Guidelines for Writing Papers at GSPIA

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Sections:

Before we start

You will encounter many kinds of papers - term papers, take home exams, major research papers, briefing notes, theses, policy papers, etc. - but the differences between these types of papers are not as large as they may appear. All these types of papers should give an answer to a precisely defined and relevant question, and this answer should be evidence-based. Three pitfalls that every paper should avoid are: 1) having no question, or a poorly specified question; 2) providing evidence not related to your question; and 3) concluding with no answer or answers, or with an answer to a question that you never posed in the introduction. The easiest way to avoid these pitfalls is to carefully review your introduction and your conclusion and make sure that they 'match'.

Any paper – even a five-page term paper – should be preceded by a blueprint or a "research proposal." This stage of research is so important that it may reasonably take half of your time; once you have it, the rest of your writing will be much easier (conversely, without a research proposal, you risk getting lost). The purpose of this document is to offer practical guidelines that will assist you with writing a research proposal.

How will your paper be evaluated?

The evaluation of your paper clearly depends on the exact requirements for the specific paper. But however, the specific requirements are, there are a few 'rules of thumb': A good paper has a clear and consistent theme. It makes an argument. It provides appropriate evidence to support the argument. It demonstrates internal consistency, that is, the research question, the evidence, the methods, and the conclusion 'speak to each other'. The paper is well-written, well-organized and provides interesting insights. A poor paper shows shortcomings in terms of internal consistency, argumentation, and composition, such as poor evidence to support statements made, a lack of logic, poor synthesis of the material, disorganization, or poor writing.

The Major Research Paper has its own grading scheme, which is given to each professor evaluating an MRP. This grading scheme is also available in the Major Research Paper section of the online handbook.

What is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a document that proposes a research project (and, yes term papers, take home exams, major research papers, and thesis are all, to some extent, research projects!). A research project addresses a research problem or puzzle. This problem or puzzle is framed or leads to a research question for which the research will offer an answer.

Goal of a research proposal

A research proposal seeks to convince a course director, research supervisor or research committee that the research project is relevant and feasible. *Relevant* means that the project should be undertaken, i.e. that it is an important question that should be researched.

Feasible means that it is possible, i.e., that you know how to approach and execute the project, that you know that there is sufficient data, and that you can do the project in the required time frame. It is easy to find a relevant question, but it can be tricky to find a relevant *and* feasible question!

Importance of writing a strong research proposal

A strong research proposal is central to the success of any research project. It helps you to determine that your project is doable before you begin writing the paper. In addition, if you take the time to clearly describe your project in your proposal, you will be able to write your research faster and more easily because you will have solidified key elements. Also, the research proposal can be used as a guide to help you stay on track while writing your research.

How to write a research proposal?

As mentioned above, a good research proposal is at least half of the work of every research project. We therefore focus on the steps needed to produce a research proposal. But even if you do not have to produce an elaborate research proposal (for example, because you are working on a presentation, or on a short-term paper), it is still a very good idea to follow these steps. By 'follow', we do not mean linearly follow the sequence of steps as outlined below: the development and writing of a research proposal typically involves a lot of 'back and forth' between the steps before a concise and logical proposal emerges.

Step 1: Find a relevant and interesting topic

A good paper asks an important/relevant question (usually, it asks only *one* question!). There are many ways to identify a question. For example, unresolved debates or gaps in the scholarly literature or the policy arena may point to a relevant problem. Following public policy debates may help you identify key questions which you may want to address. Every topic that advances our theoretical, conceptual, or empirical understanding or that proposes a solution to a real-life problem is relevant. It is important that you make sure that beyond your interest you also have access to sufficient information to write your paper on this field; indeed, writing a research proposal can help you gain background knowledge on a topic of your interest.

Step 2: Specify the type of paper you intend to write (see below for a list of examples)

There are different types of papers you will be expected to write; the following six types are among the most common. Note that a paper can have more than one objective, which means the paper can serve more than one of the following six objectives. You should always be very clear about the objective(s) of your paper!

