

The Teacher

Alfred Hitchcock and the Art of Research

Jonathan Kirshner, *Cornell University*

At least twice a year, I am confronted by groups of students asking fundamental questions about how to conduct research in international relations. Once is when I take my turn as a “show and tell” presenter in the government department seminar for seniors writing honors theses. The second time is when I explain the paper requirement to first-year graduate students in my seminar on international political economy.

I invariably respond to such questions by reviewing a number of standard methodological issues and problems, providing examples from well-known papers and discussing my own efforts as well. With this business out of the way, I lean forward and tell them what they really need to hear: that everything they need to know about good research they can learn from Alfred Hitchcock.

This brings looks of surprise, in part because Hitchcock’s last film came out when Ford was president, so some of the students have never heard of him.¹ The others are surprised to hear that there are crucial parallels between a great Hitchcock film and a successful paper. In fact, however, the secret to good research is to fulfill four simple rules that can be called the Hitchcock criteria.

What makes a good film? Four elements in particular. First, a good film is about *one limited concept*. *Rear Window* is about watching. *Vertigo* is about obsession. *Psycho* is about dualism (really). That’s really all there’s room for. In expressing his dissatisfaction with *Saboteur*, Hitchcock stated: “I felt that it was cluttered with too many ideas.” There was nothing wrong with any particular element, but

together they simply lacked the thematic unity of his other films: “the hero in handcuffs leaping from the bridge; the scene of the elderly blind man in the house; the ghost town with the deserted workyards . . . the long shot of Boulder Dam. I think we covered too much ground” (Truffaut 1984, 150–51).

It should be noted that Hitchcock always presented his one concept in a limited context—never intending a single film to be the last word on a given subject. He ruminated on dualism, for example, in other films such as *Strangers on a Train* and *Shadow of a Doubt*. *North by Northwest* explored themes similar to those found in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Hitchcock even remade a film, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, filming one version in 1934 and another in 1956, leading to endless debates between those who preferred his British or American periods.

How does this translate to writing a research paper or thesis? It means that the study should have one clear question. The author should be able to write down this question on a three-by-five index card, then tape it above his or her desk. By glancing up from time to time, one can assure that current thoughts and reading actually do relate to the research project. A project with one specific question, placed in a limited context, is well on its way to success.

The second of the Hitchcock criteria is the *clear communication* of the single concept. What is meant by “clear”? Clear means that you could explain your work to Hitchcock. This would not be an easy task, since Sir Alfred knew little of political science, although he liked to make up stories about scandal-

ous consequences from his use of uranium as a plot device in *Notorious*. Thus, to communicate to Hitchcock, one must communicate to the nonspecialist. This may at times be a considerable challenge, but it is the same requirement to which Hitchcock held himself. Hitchcock was admired by his peers and professional critics. But his death resulted in a banner headline in the *Los Angeles Times* because he was able to reach an enormous number of people—to communicate to a mass audience outside his elite peer group without compromising his professionalism or artistic genius.²

As François Truffaut stated, “Hitchcock is universally acknowledged to be the world’s foremost technician; even his detractors willingly concede him this title” (Truffaut 1984, 16–17). Other critics agree, stating that “Hitchcock is one of the greatest *inventors of form* in the entire cinema” (Rohmer and Charbol 1988, 152). Film scholars have been even less restrained, asserting that “his films remain central to questions of cinematic practice and critical theory” (Dutelbaum and Poague 1986, 1). Another referred to *Rear Window* as “funny, touching, almost inhumanly brilliant, profound, almost completely worked out formally, dramatically, and philosophically, worthy of the most attentive scrutiny” (Rothman 1982, 248).

Yet, despite this, Hitchcock was very sensitive to the broad public reaction to his product. He usually shared the public’s assessment of his commercial failures. While Hitchcock was a virtuoso, an innovator, with technical prowess that delighted his peers, his cinema was not simply film art for other art-

ists—he insisted that technique serve the story. “I am against virtuosity for its own sake. Technique should enrich the action” (Truffaut 1984, 103). His favorite innovations were the ones least likely to be noticed—the extra steps at the end of *Notorious*, the light in the glass of milk in *Suspicion*, the plane crash in *Foreign Correspondent*, the daring experimentation with constricted settings in *Lifeboat* and *Rear Window*. His more obvious stunts, such as the transparent ceiling in *The Lodger* and the entire movie *Rope*, he considered, in retrospect, to be mistakes. As Keith Richards said more bluntly, “As far as I am concerned, Art is short for Arthur.”

Similarly for Hitchcock, his favorite films were ones like *Psycho*, from which he derived his “main satisfaction”: the fact that “the film had an effect on audiences.” *Psycho* grossed over 15 times its production costs. At the same time, Hitchcock told Truffaut, “I take pride in the fact that *Psycho*, more than any of my other pictures, is a film that belongs to film-makers, to you and me” (Truffaut 1984, 282).

The criterion of clear communication yields specific lessons for research: topics that can only be explained to specialists are potentially dangerous—there are probably good reasons why no one else cares about them. Don’t let technical sophistication dominate the message—even in those cases where complex methods are required. Remember that even in his most sophisticated work, films that have kept academics flooding journals with complex analyses and film students studying prints frame by frame,³ Hitchcock is able to communicate to political scientists. Successful research in our discipline returns the favor, and is explicable to outsiders.

Third, in a good film, *every shot counts*. The basic element of a film is not the scene, but the shot, one continuous exposure of film. A typical movie has hundreds of shots. The shower scene in *Psycho*, for example, was 45 seconds of film but involved 70 camera set-ups (Robello 1990, 105, 108, 111). The final murder in *Sabotage*⁴ is simi-

larly complex. *The Birds*, on the other hand, held several shots for extended periods of time. The crucial thing is not the length of the shot, but making sure that every shot in the film is absolutely necessary. “Sequences must never peter out,” Hitchcock once wrote, “but must carry the action forward, much as the car of a ratchet railway is carried forward, cog by cog” (Hitchcock 1965, 212). If a sequence isn’t necessary—if it does not provide vital information—it should be cut.

