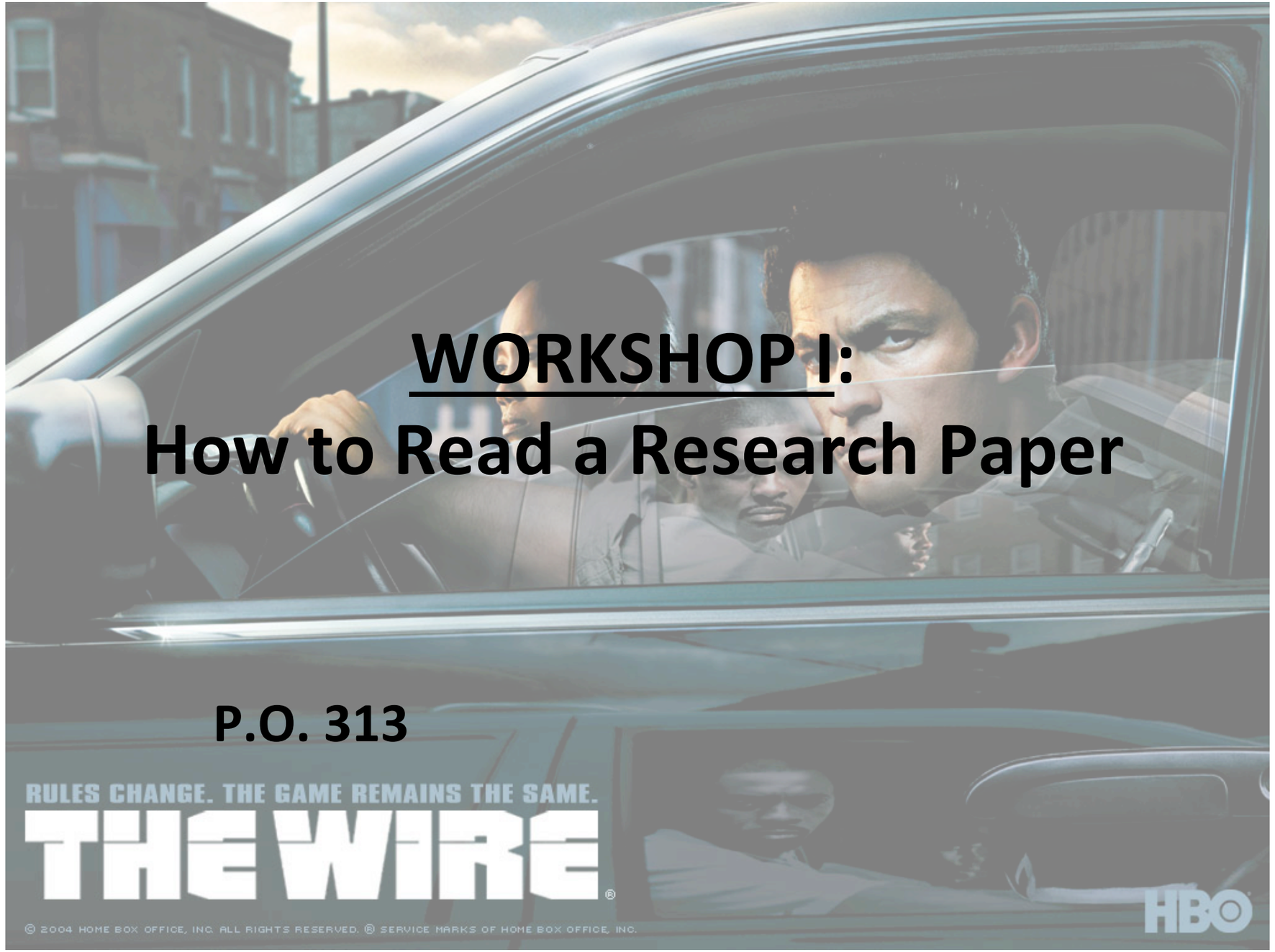

WORKSHOP I:
How to Read a Research Paper

P.O. 313

OUTLINE

- Key Terms
- Before You Start Reading
- Structure
- Methodologies
- How to “Read” Statistics
- Applying Our Knowledge

I: KEY TERMS

- Dependent variable: the outcome that the research explains (Y)
- Independent variable: the factors that the researcher thinks explain the observed outcome (X)
- Hypothesis: A specific statement of what the researcher thinks will happen to the DV if the IV is changed
- Regression: A statistical tool that helps us determine the relationship between X and Y (what happens to Y if X changes incrementally)

II: BEFORE YOU START READING

- Note the journal the article appears in
- Determine the purpose/goal of the article
  - title
  - sub-title and headings
  - abstract
- Determine level of applicability to your interests
- Hone your skepticism!