1. A literature review paper
Such a paper summarizes and evaluates existing theoretical or empirical literature on a *precisely defined* research question. It asks whether existing explanations are valuable and identifies gaps in our knowledge. Note that a literature review is a *part* of almost every type of paper. However, if

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done well, a critical analysis of existing literature is a complete paper. As a matter of fact, this is the type of paper which is most common for term papers or take-home exams.

A literature review paper also has a research question. It is not enough to summarize a few papers which talk about a common topic. Rather, the objective of a literature assessing paper is to see how different authors have tried to answer the same or similar question. Where did they get the evidence from? What methods were used? What are the findings? Where does the literature converge and diverge? What are the big debates? Where are the gaps? Which questions remain?

2. A policy-evaluative, -descriptive or -prescriptive paper
Such a paper describes and evaluates current or future public policies or policy proposals. Are the empirical and theoretical premises of the proponents and opponents of policies valid? Will they produce the results that its proponents promise? Note that this is not about your opinion on a given policy, it is about an argument about these policies based on available evidence.

3. A normative / position paper
The goal of this paper is for you to express a position and to argue for it. You must make a claim – for example, multiculturalism policies are a success or multiculturalism policies should not be pursued – and provide a step-by-step set of reasons to justify your claim. You should consider both reasons in favour of your position and those that oppose your position, explaining why the latter are false, not significant, misguided, etc. This type of paper is for those interested in exploring how, philosophy, economic, social and political theory, law or ethics and moral reasoning apply to the study of public policy and international affairs.

4. A theory-testing paper
A theory testing paper uses empirical evidence to evaluate existing theories. This evidence can be, for example, case studies, or data sets. The objective of such a paper is to test whether the evidence in one given case, which you describe, supports or contradicts an existing theory (which you need to summarize)

5. A theory-proposing paper
Such a paper advances new hypothesis. A deductive (=theory derived) argument for these hypotheses is advanced, and examples to illustrate these hypotheses are offered. Many papers are a combination of theory testing and theory proposing. For example, they test an existing theory, using case studies, and find that the existing theory does not fully explain the outcome. Then they propose and add to the existing theory, or a synthesis of existing theories.

6. An explanatory paper
Such a paper explains the causes and consequences of one or more specific cases (for example, the Falklands War or the Me-Too Movement). It can focus on a single or multiple case studies, using a theoretical framework to explain an outcome. It could also be a lessons-learned paper, focusing on ideas of a theory, policy or event and its relevance to other cases.

Are two or three cases better than one?

We receive many papers which discuss two or more cases. There is no added value in discussing more than one case, *unless* you compare these cases. If you do, you have a comparative design. Please be sure to make explicit why you chose these cases, and what you hope to demonstrate by a comparison. Multiple cases also have to be at the same level of analysis. Consult van Evera (2016) or your instructor on how to do comparative analysis. Perhaps three cases would allow more generalizations or at least triangulation of the results obtained.

Van Evera, Stephen. *Guide to methods for students of political science*. Cornell University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780801454455.

Step 3: Develop the research question

All papers require a clearly defined research question. Finding and defining this research question is the most important part of your work! So, ask yourself: What is the *specific* problem or issue that you are going to research? This informs the central question of the paper, and all elements of your paper are dedicated to the single purpose of answering this question.

Many of the most severe problems in a research paper are related to having chosen the "wrong" research question. Thus, first, ask yourself *critically*, whether it will be possible for you to find an answer to your question. In doing so you should consider the time you need and the knowledge readily available for this task.

Moreover, your research question should be concise and free from any ambiguities. It is hard to force yourself to a non-vague, narrowly focused problem, because you may worry that this implies that "there is nothing left to write about…." In the actual course of writing, you will realize that wanting to write about *everything* makes one lose sight of the forest in all the trees.

Focus!

One way to limit your focus is to determine an appropriate dependent variable and one or more independent variables.

Or in general: How does x affect y?

Keep in mind that you just want to explain one phenomenon with your research question and investigate only one dependent variable (i.e. explained variable). The number of independent variables depends on how many factors you will use for the explanation of this phenomenon (i.e. explanatory variable). If you want to learn more about variables you can find a concise and accessible explanation in van Evera (2016).