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Again, one must know what the project is about—what one is trying to achieve—in order to assure that only the necessary information is introduced. This was no problem for Hitchcock, who liked to boast that by the time he actually started shooting a film, “I know every shot and every angle by heart” (Hitchcock 1973).⁵ Similarly in writing, every paragraph must count: the author must be able to justify why each paragraph is needed and how it flows naturally from one to the next, or the paragraph should be reevaluated.

Assuring that every shot, or every paragraph counts, tells you almost nothing about how long the project will be. It is as long as the sum of the necessary elements. No shorter and no longer. It should be noted, however, that Hitchcock never produced an epic.

Finally, a good film has *suspense, not surprise*. Hitchcock avoided the simple mystery films, where the main point of the movie is to find out who the killer is. (*Murder* is a notable exception to this rule.) “I do not believe that

puzzling the audience is the essence of suspense.” In *Rope*, for example, “The audience knows everything from the start . . . there is not a single detail to puzzle the audience” (Hitchcock 1948, 114). “Surprises” last only a few seconds, but suspense can be sustained indefinitely. Hitchcock’s favorite way of explaining this was to describe men playing a card game when suddenly a bomb in the room explodes. The audience is shocked for about five seconds. But show a bomb under the table with five minutes until detonation, and now the players’ boring conversation about baseball becomes an urgent matter. Sequences in films like *Dial M for Murder* and *Frenzy* are compelling only because the audience knows who the killer is. Or, as Hitchcock puts it, “The essential fact is, to get real suspense, you must let the audience have information” (Hitchcock 1973).

This carries over directly to research design. It is important to avoid the temptation (which I always face) to be a mystery writer. Better to tell the reader what to expect. If necessary, phrases like “I will show” and “I have shown” can provide bookends. If the reader doesn’t know where the argument is going, he or she is likely to be irritated rather than intrigued, and won’t understand why each paragraph is necessary in the unfolding story. The suspense—and the success—comes in the effective execution of a promising research agenda.

Hitchcock was an astute critic of his own work. He could trace his successes to films where he presented one specific concept, communicated it clearly, made every shot count, and sustained suspense. Papers with similar qualities will almost certainly be well received.

Notes

1. Alfred Hitchcock, born in Britain in 1899, directed 53 feature films, two short films for the French resistance (just now available on videotape), and a number of episodes for his long-running television series, “Alfred Hitchcock Presents.” His career can be divided into four periods: his silent films, the British sound period, the American studio period, and his years as an

independent producer. The work from any one of these periods alone would have established him as a major figure in film history. Unfortunately, the most comprehensive current biography of this fascinating character (Spoto 1983) is marred by an unpleasant (and unfulfilled) agenda.

2. “Alfred Hitchcock Dies,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1980, p. 1. The second headline, in type half the size, is “Carter Picks Muskie to Be Secretary of State.”

3. The most casual computer search will yield scores of recent papers and books on Hitchcock’s films.

4. Hitchcock’s 1936 classic *Sabotage*, adapted from Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, should not be confused with two other Hitchcock films, *The Secret Agent*, or 1942’s *Saboteur*.

5. Hitchcock’s technique also made it difficult for producers to credit his work by using extra footage and master shots routinely called for in the studio system (Leff 1987, 215).

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About the Author

Jonathan Kirshner is assistant professor of government at Cornell University and author of *Currency and Coercion: The Political Economy of International Monetary Power* (Princeton University Press, 1995). His research focuses on the relationship between political economy and national security, and international monetary relations.

Teaching Women in the News: Exposing the “Invisible Majority”

Penny M. Miller, *University of Kentucky*

Suppose your local newspaper, or the *New York Times*, or the college daily, became an exclusively female domain—that every expert source, byline, photograph, quotation, and evaluation were female. Most readers might wonder why women deserve 100% of the coverage when they represent 52% of the population. By contrast, an all-male front page might not register as anything unusual, for it is a regular occurrence in many publications (Aprile 1993, H8).

A Dramatic Lesson

The following hands on exercise has been conducted several times at the University of Kentucky in courses on American government, introduction to political science, political behavior, campaigns and the media, women and politics, and state and local politics. It takes at least 40–45 minutes to complete, and it is particularly successful in

discussion sections of large lecture courses.

In each of these courses, the exercise has had the same impact on students, who are consistently stunned by the results. The conclusion in every class has been clear: when it comes to front-page reporting, Kentucky’s major newspapers, the *New York Times*, and the college daily significantly underrepresent coverage of women and are often unflattering in the coverage they do provide.

In October 1994, I conducted this exercise in a class on women and politics. Armed with the sectional front pages of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *University of Kentucky Kernel*, I distributed 90 newspapers randomly to 45 students. I also distributed two different-colored marking pens to each class member.

First, students were instructed to highlight in one color every textual reference to persons (noting proper

names, not pronouns), byline, or photo of a woman and, using the other highlighter, to do the same for men. Then they were asked to tabulate male and female totals for the different categories. Each student presented his or her findings orally, and the results were enumerated on the blackboard.

Overall, female bylines on the newspaper pages averaged 25% of the totals. Women amounted, on average, to 20% of those shown in photographs. But the most extreme result had to do with textual references to females. On average, females were the subject of only 10% of front-page references.

Some students had front pages that contained no female bylines, photographs, or references to women. Even stories on topics of unusual concern to women, such as abortion, often contained more references to men, and few or no references to women.

Secondly, to gain further insight into the problem of the “invisible