

Research Design: Tools and Techniques

Fall 2025/6

Class Time & Venue:

Wednesday 13:30-15:10, (venue TBC)

Instructors:

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Course Description

This course is designed for students who are just embarking on their MA studies in the IR Department at Central European University. It is the first in a two-semester required sequence of Research Design and Methods, which aims to provide a gentle introduction to the tools that will help students to successfully plan, execute and write up a thesis on an international relations topic. The course is designed for students from both positivist and post-positivist traditions, in the belief that post-graduate students should have a basic familiarity with the dominant research approaches to the study of IR. Since the vast majority of MA students will be writing an empirical thesis, we believe that an RD course should cover the mainstream tools and techniques that are available to them. In this spirit, the course takes no position on which empirical approach is best. Instead, we have curated a kind of "best practices" set of guidelines for conducting research on the topic of their choice, using tools and techniques ranging from positivist to interpretivist methods.

To this end, we begin with a quick overview of useful bibliographic management programs, Google Scholar and webclippers in creating, organizing and processing one's desk research. We then map out the different epistemological approaches in the IR scholarship, ranging from positivist quantitative and qualitative approaches to non-positivist, interpretivist and critical approaches. We also discuss ontological assumptions undergirding these different approaches, as well as questions on how to approach, collect and synthesize the literature to convince the reader of the value of the research project.

We then move to the basic building blocks of an MA thesis which will be split into qualitative and quantitative sessions. Both sessions will begin with research questions and puzzles—including what makes some more productive than others. We then turn to theory development and finally, cover how to formulate concepts for the purpose of empirical analysis/testing.

The second half of the course provides a practical survey of the mainstream methodological tools used by both quantitative researchers (data analysis, descriptive statistics, text-as-data and set theoretic methods) and qualitative researchers (including a discussion of how to select, conduct, and code interviews, and work with texts/discourses). The course also provides a basic introduction to statistical software to manage, visualize and analyze various types of data (basically Excel and R). The final session will familiarize students with computer-aided qualitative data analysis, particularly how to code, analyze and visualize textual data using NVivo or another software.

We believe that there is value in learning about different research approaches from different scholars in the field. We also believe that students should get a map of the field before deciding how to specialize. There is value in teaching broad research design courses collaboratively by professors trained in different research traditions, using a different collection of tools and techniques. We also believe in learning through doing. Hence, this course is made up of a mix of mini-lectures, discussions, group and individual exercises to try to get people to think about where their chosen approach and subject-area fits into the panoply of research traditions in the field and get a taste of how to use the different research approaches. In this way, this course provides a pluralistic introduction to the variety of ways of conducting IR research. It will also serve as a foundational course to prepare students for the follow-up methods course in the winter semester, where they will specialize in quantitative, mixed methods, or qualitative/interpretivist methodologies.

Required Materials

Course materials are available for downloading on the course Moodle page. These usually amount to one required reading or two short ones per seminar. Students should read these prior to class. We have tried to keep the reading load for the course minimal because this course is focused on learning by doing through class exercises. Students should attempt to install the indicated software on their laptops, if possible.

Prerequisites/Co-requisites

Prerequisites: None; Co-requisites: Enrollment in MA program at IR Dept.

Learning Outcomes

1. Learn to formulate a productive research question/puzzle.
2. Distinguish between positivist and non-positivist research approaches and between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.
3. Learn to justify a research project by doing a thorough literature review.
4. Understand the basic aspects of data.
5. Assess various aspects of data quality based on how the data was collected.
6. Gain familiarity with research tools such as Zotero, R, and NVivo.
7. Use R to construct datasets and generate basic descriptive statistics.
8. Learn the basics of data visualization in R .
9. Learn the basics of discourse analysis and critical interpretivist methods to textual analysis.
10. Gain familiarity with the basics of preparing for fieldwork and interviews.
11. Learn the basics of textual coding and visualization in NVivo/MAXQDA.

Course Structure

Class Structure

We will meet once a week for 100 minutes, combining a mini-lecture at the beginning of each seminar with class exercises. The exercise portion of each seminars will take place in small groups, but there will also be individual work. It is advised to bring a laptop to class or work together with someone who has a laptop (especially for classes covering Excel and R).

Assessments

Given that this course is pass/fail, we hope that students will see it more as a workshop in which they can take chances, try new things, and learn new skills that

will help them to research and write their MA theses. Effort will be recognized, and new ideas expected. To this end, we have designed it as a practical introduction to methods of international relations research. Students are encouraged to use it as an opportunity to obtain a familiarity with the tools and techniques that are available to them as they prepare to do their theses. The assignments are simply exercises; students can continually revise their research design going forward.