Van Evera, Stephen. *Guide to methods for students of political science*. Cornell University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780801454455.

Getting better at this, trick 1:

You have read these guidelines, you have read books on research methods, and it all makes a lot of sense, and it is not difficult to understand. Yet, your papers are not getting better. You feel somehow frustrated. Does this sound familiar? Well, this is because writing good (research) papers requires practice. There are however a few 'tricks' that will help you on your way:

Trick 1: 'Dissect' a paper you admire

One way of practicing your skills without writing a paper is to closely observe how others do it. Take a paper which you admire. Then write a summary of the paper. Do not focus on the content alone but include also notes on how this paper addresses the steps which we have listed in these guidelines. By doing this you will better understand how the paper which you summarize is 'built'. Thus, you learn not only about the contents, but also about how it is made. Which is as important and will help you to 'build' better papers yourself.

Getting better at this, trick 2: Formulate sub-questions and integrate answering them in your research proposal!

Especially if you are working on a larger paper, you might find it easier to assess whether you can 'handle' your research question by formulating sub-questions. Sub-questions are questions that you need before you can answer of your overall research question. The sub-questions must be logically organized so that they follow from your research question and lead towards the conclusion. If they are in the right order, they will automatically provide section divisions for your paper. Choose precise, concrete words for the headings: avoid vague terms. Work out how one idea follows logically from the previous one. Note how you will make the transitions from point to point. This is a key step, but one that is often underrated. Failure to think out the transitions in the planning stage can cost you more time in the revising stage.

For instance, your research question is:

What impact does the Progresa Conditional Cash Transfer Program have on children's health?

Then potential sub-questions could be:

1. How does Mexico's Progresa program work?
   (here you'll focus on explaining relevant aspects of the program and its context)
2. In what way is Progresa supposed to affect children's health outcomes?
   (here you'll focus on theory / theories explaining such behavioural changes)
3. What empirical evidence exists to support the impact of Progresa on children's health outcomes?
   (here you'll focus on evidence that helps explain the mechanism & health outcomes)

Step 4: Specification of concepts and theoretical framework

To have a precise research question, you also need to be precise about the concepts which you will be using. Hence it is important that you provide accurate definitions of the concepts and terms that you will use, and that you explain and justify your choice, with reference to the academic literature on the topic, and, where relevant definitions.

What is a concept? A concept is a generalized idea of a thing or class of things. For example, 'democracy' is a concept, which refers to a type of governance that is based upon participation, inclusion, representation, and competition. If your research is about democracy, you should explain what exactly you mean by the concept of democracy. If your research is about civil wars, then tell us what exactly you mean by the concept of civil wars.

Defining your terms is important because your reader needs to know what exactly you mean when you use concepts which are often very general and may have different everyday meanings. It is also important because you often need to 'operationalize' the concepts you use. 'Operationalize' means that you turn a general concept into something which you can measure (or, in other words, which can have different values). For example, your research is about whether democracy has an impact on civil wars. You need to know whether country A is or is not democratic, or whether country A is more or less democratic than country B. Hence, you need to operationalize democracy. For many commonly used concepts there are widely accepted operationalizations. For example, for democracy you could use the Polity IV index, or Freedom House scores. For civil wars, you could use the definitions provided by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).

Many concepts are quite complex and have several dimensions. For example, the concept "human development" could include the following dimensions: longevity, knowledge and living standard. If you need to measure 'human development' you need to have *indicators* which measure all of these dimensions. For example: longevity can be measured by life expectancy.

In sum, it is important that you define terms and concepts, and that you describe how you can measure ('operationalize') these concepts. If you are using a variable design (how does y affect x, when z is constant), then make sure that you operationalize all your variables (How are your indicators measured? What level of measurement is available - nominal, ordinal, interval, or ratio)?

Your concepts should also be related to a theoretical framework. "Theories are interconnected concepts that condense and organize knowledge"[1] Coming from the Greek word theōrein "to consider, speculate, look at"[2] a theory is the lens through which you view, filter and analyze your data. This means that the theoretical framework anchors your paper, and then provides the structure for your analysis and arguments. Theory should not be relegated to one section of the paper. It should be the thread that links all your sections together.

