivity, we ask you to list the tools you use for each piece of work you turn in: AI/LLMs (including how you used them), text editors, software packages, citation managers, and so on. For an example, see the acknowledgements footer at jakebowers.org. For another example, see [this conversation](#) Jake had with the Claude AI to develop this policy. If you use the same tools across assignments, you can write "Same tools as before" and note any new additions. We want you to learn how to choose your tools to enhance your own development and to avoid relying on tools in ways that might slow your personal development as a writer and scholar.

Weekly Schedule

January 22. Course introduction.

Discussion of the first-year research project and other questions related to the profession. Preliminary discussion of research topics.

We expect you have been thinking about your projects during the fall semester and over the winter break. You should come to our first meeting ready to describe your research question. We don't expect you to have a fully developed theory or fully developed ideas about how you will operationalize and measure variables for your project. But we do expect you to be able to show the ways in which you have been thinking about the project. It is fine if your ideas and research question change over the term. But you should come to class ready to **at least pretend** that you have a research question that you want to pursue.

Since research projects should be anchored in relevant literatures, we expect you to have given some thought to how your project relates to existing scholarship. In addition to coming to class ready to describe your research question, please come to class ready to talk about one piece of existing literature (i.e., a journal article or a book) with which you see your project engaging. This might be a piece of scholarship, for example, that raised interesting hypotheses that you want to test, that established initial results that opened the door to the research question that you want to ask, or that presented results that you think are incorrect or incomplete. Many papers in the discipline originate in a scholar's strong reactions to some existing piece of literature. All papers in the discipline need to reference existing literature in order to situate themselves and their contribution.

Due: A statement of your current/provisional research question in no more than one paragraph.

January 29. The Research Process.

We will invite some additional faculty members to join us for this week's meeting, and we will ask them to describe their research process, opening the floor to your questions about how these political scientists do political science.

The complete research process for an empirical paper involves developing ideas, collecting and analyzing data, writing up the results, receiving feedback on those results, and revising the presentation of the research (and perhaps the interpretation of the results).

We will ask our faculty guests to share one paper that you should read before class. Remembering that part of the research process is communicating the results, what makes the paper work as a communication device? What strategies can you detect that the author(s) employed to communicate effectively? What alternative decisions might they have made about presenting their results? How do they frame the paper and its contribution? How do they discuss existing research? What would Howard Becker say about their writing? What do you see in the paper that you think has helped the author(s) convince relevant gatekeepers (i.e., peer reviewers and editors) that they had found something in their research that was worth sharing with the broader scientific community?

Due: Have read the Becker book. Have read the papers suggested by the faculty guests.

February 5. Research Questions.

We will again invite some additional faculty members to join us to discuss more specifically their thoughts on research questions and to give you feedback on yours.

Your research question is your general, substantive statement about the mystery your research seeks to resolve. Anyone – other academics but also your friends and family or the people next to you on the airplane or riding with you on the elevator – should be able to understand your question and why it matters.

In crafting your research question, here are some general matters to consider:

1. Is the issue about which you are asking really in question? What is the mystery? Do we already know the answer? Have there been prior attempts to answer it that were unsuccessful or incomplete or otherwise unsatisfactory from your current perspective?
2. Would answering this question be valuable? What would other political scientists gain by answering it? This, in academia, is the classic “So what?” question. You

should be genuinely curious about your research question, enthused about answering it, and effective at sharing that enthusiasm with others. If you truly believe it is an important question, you should be able to communicate that importance to others.

3. Can your question be answered? You may be curious about patterns in political behavior in the afterlife, but that doesn't mean you can obtain and communicate answers to your questions. Some research questions are hard to answer, and that is fine. Those are challenges. But some are impossible to answer, and those should be set aside.

Due: By the end of the day on Tuesday, post a one-to-two paragraph statement of your research question on Canvas.

February 12 and 19. Individualized Meetings about Research Questions.

These two weeks, we will *not* meet as a group. Instead, each student will meet individually with the instructors to discuss their research questions and the relevant literature in which they are anchoring their project.

★ Let us emphasize the importance of anchoring research questions in the literature. A research paper is part of a scholarly conversation. Other scholars did work on your topic (or closely related topics) before you, and different scholars will do work after you. During these weeks, you should be reading more deeply in the literature with which you are engaging, continuing to identify the space that your research project will occupy in the literature and — as described above — the value of occupying that particular space. ★

Due:

1. By the end of the day on Tuesday of each week, post a statement of your research question with appropriate justification of the question and a discussion of where it fits in the literature on Canvas. These assignments should be one-to-two pages long.
2. Each student will comment on assignments submitted by two other students. By the end of the day on Friday of each week, post your comments for the relevant submitted assignments. We will offer signups and/or randomly assign you the other assignments on which you should comment. You can use the [template](#) for commenting that we are drafting.

February 26. Presentations of Research Questions and the Literature.

During this class meeting, students will gain experience in presenting well-motivated and well-situated research questions through six-to-eight-minute presentations that should be uploaded to Canvas by Wednesday evening.

How do you want to motivate your research question? Do you want to provide a real-world example of the phenomenon that you are studying, describe the research question, and then talk about how answering that research question will contribute to the literature? Or do you want to tell us about what past scholarship has said and use the existence of contradictions or open puzzles to motivate your research question? In either case, the presentation should include both the research question and a brief review of the literature.

Effective integration of past research into papers and presentations can be difficult to accomplish. One common problem is diving so deeply into the literature that readers, and perhaps even you, lose sight of your project. Both in your writing and in a presentation, you need to decide how much literature to cover: how many scholarly works and at what level of depth? The key thing to remember is that engagement with literature should be purposive: what past works warrant attention for the purpose of advancing the cause of your research? We use the past literature in order to extract from it lessons about what we already know — or do not yet know — about matters related to your research question. Remember that you are using literature not to communicate to readers all that you know about your topic but rather in service of your research project.

