Research & Writing Tips for Developing Projects in the Social Sciences

As you pursue your research, answer the following series of questions to help you refine your research focus, purpose, and argument:

What is your topic/subject area?

What are 3 related topics or subtopics that you are interested in? List them here (as you go on in your research you may find that one of these becomes the central topic):

1. 
2. 
3.

What is the main question you have about your research topic? What do you most want to know about this topic?

What is the goal, aim or purpose that you are working toward with your research? What do you want your research to explain?

Do some of your sources agree with one another? In what areas specifically: (and be sure to include source citations and page numbers so you can find the material later)

Do some of your sources disagree with one another? Note how specifically:

What might these areas of agreement and disagreement suggest? Why might they agree or disagree? (i.e. how might discipline, context, time period, etc. factor in?) Jot down some ideas:
Writing and Research Tips:

- **Try writing the introduction last and revising with a “working thesis.”** For most writers it isn’t clear precisely what we are trying to argue until a draft, or several, has been written. If you are writing a formal research paper, the thesis statement should be one of the last things revised.

- **As you revise your thesis, consider:**
  - *Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?* If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it’s possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.
  - *Is my thesis statement specific enough?* Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: *why* is something "good"; *what specifically* makes something "successful"?
  - *Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?* If a reader's first response is, "So what?" then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
  - *Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?* If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It's o.k. to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
  - *Does my thesis pass the "how and why?" test?* If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.

- **Think about the quality of your sources.** Ask yourself, do I have quality peer-reviewed sources? If I’m using a website, is it peer reviewed? Is it an identifiable and reputable source (i.e. an academic publisher, scholarly association, or reputable organization)?
  - *Tip:* Prove your point by using evidence and citing it properly. Use more than one piece of evidence. The best papers use a variety of different types of evidence.

- **Save your work in multiple places!** Always back up your work because computer problems are inevitable and frequent. You can use the Google Drive, email yourself a copy, etc., but always have a back-up plan.

- **Remember the formalities of academic writing.** A formal academic paper should be 12 pt., Times New Roman font, double-spaced with 1” margins. Use this formatting unless your Professor has specified something different in the course syllabus.
Keep in mind the framework of an academic paper and the key pieces to an academic paper:

- You should have an introduction that clearly states the topic to be analyzed and 1-3 sentences at the end of the first paragraph that constitutes the thesis statement (the overall argument of the paper).
- The body of your paper should have full paragraphs (3 sentences or more) that have the following 3 “ingredients”:
  - A topic sentence that tells the main point of the paragraph (not a statement of fact, but a “mini-thesis” or point of analysis that the paragraph will expand on);
  - Evidence to support your claim (a direct quote, an example, a fact, etc)
  - Analysis which tells the reader why the evidence is significant and how it supports the overall point of the paper (i.e. “This quote illustrates that....” , “As the work of Andrew Bacevich demonstrates, ...”)
- The conclusion should restate the thesis (in different words) and include closing analysis
- The conclusion should be followed by a Bibliography or Works Cited page

Citations & Formatting:

- Your paper should be typed in Times New Roman font size 12 pt.
  - The body of the paper should be double spaced
  - You do not need a separate title page, simply put a single-spaced heading at the top of your paper which includes your name, the course number, and the date
  - Do not put extra spaces between the paragraphs
- All evidence needs to be cited. Whenever you take a quote, paraphrase, idea, or wording from another person or a document, you need to include a citation. You need to cite your source, even if:
  - you put all direct quotes in quotation marks.
  - you changed the words used by the author into synonyms.
  - you completely paraphrased the ideas to which you referred.
  - your sentence is mostly made up of your own thoughts, but contains a reference to the author’s ideas.
  - you mention the author’s name in the sentence.
  - *when in doubt, cite
- Make sure you understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. This means properly citing your sources and being conscious of your language and word choices. See these tips on how to understand and avoid plagiarism:
  - [http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml)
  - [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/)