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[1] Donileen R. Loseke. Methodological thinking: Basic principles of social research design. Sage, 2012, p. 18.
[2] "Theory" Online Etymology Dictionary.
https://www.etymonline.com/word/theory#:~:text=1590s%2C%20%22conception%2C%20mental%20scheme,%22to%20see%2C%22%20which%20is

Step 5: Determine the research method

Now it is time to define your research method. The research method can refer to methodology, method, or both. Methodology is a theory on how research is or should be done, given the assumptions regarding the status of reality (ontology) and/or its place in a knowledge domain (epistemology). Methods are techniques for collecting and analyzing data.

Methodologies and methods are roughly divided into qualitative (concepts expressed in words) and quantitative (measurement expressed in numbers or statistics), though many works of scholarship use multiple methods (mixed, nested, two-step etc.). To help you determine the research method, it is always a good idea to consult your notes from the last research methods class you took, read a research methods textbook (we provide a list of suggested reading at the end of this text) and talk to your instructor. In principle, the research method follows the research question and not the other way around.

A literature review can be regarded as a basic method for answering your research question. As mentioned above, almost every research paper – including theoretical or policy paper – requires some form of a literature review, which seeks to synthesize (scan, filter, etc.) information from secondary sources and distill answers (arguments, propositions, hypotheses, options, scenarios etc.) relevant to your question. It might be that you are using a literature review to explore a topic and in doing so formulate your research question. Once you complete this task, you might want to go back and identify the answers supplied by the same literature.

If your research paper is asking a causal question, and you do not want to only rely on existing literature to answer this question, you might need additional methods. Among these may be case studies (either single case studies, or comparative case studies); statistical methods, such as for example regression analysis (bivariate, multivariate etc.); content analysis, grounded theory and discourse analysis; process tracing; various data collection tools, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups. If you want to learn more about these methods, please consult the literature tips at the end of this list and talk to your instructor.

Examples of types of papers and research questions

This section offers a few examples for the different types of papers we have mentioned above. It also gives you a few examples of research questions that correspond to each type of paper. Research questions come in many forms. They can be normative, policy oriented, descriptive, or causal.

1. A literature review paper

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA students:
- Sarra Ben Khelil, The Externalization of Geographical Indications' Protection in the European Union's Trade Policy: A Three-step Process, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa, 2021.

- Blavasky Nzimbu-Makamu, [L'impact socio-économique et environnemental de l'exploitation des ressources naturelles en Afrique et le rôle de la Chine: Cas de la RDC et de l'Angola](), École supérieure d'affaires publiques et internationales, Université d'Ottawa, 2015.

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA professors are:
- Marie-Eve Desrosiers, and Srdjan Vucetic, [Causal Claims and the Study of Ethnic Conflict](), *Journal of Global Security Studies* 3: 4, 2018, 483-497.
- Ruckert, A., **Fafard, P.**, Hindmarch, S., Morris, A., Packer, C., Patrick, D., Weese, S., Wilson, K., Wong, A., and Labonté, R.. [Governing Antimicrobial Resistance: A Narrative Review of Global Governance Mechanisms](), *Journal of Public Health Policy*. Vol. 41, 2020, 515-528.
- Leblond, P., [La gouvernance de la zone euro et la crise économique](), dans O. Costa et F. Mérand (dir.) *Études européennes*, Bruylant, 2017, 345-376.

Examples questions for this type of paper are:
- How much poverty exists in Canada? Which population groups are most at risk of poverty?
- How did global markets operate before 1971?
- How do natural resources increase the risk for civil war?

2. A policy evaluative or policy prescriptive paper

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA students:
- Wang Zhi Duo, [Canola Disputes in Canada-China Agricultural Trade: A Chinese Policy Perspective](), 2019, also resulting in a [Policy paper]().
- Thomas Dubuis, [Les relations post-Brexit entre le Royaume-Uni et l'Union Européenne : la Suisse comme modèle ?](), 2018.
- Olivier Dyment. [Canadian Human Trafficking: Assessing the Government's 2019 National Strategy for Enforcement, Prevention, and Supporting Survivors]()", 2021.

