

FRAMEWORKS FOR ANALYSIS

What is a “framework for analysis”?

For many courses with an assigned research paper, the professor asks the students to explore a central question using one or more theories from a singular academic discipline. However, interdisciplinary courses require students to take a broader approach, looking at additional, related academic disciplines to provide a more holistic context for their research. At its best, this process reveals a deeper, more rounded truth about the research findings for the student. At its worst, this process could lead a student to pursue tangents so far as to lose the meaning of the research findings and lose themselves in a sea of information. A *framework for analysis* keeps the student focused and the research findings relevant to the central question being asked.

Fundamentally, the framework for analysis is two things simultaneously: It is both the prism through which we view research on a question, and, as the name suggests, a scaffolding present throughout the paper on which to support factual information and student-drawn conclusions in a logical way.

How does incorporating an interdisciplinary approach change the framework for analysis?

In the interdisciplinary context, it is taking the main discipline of the course – say, political science or anthropology – and supplementing the students’ understanding by pulling in historical, religious, literary, legal, behavioral, business- or economics-related, sociological, psychological, or philosophical theories or lines of inquiry.

- Example: For a research paper for an interdisciplinary political science course about the Middle East, a student chooses to investigate the currently proposed “peace pipeline,” bringing Turkish water to various dry places in the region and aiding in diffusing regional conflict. Politics and political theories of conflict resolution are central to this paper, but the student also may look at the history of Turkish influence, regional geography issues, collective psychology theories (to relate “water delivery systems” to “feelings of peace”), and legal issues involving water rights and minority rights (for the Turkish Kurds). The student may choose to pursue one or more of these angles for looking at the contexts of the political situation posed by the pipeline or the impacts such a pipeline would have, depending on how many pages the paper is.

In essence, an interdisciplinary approach involves using one main framework for analysis while keeping in mind *multiple contexts* for our research and the *multiple impacts* our research may have on understanding the past or predicting future behaviors or consequences. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach helps a researcher clarify his or her understanding of the *system* or *regime* under which the researched issue / problem exists. Therefore, when students write their papers, they are thinking about other factors or lines of thought that influence a chosen topic and framework for analysis.

- Example: “Women’s Rights in Afghanistan” might require a political framework for analysis. However, how women relate to their government, view their religious requirements, communicate within public and private spheres, etc., involve thinking about the topic in a variety of ways that shed light on the politics of the situation. To fully understand women’s rights in Afghanistan, the student needs to understand how religion, Afghan national culture, and Afghan collective history have affected Afghan women’s specific historical and current political experience. This multifaceted analysis will allow the student to make more coherent arguments on whether women’s rights are evolving or devolving in Afghanistan and why.

Why do we need a main framework for analysis instead of using some other method of organization?

A framework for analysis is so important because it *defines* and *focuses* the scope of a student’s research. In so doing, it:

- Acknowledges the research that has come before ours, as we “stand on each other’s shoulders, not on each other’s faces.”
- Helps structure our arguments in a pattern that the reader can follow.
- Helps us as writers / researchers in developing our arguments logically, thereby giving our research direction.
- Puts our research into the perspective of a field of research.
- Places conditions and/or limits on the *value* and *context* of our research, encouraging others to use it to draw proper conclusions.
- Answers the question, “So what?”
 - Example: For a research paper on the 50th anniversary of the American interstate highway system, if the framework for analysis is:
 - Urban planning: How was the highway system designed to change the physical American landscape? Why is the creation of the highway system significant to today’s urban planning issues? What have we as urban planners learned over the time we have had this system in place?
 - Sociology: How has the highway system changed the way Americans live and work? How have our social networks been affected by these changes? Why are those changes important with regards to who we are as Americans?
 - Environmental policy: How has the burgeoning highway system affected the environment, both directly (e.g., impact of population shifts) and indirectly (e.g., impact on more efficient public transportation usage)? Why has highway pollution been managed in one way or another up until now, and what policy changes are on the horizon and why?
 - Politics: How do proposals and budgeting for grand government schemes like the highway system get started, and how are those budgets politically sustainable over time? Why do politics at any given time matter when projects like the highway system are expected to go on developing for decades?

- NB: Interdisciplinary approaches require multiple answers to the question, “So what?” However, the framework for analysis keeps a student from “throwing in the kitchen sink” when using a main discipline with secondary disciplines drawn in through case studies, illuminating examples, or introduction of related academic theories. This is because the student is constrained by the parameters of the main framework, only drawing from outside disciplines that are directly relevant to it.

What are the limits to relying on a framework for analysis to structure a research paper?

When looking at a topic that concerns some outside culture, a framework for analysis may be innately occidental. Meaning, the way we as Americans approach research on a particular issue / problem will be different than that of someone from inside the culture who is experiencing the issue / problem. A *comparative perspective* remedies this. A student can gain comparative perspective by:

- Using two competing frameworks – one from within a culture and one from outside of it – to analyze one issue / problem.
- Using one framework that the student acknowledges is a Western construct, while critiquing its application to the issue / problem with sources from inside the culture.
- Making the culture itself the prism through which the student is viewing the research issue / problem, explaining why their cultural understanding differs from our own.