**PSC-4099**

**Thesis Assignment #3:  
A draft of your paper’s “front end”**

**This assignment is due in electronic form by 10pm on Sunday, September 29.** E-mail your work as *an attachment* (i.e. a pdf, doc, docx, or rtf formatted file; no Apple-only formatting) to [msetzler@highpoint.edu](mailto:msetzler@highpoint.edu).

To be accepted as on-time work, *the email’s subject line must be* ***psc4099 assignment 3.*** Bring a hard copy to class the following Tuesday.

Please do your best work. Your assignment will be evaluated based on effort, attention to detail, and professionalism. Your work should be well written and clearly show that you are carefully and thoroughly reviewing the scholarly research on your thesis topic. One grade will be issued for the assignment:  
A = Excellent in all respects; B = Good work with evident room for improvement; C = Minimally satisfactory work that obviously could be much stronger; D = Poor work. Late work will receive a 10% per day deduction.

**What is the “front end” of a research paper?** Over the semester, you will write a full draft of your thesis in three separate major assignments. This is the first one. The “front end” of research paper refers to the sections of your study that come ahead of a discussion of its research methods, findings,and conclusions. In the front end, you will:

* Identify your main research question (i.e., revise what you did for Assignment 1),
* Explain why the research question is an topic important for researchers (what you did in Assignment 2),
* Summarize what previous research has said about the main concepts in your study and how other researchers have examined your topic (i.e., what are the relevant theories and previous findings for your topic?),
* Explain what we still need to know in order to answer your research question/s.

In short, a study’s front end provides a justification for additional research on a topic (or similar ones) that has been examined before and explains all of the key concepts and any theories that we need to be familiar with in order to follow your’s study’s logic and findings. .

**What kind of background research will you need to do to write an effective front-end for your study?** Before collecting any original data or conducting in-depth analyses of preexisting datasets, social scientists typically use Google Scholar, Consensus AI, and similar tools to conduct “a review of the literature.”This background research is necessary to justify, clarify, and refine their studies. While “a literature review” typically refers to an annotated bibliography that synthesizes all of the previous research on a topic, your thesis background research will instead involve a more focused approach. As a University of Toronto handout puts it, *“You are not trying to list all the material published but to synthesize and evaluate it according to the guiding concepts of your research question.”*

Most academic papers in the social sciences discuss the work of previous scholars in quite a lot of detail, but this is especially the case in a study’s opening sections. Scholars engage and cite previous research for four main reasons. The first is about credibility. We want to demonstrate that we have enough expertise in our topic area to convince readers that we are competent when conducting and interpreting the original analyses that will appear in the back half of our study. Second, we rely on the work of other scholars to provide our readers (and ourselves!) with the background and context needed to understand the importance of our study’s main research question/s, the meaning of our study’s key concepts, what has been learned from previous research on the same or similar topics, and what social scientists still need to know. Third, selectively analyzing and frequently citing previous scholarship helps us to justify the specific theories, hypotheses, and variables we are using in our study. Our methodological and theoretical choices are much less likely to be challenged if they have been used in previously published research. Finally, social science papers refer back to the extant literature in their concluding section to show how the new research contributes to what social scientists already know.

**What specific content needs to go into this assignment?** When students are just starting their thesis projects, it typically works out better if they divide their background research into two categories: (1) a handful of journal articles that will give them enough material to write a high-quality draft of the front end and (2) a separate, larger collection of articles on the general topic of their research or issues that seem likely to come up while writing. For this assignment, you should focus on just the first category. While you are welcome to use academic press and research reports from reputable organizations, it should be obvious from reading this assignment that you have carefully reviewed **the most relevant** previously published, peer-reviewed social science studies on your topic area. That means that you should identify and engage **at least five high-quality, peer-reviewed sources that are very closely related to the study you are doing** to:

1. Identify your research question and phrase it in a way that makes it clear to a well-educated reader not already familiar with your project that an empirical analysis of individual-level survey data will allow us to answer the question.
2. Make a compelling case that answering your research question is of interest to other social scientists.  ***Note: Because senior seminar topics focus on either individual-level political behavior or opinions, you need to make a convincing argument for why we need to know more specifically about the behavior or opinion your project looks at****.*
3. Identify and explain the main concepts involved in answering your question.
4. Tell us what we already know about potential answers to your research question based on previous research on it or related topics. Here, you want to summarize both theories and findings from previous work. (Again, stay focused on what is known about public opinion or individual-level behavior in the area you are studying rather than writing extensively on the general topic area).
5. Tell us what still needs to be known about your topic *as it relates to the study you are planning to do*. Sometimes, scholars will have indicated in an article’s conclusions that we need to pursue additional topics in future research. Other times, you will have to logically make the case for a new avenue of research.
6. Finally, tell us what you think the answer to your question will be based on the theories you have looked at earlier in this section. If appropriate, state these expectations as formal hypotheses.