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA professors are:

- Notten, G. and J. Kaplan, [Material deprivation – Measuring poverty by counting necessities households cannot afford](), *Canadian Public Policy*, 2021, 1-17.
- Paris, R.. [The 'Responsibility to Protect' and the structural problems of preventive humanitarian intervention](). *International Peacekeeping*, *21*(5), 2014, 569-603.
- Leblond, P., [Toward a Free Trade Agreement with China: Opportunities, Challenges and Building Blocks for Canada](), Special Report, Centre for International Governance Innovation, August 2017, 1-33.

Examples questions for this type of paper:
- How effective are impregnated bed nets in reducing malaria?
- Do student grants increase access to post-secondary education?
- How to measure poverty?

3. A normative / position paper

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA students:
- Voronenko, Roksolana. Le visa au Canada: Une politique justifiée envers les ressortissants mexicains?, 2020.

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA professors are:
- Lenard, P. T., & Straehle, C.. Temporary labour migration, global redistribution, and democratic justice. *Politics, philosophy & economics*, *11*(2), 2012, 206-230.
- Lenard, Patti Tamara, The ethics of deportation in liberal states, *European Journal of Political Theory*, Volume 14, Issue 4, 2015, 464-480.

Examples questions for this type of paper:
- Should the minimum wage be a living wage?
- Are affirmative actions just?
- How should we talk about race?

4. A theory testing paper

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA students:
- Cruickshank, A., Notten, G., Wesche, S., Ballegooyen, K., & Pope, G.. Co-management of Traditional Foods. *Arctic*, *72*(4), 2019, 360-380, based on Major Research Paper titled "Co-managing traditional territories: Assessing Kluane First Nation's capacity to enhance traditional food security".
- Iulia Lupulescu, Can the Environment Kuznets Curve Explain the Divide in Europe in Terms of Climate Change Consciousness?, 2020.
- Joseph Cock, Taking Back Control: Can Brexit Deliver Regulatory Independence?", Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, 2018.

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA professors are:
- Srdjan Vucetic and Atsushi Tago, Why Buy American? The International Politics of Fighter Jet Transfers, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 48: 1, 2014, 101-124.
- Zürcher, C. A theory of democratisation through peace-building. *Conflict, Security & Development*, *18*(4), 2018, 283-299
- Rivers, Nicholas, and Brandon Schaufele. Gasoline price and new vehicle fuel efficiency: Evidence from Canada. *Energy Economics* 68, 2017, 454-465

Examples questions for this type of paper:
- Does deterrence theory work?
- Are civil wars really caused by greed?
- Under what conditions do states buy US-made weapons?

5. A theory proposing paper

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA professors are:
- Böhnke, J.R. and Zürcher, C., Aid, minds and hearts: The impact of aid in conflict zones. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *30*(5), 2013, 411-432
- Leblond, P., The Fog of Integration: Reassessing the Role of Economic Interests in European Integration, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 10(1), 2008, 9-26.

Examples questions for this type of paper:
- What factors contribute to the outbreak of violent ethnic conflicts?
- Under what conditions do states use economic rather than military intervention?
- Under what conditions do regional organizations call for literacy programs for women?

6. An explanatory paper

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA students:
- Marianne Blondin. Étude de cas sur l'Organisation internationale pour les migrations et sa collaboration avec l'Association des nations d'Asie du Sud-Est en vue de limiter les déplacements de masse liés aux changements climatiques, 2021.
- Saidouba Camara, Économie politique de l'intégration économique en Afrique de l'Ouest, 2020.
- Nassiba Idebdou, A Game of Coins: The Digitization of Money and the Regulation of Virtual Currencies, 2015.

