Basic Elements of a Research Paper

I. Introduction
Outline your thesis, problem, question, etc. The most important point is that you are stating a thesis/theory (relationship among variables), examining a problem, investigating a question, or the like. You are not simply describing. In terms of the “Ws”, above and beyond the What, When, and Where, the most important is Why. You are explaining some political phenomenon, utilizing observations and data, possibly incorporating a research design and statistical analysis, and producing a general conclusion or theory.

II. Review of the Literature
Summarize the state of the current literature relevant to your topic. What have been the major articles and books? What have been their critical findings? How does your research expand upon the relevant literature?

III. Analysis and Substantiation
This section is the body of your paper. You are presenting your evidence and developing your argument. If appropriate, you analyze your data, outline your evidence, and apply your research design. You will undoubtedly be exploring many “What’s, When’s, and Where’s” but all should relate ultimately to the “Why.”

IV. Conclusion
Summarize your major findings.

V. Bibliography
I do not require my students to utilize a particular style, though you should be consistent in your style. You should alphabetize your bibliography by author’s last name. Each citation should include author’s name(s), date of publication, title of publication, publisher, title of journal (if applicable), and page numbers (if applicable). You should utilize footnotes in your content whenever you are directly quoting or borrowing from a particular publication.

VI. Example
Assume you wanted to write a research paper on “Democratization in Mexico.” First, remember you are not just describing Democratization in Mexico, but you want to try to explain why it is occurring. Clearly we have to begin with understanding the phenomenon, but we want to elaborate by examining explanatory factors.
Thus, you would start with a thesis. You do not have to explain the topic completely (actually, that is impossible in the social sciences). But, you should choose a factor that plays a role in the topic. For the sake of an example, I will choose the role of the private sector. Hence, my thesis might be:

*The private sector in Mexico has played an important role in the recent democratization of the political system.*

As stated above, I would initially explain why this seemed relevant and provide an overview of the literature (albeit limited by the length of my paper).

*Mexican business groups have historically assumed an autonomous position vis-à-vis the state and have exerted considerable influence in numerous decisions, ranging from the entry to GATT to the bank nationalizations... And so on.*

The bulk of the paper would then be the analysis and substantiation of your thesis. Certainly you will describe (here it would be democratization and the role of the private sector), but you want to make the linkages between your “variables.”

*Mexican democratization begin with the 1988 election in which Cuauhtemoc Cardenas and the Mexican “left” split from the PRI and created the closest presidential contest in Mexican history. The process culminated in the election of Vicente Fox of the opposition PAN in 2000. The Mexican private sector was very active in financing campaigns, exerting influence, pressuring for autonomy, etc. {Much of your paper will be providing evidence for the two variables and their linkages: democratization and private sector influence.}*  

And summarize.

*It does appear that the Mexican private sector has played a substantial role in the democratization of the Mexican political process. Business groups have ...*