Revolution

You can find a more complete account of the analysis of this concept in *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation* on pages 78-85.

Step 1: Gather your typical examples

If you are a historian or social scientist, you may find yourself using the concept ‘revolution’ in your work. So you will need to know what we mean by this and how it can be distinguished from a revolt, a rebellion or a coup d’état. The first step is to assemble examples of revolutions that are as different as possible from each other, like the French Revolution 1789, the Russian Revolution 1917, the English Revolution 1649, the Portuguese ‘Carnation’ Revolution 1974, the Hungarian Revolution 1956, the Industrial Revolution, even the Computer Revolution. Then you will need to think about rebellions and revolts, like Jack Cade’s Rebellion 1450 and the Peasants’ Revolt 1381.

Step 2: Analyse your examples

Now, using these examples, create your concept by identifying the common characteristics in each of your examples, isolating them so that you can then put them together to form the concept. You can see the analysis of the concept of revolution in the pattern notes, which you can find on this website.

As you can see in the notes, in the examples we listed above the Hungarian, Russian, French and English all have core characteristics not shared by the others. They involved more than just a change within the leadership or the elite ruling group: they involved deep-seated social change. The scale of each was similar in so far as they involved all society, geographically and socially. They also involved the concerted use of force and violence to overthrow the established government, unlike the Carnation Revolution and the Industrial and Computer revolutions, which were all largely peaceful.

The pace of change, too, was sudden, a matter of days in some cases, weeks or months in others, unlike the Industrial Revolution, the first phase of which lasted from 1760 to 1850. They also involved ideas, unlike, say, a population revolution or similar economic revolutions, which involve general social and economic trends. Finally they all involved radical change in our values and the way we think about rights, freedom and the way we are governed. So, with these six elements we have a concept: a pattern of ideas, which we can now test.

Step 3: Test your concept

In many cases you will find you have the overall structure right, but there may be details that are wrong or subtle distinctions you haven’t seen. So, by testing your concept you will identify those characteristics that are essential, while you ditch those that are only accidental to it. In the process you will sharpen up your understanding of the core characteristics.

1. Borderline cases

First, with your structure in front of you try to think of a borderline case, an example of your concept that doesn’t fit comfortably within your structure. It may lack features that are in your structure, or have other features that are absent from it. Then analyse its characteristics to see if, in fact, it does fit after all. You may find there’s more to this form of the concept than you first thought and it does, in fact, fit within the structure. Alternatively, after thinking through all the possibilities, it may become clear that it doesn’t fit and you will have to adjust your structure to take account of it.

Portuguese Revolution

The Portuguese Revolution seems to match every characteristic except that it didn’t involve force and violence. But it did involve the ‘threat’ of force, so we will have to decide if this is enough to qualify it as an example of a revolution. If it isn’t, then we must call it something else. If it is, then we have to decide whether we need to change this core characteristic to read something like ‘the actual or threat of force and violence’, or just drop this characteristic entirely from the structure of our concept.

2. Contrasting cases

Either way, we will have confirmed important parts of our structure. As a result you will probably feel more confident that you have now got it just about right. So it’s time to put this confidence to the sternest test you can find, this time by imagining an example that presents a clear contrast to your concept. Think of the strongest example you can find that clearly doesn’t fit within the structure of your concept. The best examples fail to share one or more of the core characteristics of your structure. Again, test your structure against this example to see if you need to make any adjustments to the components and the way they interrelate.

Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution doesn’t seem to possess two of the six characteristics in our structure: the pace of change and the concerted use of force and violence. However, the more you look at the Industrial Revolution the more you see how force, and sometimes violence, was used to take land, as in the enclosure movement, and rights, like the freedom to belong to a trade union.

If this is enough to satisfy this characteristic, we are then left with just one characteristic that seems not to fit: the pace of change. Here we either have to decide that the Industrial Revolution is simply a case of rapid ‘evolution’, or we have to modify our structure to take account of the Industrial Revolution by dropping the pace of change from our structure.

Once you have done this you will find that you have sharpened up your concept considerably. You will have identified one or more core characteristics that might not have been sufficiently clear in your original analysis.

3. Doubtful cases

Both of these two tests will probably have brought you to a point where you now know the core characteristics of your concept and the structure that defines their interrelations. If you are not this certain, you will have to test it with one or more additional contrasting examples, but it will rarely take more than this. In most cases you will have identified the core characteristics fairly clearly by now.

If this is the case, it’s time to move to the next stage and test the consequences of adopting these as your core characteristics. We need to imagine cases in which it would be difficult for you to accept these consequences. Either these are not, after all, examples of the concept, or we have missed something.

Unlike the previous stages, in this one we are neither identifying core characteristics, nor others that we need to ditch because they are merely accidental to the concept. We have our core characteristics now and their interrelations that define the concept. In this stage we are refining the distinctions that were in our original analysis, so we get a clearer, sharper understanding of the core characteristics and their interrelations. As a result we inject more subtle shades of meaning into our distinctions.

Computer Revolution

The clearest example of a doubtful case seems to be the ‘Computer Revolution’. It appears to be quite different from all the other examples in that it struggles to make a compelling case in most of our core characteristics. In particular, it appears not to involve any overthrow of government, or the use or threat of force and violence.

Even so, it could be said to elevate a new class of technocrats to positions of greater influence, while bringing systems into government that make it much more certain that information will indeed bring power to those that possess it. And, of course, by disseminating that information more widely through computer technology and the Internet it can be regarded as a powerful agent bringing about more democratic government. You will have to decide whether you think this alone merits the description of it as a ‘revolution’, or whether we are simply wrong in describing it as such.

As you can see, as we have worked our way through each of these stages we have deliberately asked awkward questions to test and refine the distinctions we made in our original analysis.