Grading Policy

Please submit your work by the deadline given in the syllabus. We will follow the department policy on grading late assignments (please see the student handbook). To pass the course, students are required to achieve a minimum of 60% overall; and a minimum of 50% in the two main assignments (research question and literature review; research design). Your final grade will be a weighted average of the following assignments:

- **30%** Research question and brief literature review. Submit a one-page pitch for a research project you are considering for your thesis. Include a draft of a research question and relate it to a live debate in the field. Explain why it is an important question by explaining who should care about what you find and why it has real world consequences. (250 words max) (due Week 8, Sunday, 16 November 2025, 11:59 PM).
- **15%** Class attendance, participation and in-class exercises. Attendance is mandatory, and absences should be justified. Please see below on the department attendance policy. We will do group and individual exercises during most seminars.
- **15%** Reflexive note. Students are expected to attend at least one research seminar hosted by the IR Department in the Fall term, and submit a reflexive note on the session (in approx. 200-300 words), engaging their experience, learning and questions regarding research design and methods in the project presented. Students are encouraged to submit this note within a week of the seminar attended, and at the latest by the end of the term (12 December 2025, 11:59 PM).
- **40%** Research design. Students should submit a draft plan for an empirical project that answers a draft research question. This should include the student's intended epistemological approach, method(s) to be used and data sources that will be consulted. (1000 words max) (due Week 12, 14 December 2025, 11:59 PM).

Course Policies

During Class

Students are encouraged to bring laptops to class for the taking of notes and to do exercises. We ask that students refrain from using electronic devices for non course-related activities.

Attendance Policy

Attendance is required for all sessions, unless excused. Please contact the instructors and the teaching assistant if you need to be excused for immigration- or sickness-related absences. The department's policy on attendance is outlined in the Attendance Guidelines, according to which "absences are justified only in case of illness and absences are justified if supported by appropriate medical documentation, to be

submitted to the IR office. Absences unrelated to medical reasons are justified only if approved by the course instructor. The maximum number of such absences may exceed two per course only if approved by the head of department."

Policies on Incomplete Grades and Late Assignments

Students will be expected to submit the two assignments on time. Unexcused late assignments will be downgraded according to the department policy laid out in the student handbook. Late assignments will be accepted for no penalty if a valid excuse is communicated to the instructors before the deadline.

Academic Integrity and Honesty

Students are required to comply with the university policy on academic integrity found in the CEU regulations. There are strict penalties for plagiarism, in which students submit work that has been substantially borrowed from someone else or generated by AI without attribution. The CEU Code of Ethics lays out the policy against plagiarism as well as the penalties for doing so.

Accommodations for Disabilities

Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with verifiable disabilities. Students in need of accommodations are encouraged to consult with the instructors at the beginning of the course so that they may be provided with these accommodations.

Guidelines on dealing with AI systems

We support responsible experimentation with generative AI tools, but there are important considerations to keep in mind when using these tools, including data privacy, compliance, copyright, and academic integrity. Any use of AI systems in submitted work needs to be acknowledged, including a detailed description of the process (documentation of prompts given to AI, documentation of AI-produced text, elaboration on how AI input was subsequently used etc.). We only accept the collaboration with AI composition software for idea generation and assessment planning. We will discuss these uses at the beginning of the course.

Schedule and Weekly Learning Goals

The schedule below is set, but it might be changed in extenuating circumstances to a day and time that is good for everyone. The learning goals should be viewed as the key concepts you should grasp after each week, combining the pillars of research design in international relations with a short introduction to various tools that are invaluable for organizing and analyzing political data. The two assignments will be due in the sixth and twelfth weeks. The first assignment asks you to draft a research question and justification for doing the project. The final assignment asks you to revise your first assignment and combine it with a short sketch of how you would conduct your research, including any data you might collect and method for analyzing the data.

Week 01 17/09/2025

Introduction & Research Basics

- Google Scholar, Research Gate, ResearchRabbit
- Webclippers (Evernote), EndNote, Zotero (TBC)
- Introduction to method courses and instructors in the Winter Semester

Week 02 24/09/2025

Epistemologies, Ontologies, Methodologies: Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches

Mandatory Reading(s)

- Yanow, Dvora, Chapter 1 'Thinking Interpretatively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences.' In Yanow, Dvora, and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2014. (Access also via publisher's page - please click on '[preview book](#)').
- Kellstedt, Paul M., and Guy D. Whitten. *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research* (3rd Edition). Cambridge University Press, 2018 [hereafter referred to as **Kellstedt and Whitten (2018)**], Chapters 1, pp. 1-24.

Recommended Reading(s)

- Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating. 2018. *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press), pp. 19-38.

Week 03 01/10/2025

Positivist Research Design: Research Questions, Theory and Hypotheses

Mandatory Reading(s)

- Kellstedt and Whitten (2018), Chapters 2, pp. 25-55

Recommended Reading(s)

- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce. *Principles of International Politics*. Sage Publications, 2014, Chapter 1, pp. 35-63.
- Gerring, John. *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, Chapter 3, pp. 58-73.