The first two points above should be combined and make up the “introduction” to your paper. You have already written a draft of this part of your paper by completing the thesis topic assignments. The subsequent points should each be addressed in a separate paper section that begins with a subtitle. If you look at the structure of the various articles you will be asked to read this term and most of the social science articles you will read while preparing to complete this assignment, you will see that almost all of them follow the structure indicated above, although they use project-specific subtitles for most sections.

**Assignment length, writing, AI use, and citation guidelines.** In your final thesis, the length of your study’s front end and its bibliography will depend on how much previous research has been done on your topic, how complex your research question and theoretical setup is, and how much space is required for your statistical analyses. If you plan on adding to a well-established line of research, you will cover more previously published research; if you have a relatively new topic, your front end will likely be shorter. For this assignment, **aim to submit a 10-page essay (double-spaced, with standard font and margins), excluding the required bibliography**. The body of the paper should be at least seven pages in length. If you believe that a longer or shorter draft would offer a more effective setup for your specific project and still demonstrate that you have closely reviewed the pertinent literature, see your instructor for guidance.

The tone and style of this assignment and the rest of your thesis work should closely resemble those found in the sample articles read for class and in most social science journal articles. Social science scholars frequently use the first person in writing; however, they do so only when they are referring to activities they completed as part of the research project (e.g., “To capture how politically active a person is, I created an index that combines several different types of political participation into a single measure”).

As stated in the syllabus, you *should* use AI (e.g., Google Scholar Consensus) to help you identify relevant previous research You also are encouraged to to utilize AI tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly to assist you in proofreading. Conversely, using AI to generate text or summarize the work of other authors is expressly prohibited. Should you opt to use AI tools resources, indicate that you have done so in the paper’s title section where you have listed your name.

Most students will improve both the quality of their work and their command of grammar by regularly using the free version of Grammarly and perhaps additional AI assistance.Carefully review any AI-suggested changes to ensure that no new grammar errors have been introduced and that any proposed rephrasing accurately conveys the ideas and voice you originally intended to use. With ChatGPT, I recommend proofreading each of your paragraphs separately by using the prompt: “Proofread only:” followed by the copied-and-pasted paragraph. ChatGPT can help you identify instances where you are not communicating clearly enough, in which case you should rewrite your original paragraph. Generally, when ChatGPT is instructed to “proofread only,” it will not extensively revise a well-composed paragraph or significantly alter the voice of its author. If ChatGPT heavily reworks your writing—adding words, tones, or ideas that deviate from your original intent—rewrite the original paragraph. Also, be aware that ChatGPT's output often contains grammar glitches.

If you want more general feedback on how your writing can be reworked to be clearer and more effective, consider using Claude.ai. Explain to the program what the purpose of the assignment is and paste in the assignment in its entirety. Here are some examples of prompts that may help you to improve your writing:

*“I am a college senior writing part of my senior thesis. This assignment is written for an academic audience of college students and professors who do not necessarily have a background in my topic area. Give me feedback on the clarity and elegance of my writing. Are there general areas or specific instances where the writing could be more effective? As you are suggesting edits, keep in mind that this needs to be my writing and in my voice: (And then paste or upload the full assignment).*

Here are some follow-up prompts you might use:

*Do you see additional areas or specific sentences that could be clearer? Are there places where the argument would be stronger with additional examples or citations? Are there instances where the writing could be more concise?*

You need to cite your work. If you are unsure of when exactly you need to cite, see the “Student Resources link on our course homepage.” Format your citations and bibliography to match the APSA format:

<https://marksetzler.org/generalissues/APSRcitation.htm>   
If you are unsure about a document type, this resource is more detailed: <https://guides.highpoint.edu/apsa>

**How many citations will your final thesis need?**

In the final version of your thesis, you will cite more extensively than you need to for this assignment. The degree to which the final version of a thesis incorporates previous research varies by the topic and research methods, but a good rule of thumb would be around 20 sources, with most of them being peer-reviewed journal articles and books/chapters from the last several years. Most of these citations will do nothing more than provide support for points made in the opening few pages of your study that you do not want to develop in detail. Even in a published paper, it is not unusual for just a few peer-reviewed articles to have provided most of the background support discussed in the paper’s front end.

Ultimately, how much you cite and the degree to which that research will reflect your specific research question. Some of you will write on a research question closely related to topics about which much had been already written. If you are doing work that analyzes the determinants of political participation of young Muslim women, for example, there is a substantial body of literature to draw upon. Your literature review thus will want to summarize what we already know about factors best explain different kinds and amounts of political engagement by the young, the relationship between gender and participation, and what we know about religion and political activism.

Conversely, some of you will probably choose to write on interesting questions that have never been researched in detail. In this case, your literature review might be shorter and focus on why the topic has been ignored, what we know about related topics, and how we can apply that limited knowledge to inform this project. For example, if you are writing about public opinion toward the CIA and there is not much previous research on that specific topic, you might consider what we know about which factors best explain individual-level differences in attitudes toward law enforcement, the federal government, and the military.