III: STRUCTURE

- Abstract (200-300 words)
- Introduction/Research Question
- Literature Review
- Hypotheses
- Research design/methodology
- Results
- Conclusion

Abstract

- 200-300 words
- Precis/summary of the piece
- Should present research question, results and conclusion with brevity and efficiency; reading the abstract is a good way to “filter out” articles that won’t be relevant to your needs

Introduction/Research Question

- What is the topic(s) of interest?
- Is this topic *theoretical* or *empirical*?
- Why should we care? Research question should be situated in a larger political/theoretical context
- Is the question *causal* or *descriptive*?
  - *Descriptive*: x is associated/correlated with y; what are observable patterns?
  - *Causal*: x causes y (the holy grail of social science research); what causes a specific political phenomenon?

Lit Review

- What is the *general scholarly consensus* of the research question?
- Will never be a complete exposition of previous work, nor should it be
- What is the *added value* or *contribution* of the project? (Review should demonstrate the gaps in previous scholarship and, more specifically, *what gap the project intends to fill*)
- Great place to mine for additional information re: your own research topics!

Hypothesis/Hypotheses (the *what*)

- What does the author expect to find?
- Hypotheses will usually be *predictive*—in other words, what kind of effect will a change in X have on Y, if any?
- Hypotheses will usually be *specific*, distinguishing them from more open-ended research questions

Research Design/Methodology (the *how*)

- *How* has the author gone about finding the answer to her research question/testing her hypothesis?
- Research-design section should answer the following questions:
  - What is the nature of the available data (or of the research question)?
  - How will this data (or the question) be analyzed?
  - Why is this design preferable to all other possible designs?
  - What are the strengths and weaknesses of this design?
  - What are the particulars (control variables, sample size, simulation details, etc)?

Results/Analysis

- What are the findings?
- Has the hypothesis been confirmed by the evidence?
- What do these results tell us about the larger research question?

Conclusion

- Should summarize the findings and reiterate why they are significant
- What are the *implications for future research*? What contributions has this project made and what work still needs to be done? (What other papers will you seek out to answer the lingering questions/ concerns?)

IV: RESEARCH DESIGNS/METHODOLOGIES

- Research papers can employ one or more of certain *modes of analysis* to test a hypothesis and answer a research question
- Designs can be *qualitative* or *quantitative*
- Examples:
  - Case studies (small or large n)
  - Field research/ethnography
  - Surveys (interviews, focus groups)
  - Regression of observational data
  - Experiments

V: HOW TO "READ" STATISTICS

- Regression: A statistical tool that helps us determine the relationship between X and Y (what happens to Y if X changes incrementally)
- Different kinds of regression based on the nature of the data (continuous, binary, categorical)
- Positive and negative relationships between variables
- A regression also tells us the *statistical significance* of a relationship between variables
  - a relationship is *significant* if there is less than a 5% chance that the observed relationship was the result of random chance

WORKSHOP I: How to Read a Research Paper

Table 2.1
Predicting Support for Crime Control over Due Process

Variables	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
Age	.02*** (.00)	.02*** (.00)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Black	-1.54*** (.15)	-1.81*** (.19)	-.98*** (.28)	-.65* (.28)
Female	.11 (.11)	.15 (.12)	-.08 (.18)	-.02 (.18)
Income		.04 (.05)	.04 (.05)	.03 (.05)
Constant	3.36*** (.17)	4.04*** (.43)	3.70*** (.76)	.95 (.93)
N	1,424	1,208	556	532
Adj. R^2	.10	.11	.18	.25

*****p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10**

measure of **statistical significance**

coefficient

standard error

sample size

one measure of the explanatory power of the model

VI: APPLYING OUR KNOWLEDGE

- Remember:
  - The burden of proof is on the author(s); her job is to convince you, using the most credible evidence possible, that she is right
  - There is no such thing as a flawless research design
  - Uncertainty is the nature of all branches of science, but particularly social sciences—always make sure you understand the problems/biases of the design. (This will sometimes be buried in the Appendices!) Are the results still convincing?

VI: APPLYING OUR KNOWLEDGE

- Devah Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record" (*American Journal of Sociology* 108.5, March 2003)

- Amy Lerman, "The Rights of the Accused" in *Public Opinion and Constitutional Controversy* (Oxford University Press, 2008)