Week 04 8/10/2025

Positivist Research Design: Causality and Causal Inference

Mandatory Reading(s)

- Kellstedt and Whitten (2018), Chapter 3-4, pp. 56-103

Recommended Reading(s)

- Dunning, Thad. "Improving Causal Inference: Strengths and Limitations of Natural Experiments." *Political Research Quarterly* 61.2 (2008): 282-293.
- Druckman, James N., Donald P. Green, James H. Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia. "The Growth and Development of Experimental Research in Political Science." *American Political Science Review* 100.4 (2006): 627-635
- Babbie, Earl. *The Practice of Social Research*. Wadsworth, 2013, Chapter 4, pp. 88-122.

Week 05 15/10/2025

Positivist Research Design: Conceptualization, Operationalization and Measurement

Mandatory Reading(s)

- Kellstedt and Whitten (2018), Chapter 5, pp. 104-124.
- Adcock, Robert. "Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research." *American Political Science Review* 95.3 (2001): 529-546.

Recommended Reading(s)

- Collier, David, and James E. Mahon. "Conceptual "Stretching" Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis." *American Political Science Review* 87.4 (1993): 845-855.

Week 06 22/10/2025

Interpretivist Research Design: Concepts, Questions, Reflexivity and Situatedness

Mandatory Reading(s)

- Kurowska, Xymena and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (2020) "Interpretive approaches in political science and international relations." In: *The SAGE Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations*, eds. Luigi Curini and Robert Franzese, 1221-1240. London: Sage.

Recommended Reading(s)

- Yanow, Dvora and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (2014). *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Yanow, Dvora and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (2012) *Interpretive Research Design*, London and New York: Routledge.

Reading Week: 27-31 October 2025, NO CLASS!

Week 07 05/11/2025

Interpretivist Research Design: Preparation for Interviews and Field Research

Mandatory Reading(s)

- Mikecz, Robert "Interviewing Elites: Addressing Methodological Issues," Qualitative

Inquiry, Volume: 18, (6): 482-493.

- Thambinathan, V., & Kinsella, E. A. (2021). Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Creating Spaces for Transformative Praxis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20 1-9.

Recommended reading(s):

- Fujii, Lee Ann. *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. Routledge, 2017.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai (2021) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bliesemann de Guevara, B., & Poopuu, B. (2020). Preparing for fieldwork interviews. In R. Mac Ginty, R. Brett, & B. Vogel (Eds.), *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork* (pp. 65-83). Springer Nature.

Week 08 12/11/2025 (Deadline for Assignment I)

Interpretivist Research Design: Entry Points into Discourse Analysis

Mandatory Reading(s)

- Chris Methmann, “Visualizing Climate-Refugees: Race, Vulnerability, and Resilience in Global Liberal Politics”, *International Political Sociology*, Volume 8, Issue 4, December 2014, Pages 416–435.
- Foucault, Michel *History of Sexuality* Vol 1. Chapter 4: ‘Method’ pp 92-103.

Recommended reading on discourse analysis as a research method (in IR and the social sciences more broadly). Please consult these resources for different definitions of ‘discourse’ and practices of discourse analysis:

- Milliken, Jennifer. (1999). The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods. *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(2), 225–25
- Davison, A. and Hoffman, M (2019) "Discourse Analysis" in *Interpreting Politics: Debating the Foundations and Objectives of Political Analysis*, Sloan Publishing. 199-244.
- Holzscheiter, Anna. “Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification: Discourse Theory and Analysis in International Relations.” *International Studies Perspectives*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2014, pp. 142–62. *JSTOR*,

Week 09 19/11/2025

Set-Theoretic Methods (Qualitative Comparative Analysis) - guest lecture by Letitia Roman

Mandatory Reading(s):

- Pages 3–18 of Introduction: QCA in a Nutshell in Oana, Ioana-Elena, Carsten Schneider, Eva Thomann. *Qualitative Comparative Analysis Using R: A Beginner’s Guide* (Cambridge University Press), 2021.

Recommended reading(s):

- Pages 1–8 of the Introduction in Schneider, Carsten and Claudius Wagemann. *Set-Theoretic Methods for the Social Sciences: A Guide to Qualitative Comparative Analysis* (Cambridge University Press), 2012.
- Schneider, Carsten Q. *Set-theoretic Multi-method Research: A Guide to Combining QCA and Case Studies*. Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Week 10 26/11/2025

Quantitative Data Analysis: Data Description, Visualization and Summary Statistics

Mandatory Reading(s)

- Kellstedt and Whitten (2018), Chapter 6, pp. 125-142.

Recommended reading(s):

- Johnson, Janet Buttolph, Henry T. Reynolds, and Jason D. Mycoff. *Political Science Research Methods*. CQ Press, 2016. Chapter 11, pp. 348-386

Week 11 03/12/2025

Qualitative Text Analysis - guest lecture by Tamara Pataki

- NVivo/ MAXQDA

Week 12 10/12/2025

Writing Workshop

- AI Usage
- Questions and Answers