Essay Worksheet

If you intend to write an essay in one of my classes you are required to answer the questions on this worksheet and hand them in before you start writing your essay.

I require this worksheet instead of an outline of your essay. This has several pedagogical reasons, as this worksheet will help you to avoid three basic mistakes.

First, it will guide you away from descriptive research questions (i.e. just describing what happened) towards truly analytical research questions (i.e. explaining why something happened). Second, it will compel you to evaluate the quality of your own argument relative to alternative explanations. After all, science is about demonstrating that one explanation is better than another. Third, the worksheet will require you to think about evidence. Such evidence will be needed to prove that your explanation is better than the alternative explanations.

Ultimately, this worksheet will guide you on your journey to a good paper. Writing a good paper is not only instrumental for obtaining a good grade, but will have several side benefits. For example, if you are interested in going to Graduate School, you will have to include a writing sample with your application. A well-crafted paper will increase the likelihood of getting into the Masters- or PhD-program of your choice.
Please answer the following questions.

1. Your approach

   (a) Describe your research puzzle. In other words, what is the phenomenon or situation that you want to explain?

   (b) State your Research Question. What is it about this puzzle that is puzzling? Recall that a "Why"-question is the most suitable formulation for an analytic (as opposed to descriptive) Research Question.

   (c) What is your unit of analysis?

   (d) Considering your puzzle, what is your Dependent Variable (i.e. the outcome that you want to explain?)

   (e) What is your Independent Variable (i.e. the variable that has an impact on the dependent variable so that we see the outcome)?

   (f) Why do you think that your Independent Variable matters? Put differently, what is the causal mechanism that connects your Independent Variable with your Dependent Variable?

   (g) Explicitly state your hypothesis. If possible, use the following template to state your hypothesis

   - In comparing [unit of analysis], those having [one value on the independent variable] will be more likely to have [one value on the dependent variable] than will those having [a different value on the independent variable].

2. Alternative approaches

   (a) What alternative Independent Variable(s) could also explain the phenomenon of interest?

   (b) What is the causal mechanism with which this alternative Independent Variable might be affecting the Dependent Variable?

   (c) State the hypothesis implied by this alternative approach. Use the template from above.

   (d) Explain why you think that your hypothesis is better than this alternative hypothesis.
3. Evidence

(a) Explain what kind of evidence would confirm your hypothesis? What kind of evidence would falsify it?

(b) How could the alternative hypotheses be falsified?

(c) Describe where you expect to find any information that could help you to confirm or reject any of the hypotheses identified above.
An example of how to answer this worksheet

1. Your approach

   (a) I am interested in the success of East Asian Tiger states (i.e. South Korea and Taiwan). It surprises me that these states were able to grow so much faster, even though other countries did have much better starting positions.

   (b) Why did South Korea grow faster than Nigeria?

   (c) States

   (d) Economic growth.

   (e) The presence or absence of strong state institutions.

   (f) I suggest that strong institutions might be able to coordinate private actors in such a manner that is productivity enhancing. An example might be reports of the Korean government “picking the winners” and subsequently subsidizing these selected industries. States with weak institutions are unable to do this, and therefore exhibit lower growth rates.

   (g) In comparing states, those having strong state institutions will be more likely to have high economic growth than will those having weak state institutions.

2. Alternative approaches

   (a) The presence or absence of natural resources (i.e. oil, minerals, etc).

   (b) It might be that the presence of natural resources explain why some states have an easier time growing. After all, they would not have to import raw materials needed for the production of whatever the country wants to produce. This advantage would result in higher growth rates.

   (c) In comparing states, those having many natural resources available will be more likely to have high economic growth than will those having no natural resources.

   (d) South Korea did not have any natural resources, while Nigeria has oil. Yet, South Korea managed to grow, while Nigeria did not.
3. Evidence

(a) I would have to show that every state with strong institutions exhibits high growth, and that every state with weak institutions is not growing. Alternatively, I could look at two states that are very similar in every respect, but have different institutional strength. If there is a difference in growth rates between these two states, then I can conclude that institutional strength causes economic growth.

(b) If I would find some states that have strong institutions but do not exhibit high growth, my hypothesis would be falsified.

(c) I will look at the data provided by the World Bank on their website. I expect that I will find information on institutional strength, natural resource abundance as well as growth rates there. Further, I will look for books on growth and institutions as well as growth and natural resources. I expect that these books will offer case studies of specific countries which might provide evidence for or against either of the hypotheses.