

Creating a Research Agenda

Building and maintaining a coherent research program

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Roadmap

1. The shape of an agenda. Two strands, sub-strands, and how to name them
2. Examples. A finished agenda, and one still being built

The Shape of an Agenda

Two Strands, Not Ten

- Aim for two high-level strands, each with several more specific sub-strands underneath.
- Two lets you market yourself differently depending on the job. The same agenda, with a different strand in front.
- Strands have to be recognizable to a non-expert on the search committee. They are reading fast, and usually from outside your area.
- Sub-strands are where you get specific. That is where the individual papers live.

Name Them at the Right Altitude

- Strands are substantive fields, not subfield labels. "Comparative politics" and "IR" tell a committee nothing.

environmental politics · conflict and peace · migration · gender · political economy · democracy and autocracy · human rights · health · AI and governance

- The formula that works: "I work at the intersection of X and Y." One sentence, no jargon, instantly placeable.
- Keep it trendy. Tie some part of your identity to a trendy field, wherever funding and hiring lines are going.
- Pick it on purpose, and pick it early. Building a trendy field into your work now is much easier than bolting one on later.

Your Dissertation Is One Part, Not the Whole

- Do not market yourself as the scholar who does everything connected to the dissertation. It reads as a student, not a colleague.
- The framing that works: "My dissertation work on X and Y is one part of a broader agenda, and I am also working on Z."
- Everything you name should still sit under the same two strands. Projects that fit nowhere make the agenda look scattered.
- You need to look like an adult with an agenda, someone with a program that will keep producing for a decade.

Never Frontload Methods

- Lead with substance. Do not open with "I am a qualitative scholar" or "I am a computational social scientist".
- A method is not an identity to a search committee. Put it first and they will not recognize you as a scholar of anything, and will not understand what you study.
- A short phrase in passing is fine: "using mixed methods", "leveraging computational methods". One clause, then back to substance.
- This holds even when the work is methods-driven. Computational social science still needs a substantive home.
- **The caveat:** political theory, where the approach often is the substantive identity.

Examples

Elisa: Two Strands and a Nexus

Climate change

- Adaptation law
- Climate litigation
- Vulnerability and resilience
- Policy timing

The nexus

- Climate and migration
- Resource wars
- Fisheries disputes
- Hydropower and conflict

Conflict

- Mediation
- Ex-combatant reintegration
- Peace agreements
- Urban violence

Two strands, and the intersection is the thing I am known for.

Elisa: How the Strands Do the Work

- Every paper drops into a bucket. I grouped publications by strand, not by stage, so three slides did the arguing for me. It looked like I was well on my way across many of my sub-strands.
- The dissertation was one line inside the nexus strand, sitting alongside other papers rather than above them.
- Policy and practitioner outputs got their own slide, so they added weight without diluting the scholarly strands.
- The overarching goal was one phrase, climate resilience and sustainable peace, which told the committee what the whole program is for.

Elisa: The CV Does It in One Line

- Under my name, before anything else, there is a single banner line:

Climate · Conflict & Peace · Migration · Political Economy · Methods · Computational Social Science · Policy

- Substance comes first and methods come near the end, even though the methods are a selling point.
- A reader who spends four seconds on the CV still leaves knowing what I study.

Elisa: Say the Same Thing Everywhere

- The job talk and the CV use the same buckets in the same order. Climate, the nexus, conflict.
- That repetition is the point. A committee reads several documents and comes away with one sentence about you, because they saw it every time.
- The CV is the exception. It is ordered by stage and progression. The research statement, the cover letter, and the job talk are all ordered by strand.

Katie: A Working Version

- Katie is a PhD researcher, a couple of years out from the job market. The agenda is still forming, which is the normal case.
- Her CV opens with a skills list: NLP, transformer models, machine learning, web scraping, R, Python, SQL, GIS, LiDAR.
- She wanted to be known as a computational social scientist, and the CV delivered exactly that.
- It says how she works, not what she studies.

Katie: Finding the Substantive Strand

- The question we worked backwards from: what is the substantive thing all of this is already about?
- Institutional responses to unrest, mostly environmental.
- Computational methods become the how, not the identity. Same skills, just not the headline.
- One sentence: I study how institutions respond to unrest, using computational methods, mostly in the environmental space.

Katie: The Papers Bracket the Chain

- **Policy as the outcome:** our paper on environmental protest and legislative response across six liberal democracies. Unrest goes in, policy comes out.
- **Policy as the input:** the AdJUST work on climate policy paradigms at the European Commission, on the pre-legislative documents that shape what policy can even become.
- **Response beyond legislation:** the non-securitisation paper on protestor partisanship and police response across five countries.
- Three papers, one strand, sitting at different points of the same causal chain rather than being three separate interests.

The agenda was already there. It needed naming, not new projects.

Kasia

Kasia is a Post-doc researcher, actively on the job market. The agenda has just about formed! Her cover letter overtly states three interlinking strands (much like Elisa)

Peace

- Mediation
- Peace agreements

Political Economy

- political economy of peace
- resource competition

International Security

- Conflict interventions
- Conflict spillover

Nexus: strategic peacemaking

Kasia

Have fun creating your agenda - you have the freedom to decide what you work on and the impact you have!

- If there is something you want to learn (methods, sub-field etc.) work it into your research agenda
- If you can see that a new and interesting area of research is emerging, use your research agenda to move in that direction
- If you love traveling or data science, work this into your research agenda

Takeaways

- One to two strands, named so a non-expert recognizes them. Sub-strands carry the detail.
- Lead with substance. Methods are the how, never the identity.
- The agenda is often already there. It needs naming, not new projects.

Questions?