Due: Slide presentations (links or documents) with roughly 5 slides.

March 5. Individualized Meetings about Research Questions and the Literature.

Based on the feedback that you received on earlier drafts and from your presentation, you should revise what you have written so far, editing the introduction to fully motivate the project and writing up your engagement with the literature just as you see it done in some of your favorite published articles: we encourage you to find models of academic writing and to study and copy their structure and style. For example, you will rarely find sections explicitly called “Literature Review” in actual published work even if a section that operates as a literature review is typically a part of the article formula. How do these professionals use the literature? What can you learn from them?

The instructors will meet with students to discuss the progress of their projects.

Due: By the end of the day on Tuesday, submit an introduction and a purposive engagement with the literature on Canvas. These assignments should be around four-to-five pages long.

March 12. Theory.

In PS522/PS597, we ask students to operate from the premise that political scientists work together as a collective or community over time and space to come up with new explanations of important relationships and phenomena and to improve existing explanations via criticism and scrutiny. Theories produce explanations. Theories answer

questions about “why” and “how.” Most theories in political science produce mechanistic explanations: “What is the explanation for why X occurred?” is often answered with “Because A led to B which interacted with C to produce X.” And theories always require assumptions about the way the world works: explanatory statements make sense given certain assumptions and may not make sense given other assumptions. Notice that we are not talking about data or statistics or any given observation here, just about the words and symbols that political scientists use to ask and answer “why” and “how” questions.

A good research question engages either directly or indirectly with such questions: “Why do people elect politicians who show signs of turning into dictators?”, “How does democracy fail?”, “Why do some countries that engage in military disputes avoid war?” or “How can this explanation help us understand this new phenomenon?” or “How should we change this explanation to account for changes in the world and other related theories?”

So how does your research question engage with theory and explanation? If you are proposing a new theory or modifying an existing one, is the theory one about psychological processes (e.g., how humans receive and interpret information and use that information to form opinions or guide behavior), or is the theory about strategic interactions between different actors (e.g., how a legislator’s understanding of how other legislators will react to their proposed bill guides the content or timing of the bill that they introduce)? Or something else?

Students will present their initial theoretical ideas in six-to-eight-minute presentations.

Due: Slide presentations (links or documents) with roughly 5 slides should be uploaded to Canvas by Wednesday evening.

March 19. NO CLASS MEETING – SPRING BREAK.

March 26. Individualized Meetings about Theory.

Students will meet individually with the instructors to discuss revised versions of their theoretical ideas.

Due:

1. By the end of the day on Tuesday, submit a draft theory section on Canvas. These assignments should be around four-to-five pages long.
2. Each student will comment on assignments submitted by two other students. By the end of the day on Friday, post your comments for the relevant submitted assignments.

April 2. Problem Solving Meeting.

We will meet as a group this week to discuss whatever you want to discuss about your paper. Are you still struggling to find the right literature in which to situate your project? Have you tried a half-dozen times to relate your question to a “why” question, and you’re still feeling unsure about how it’s coming together? Do you feel like the hypotheses coming out of the theoretical explanations and past literature are too obvious? Are you looking ahead to testing your hypotheses, but you’re not sure what research design would produce the most credible test? Are you struggling to think about where to find data? Let’s put our heads together and solve the problem!

All students should come to class with some issue on which they would like feedback.

Due: A description of an issue or problem with the research project on which feedback is needed.

April 9. Research Design.

You’ve asked a research question and situated it in an existing literature. You’ve thought hard about theoretical answers to that research question and generated one or more testable hypotheses. How will you now collect empirical evidence that might possibly disconfirm or else support those hypotheses?

Think first about what the ideal experiment(s) for testing your hypotheses would be. If your topic does not lend itself to experimentation, you don’t necessarily need to share this idea, but thinking about the ideal experiment can be useful for making sure that you really understand your main explanatory variable (a measurement of the “cause” or key driver in the theoretical mechanism) and for concretizing the types of outcome variables at which you are looking (a measurement of the “effect” or important outcome of the process).

Draw on PS522 material to think about how to make your research design as credible as possible. Can you design an experiment for testing your hypotheses? Can you think of ways in which the world might have designed a quasi-experiment for you? If your data will be observational, what processes might confound the one underlying your hypothesis, and how will you know if patterns in the data originate with your proposed theoretical process or a different one? How will you collect the data that you need for testing your hypotheses?

Students will present their initial research designs in six-to-eight-minute presentations.

Due: Slides (links or documents) should be uploaded to Canvas by Wednesday evening.

April 16. Individualized Meetings about Research Design.

Students will meet individually with the instructors to discuss revised versions of their research designs.

Due:

1. By the end of the day on Tuesday, submit a draft research design section on Canvas. These assignments should be around four-to-five pages long.
2. Each student will comment on assignments submitted by two other students. By the end of the day on Friday, post your comments for the relevant submitted assignments.

April 23. NO CLASS – MPSA ANNUAL MEETING.

April 30 and May 7. Research Design Presentations.

Students will make 12-minute presentations of their research projects.

We will discuss whether to make these presentations open to the entire department, the entire faculty, to advisers and select faculty, or to no one other than the class and instructors.

Presentations should be uploaded to Canvas by the end of the day on Wednesday before your scheduled presentation.

May 14. Final Papers Due.

Submit a complete draft of the first half of your first-year research project on Canvas.

Acknowledgments:

We used Claude AI to draft the AI Policy.