

Research Process and Scholarly Growth Essay

As a Global Studies major with a regional concentration in Latin America, my academic interests are deeply rooted in the impact of U.S. foreign policy on the social, economic, and political landscapes of Latin America. I am particularly intrigued by how U.S. military training and intervention have contributed to political instability, repression, and economic dependency across the region. My specific interest in the School of the Americas (SOA) emerged in the summer of 2025, after attending a talk by the nonprofit organization Guatemala Solidarity Project. This discussion was my first time hearing about the SOA and the ongoing movement to close the facility. After speaking with the organizers, I found myself repeatedly wondering how the training facility could continue operations, considering the prolific history of human rights abuses committed by its graduates. Simultaneously, I felt aware of my own ignorance; until encountering the anti-SOA movement, I had never learned about the school's history, existence, or continued operation.

This experience inspired me to continue investigating the SOA, but until this quarter, I had not found a formal opportunity to do so. In Winter 2026, I enrolled in GLBL 446, *Development and Social Change in Latin America and the Caribbean*, where we would write an independent research paper. After visiting Professor Millar's office hours, I started refining my topic. With stories about President Burkele's relationship with Trump and the use of the CECOT prison circulating the news, I began to wonder about El Salvador's involvement in the SOA. Although I initially considered approaching my research through a lens of current events, I found limited information regarding current SOA training, so I ultimately decided to adopt a historical approach. By grounding my research in historical events, I aimed to contextualize El Salvador's relationship with the U.S. in a way that could highlight parallels to ongoing current events.

After conducting a preliminary investigation, I discovered jarring statistics and case studies about the human rights records of Salvadorian SOA attendees. This realization solidified my decision to focus on how El Salvador's participation in the SOA has impacted military practices and patterns of human rights violations within the nation. Because my initial exposure to the SOA came through an advocacy-based nonprofit organization, I decided to incorporate a discussion of the anti-SOA social movement alongside historic accounts.

Throughout my research process, the UO Library provided access to sources that fundamentally shaped my understanding of the SOA. I consulted the Global Studies Research Guide, which introduced me to two new databases: the Social Science Premium Collection and Web of Science. While searching these databases, I noticed that nearly every search result either referenced or reviewed Lesley Gill's 2004 book *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas*. The frequent citation of Gill's book across academic literature highlighted its prominence and established credibility. In my paper, I describe it as "one of the most comprehensive accounts of training methods and human rights violations at the SOA". I decided that I could not conduct thorough research without reading Gill's book, which served as a foundational resource for my paper.

After reviewing the Global Studies Research Guide, I expanded my search to JSTOR, which proved pivotal to my research process. Accessing JSTOR through the U.O. library facilitated my discovery of academic journals such as *Inside the Pentagon*, *Latin American Perspectives*, and *Third World Quarterly*. I experimented with different keywords and search filters, allowing me to find information from multiple disciplines. By separating my searches between journals and research reports, I found papers grounded in both mathematical statistics and the social sciences. When analyzing these sources, I kept an ongoing document of notes,

where I wrote the author's key arguments, methodologies, conclusions, and notable case studies. Alongside these notes, I tracked page numbers and kept an updated bibliography so I could easily cite my sources. This organizational framework was incredibly useful during my analysis, as having similar categories of information allowed me to organize my ideas, find commonalities, and develop my own interpretations.

Beyond secondary academic journals, I wanted to incorporate at least one primary document from the United Nations (UN), and noticed that the Global Studies Research guide contained a link to the UN Digital Library. Several of the academic journals I had already read referenced the 1993 UN Security Council Report, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador*. Using the UN Digital Library, I refined my search to Security Council publications from 1993 and easily located the primary document. Reading this report helped uncover many of the case studies I reference in my paper, including the El Mozote Massacre, Jesuit Murders, and the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Considering the UN is a well-established international body that conducts thorough primary research, I felt comfortable referencing their findings, particularly when using empirical data.

Despite the utility of the report, I wanted to further develop my understanding beyond the UN perspective. Using the library catalog, I located complete books about each case study, including *Assassination of a Saint: the plot to murder Óscar Romero and the quest to bring his killers to justice*, *The El Mozote Massacre: Human Rights and Global Implications*, and *Death foretold: the Jesuit murders in El Salvador*. The first two books were available in an e-book format, while *Death Foretold* was a part of the Knight Library's physical collection, which the library staff helped me quickly access. Within my research process, I frequently used the index to locate specific information, including Roberto D'Aubuisson's involvement in the assassination

of Oscar Romero as described in *Assassination of a Saint*. Similar to my use of JSTOR, I kept an ongoing document with categorized notes and citations.

One of the difficulties I encountered during my research was navigating the credibility of nonprofit publications. A significant portion of my research focused on the role of the SOA Watch and CISPES in the anti-SOA movement, but since they are not peer-reviewed academic journals, I knew I needed to be conscious of how I referenced their work. These feelings of skepticism were solidified by one of my academic sources, *Still Training to Torture? US Training of Military Forces from Latin America* by Ruth Blakeley (2006), who challenges the SOA Watch for publishing articles using inflammatory, misleading information and substantiated allegations (pg. 1447). After reflecting on this argument, I decided to reference their published articles as examples of advocacy, but not as a source of evidence about the SOA. Despite not relying on their articles, many of my academic sources, including Lesley Gill's 2004 book and a report by Amnesty International, reference and affirm the credibility of their public graduate database. For that reason, I distinguished between their databases and publications, allowing me to reference the organization without sacrificing credibility.

In addition to navigating sources, another challenge I encountered was learning how to cite sources from the SOA Watch and CISPES, considering that neither organization includes author names, and many of the articles have the same publication year. This was particularly challenging with the SOA Watch, since I referenced three of their publications from 2021. I initially cited these sources using identical parenthetical references, but then decided to check with a librarian using the 24/7 chat service. I connected with Katrine Donaldson, who directed me to the APA Style and Grammar Guide, and informed me that you can use letters (a,b,c) to distinguish between multiple publications from the same year and author. This discovery

strengthened my confidence in the accuracy of my citations and broadened my understanding of APA format.

Engaging in this research allowed me to explore the profound connections between U.S. military training and human rights violations in El Salvador. As a broader concept, U.S. support for repressive, authoritarian governments in Latin America is a recurring topic in the field of Global Studies. This research paper expanded and solidified my understanding of this dynamic, complicating how I understand and interpret human rights violations across Latin America. In future research into the Latin American hemisphere, I will bring a critical consciousness of how involvement in the SOA and other U.S. military training may have influenced patterns of repression and violence. This perspective will enhance future academic discussions, bringing a depth of understanding to a component of U.S. foreign policy that is often overlooked.

Beyond learning about the SOA, this research project reinforced my confidence in using new academic databases, which I plan to incorporate into future research. Locating credible databases and effectively evaluating sources is an essential research tool, particularly in our current, convoluted information climate. As someone interested in a future career grounded in research and academia, developing adept research skills is one of my primary goals. This experience allowed me to focus on this objective, enhancing my critical thinking and information synthesis abilities while learning about a politically relevant topic.