Examples of such papers written by GSPIA professors are:
- Robinson, P. Russia's role in the war in Donbass, and the threat to European security. *European Politics and Society*, *17*(4), 2016, 506-521.
- Rita Abrahamsen, Jean-François Drolet, Alexandra Gheciu, Karin Narita, Srdjan Vucetic, and Michael Williams, Confronting the International Political Sociology of the New Right International Political Sociology 14(1), 2020, 94–107.
- Regina Bateson, Voting for a Killer: Efraín Ríos Montt's Return to Politics in Democratic Guatemala, Comparative Politics, 2022.

Examples questions for this type of paper:
- Describing the origins of the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan
- How universal suffrage was introduced in Canada
- Describing radical conservatism today

Library Resources

The University of Ottawa libraries maintain excellent research guides in multiple fields. These research guides can help you discover databases, articles, primary source materials, and quantitative datasets to help you with your research project. You may wish to consult the research guide for public and international affairs, which is available here: https://uottawa.libguides.com/PublicandInternationalAffairs-en

Suggestions for further readings

In preparing these guidelines, we follow in large parts van Evera, S. (1997). Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science. Cornell, Cornell UP (ISBN13: 9780801484575), and Kellstedt, Paul M./Whitten, Guy D. 2009: The fundamentals of political science research, Cambridge; New York (ISBN: 9781107621664).

On research and writing:

- Beaud, Michel. L'art de la thèse: comment préparer et rédiger une thèse de doctorat, un mémoire de DEA ou de maîtrise ou tout autre travail universitaire, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.
- Belcher, Wendy Laura. *Writing your journal article in twelve weeks: A guide to academic publishing success*. University of Chicago Press, 2019. **ISBN-13:** 978-0226499918
- Day, Christopher and Kendra L Koivu. Finding the Question: A Puzzle-Based Approach to the Logic of Discovery. *Journal of political science education*, 15(3), 2019, 377–386.
- Gauthier, Benoît. Recherche sociale: de la problématique à la collecte des données, 7th ed. Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2021. ISBN 978-2-7605-5276-0
- Loseke, Donileen R.. *Methodological thinking: Basic principles of social research design*. London and Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2017.
- Scott, Gregory and Stephen Garrison, The Political Science Student Writer's Manual, 7th edition. Upper Saddle River NJ, Prentice Hall, 2011. ISBN **978-0205830121**
- Sternberg, David. *How to complete and survive a doctoral dissertation*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2014. ISBN 0-312-39605-8

On policy analysis:

- Bardach, Eugene, and Eric M. Patashnik. *A practical guide for policy analysis: The eightfold path to more effective problem solving*. CQ press, 2019. ISBN: 9781544385273
- O'Sullivan, Elizabethann, Gary Rassel, Maureen Berner, and Jocelyn Taliaferro, *Research methods for public administrators*. Routledge, 2017. ISBN 9780205856251

On qualitative methods:

- Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash, eds., Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-230-58412-9
- George, A. L. and A. Bennett. Case studies and theory development in the social sciences. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2005. ISBN: 9780262572224
- Clark-Kazak, Christina. *Research Across Borders: An Introduction to Interdisciplinary, Cross-Cultural Research.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022.*

On quantitative methods:

- Kranzler, John. Statistics for the Terrified, 6th edition. Rowman and Littlefield, 2017. ISBN: 978-1538100288
- Wooldridge, Jeffrey., Introductory Econometrics: a modern approach, 5th edition, South-Western CENGAGE Learning, Mason, 2013. ISBN ISBN-13: 978-1-111-53104-1 ISBN-10: 1-111-53104-8

On the philosophy of social science:

- Drawson, Alexandra S., Elaine Toombs, and Christopher J. Mushquash. Indigenous research methods: A systematic review. *International Indigenous Policy Journal,* 8(2), 2017.
- McGregor, Deborah, Jean-Paul Restoule, and Rochelle Johnston, eds. *Indigenous research: Theories, practices, and relationships*. Canadian Scholars' Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781773380858
- Hay, Colin, Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction, Basingstoke, 2002.
- Helen Longino, The Social Dimensions of Scientific Knowledge, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last updated August 31, 2006.
- Olivier, Lawrence et al, *Épistémologie de la science politique*, Montréal Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1998. ISBN 978-2-7605-1001-2