



# WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER

## What is a Research Paper?

Generally speaking, a research paper is an academic paper that explores a topic using theories, data, and analysis. Research papers should be written in a clear, concise manner and use reputable references such as books and periodicals, peer-reviewed journals, and government reports. Of course, your local library staff can assist you with finding these and other options.

## Getting Started

There are multiple ways to approach writing a research paper as no single option works for every student. You may find that all of the suggestions below are helpful on one assignment, but only one or two are needed for a different writing project. The following options are meant to help you get started, but in time, you will develop your own process that works best for you.

- ◆ Unless a topic is assigned, choose a topic of interest to you as it is much easier to write about a topic that inspires you or piques your curiosity.
- ◆ Brainstorm potential ideas. Do not get bogged down with whether an idea is “good” or “bad.” Simply make a list of what comes to mind.
- ◆ Once you have chosen a topic, decide on your thesis statement. What question are you attempting to answer with your research? Be as specific as possible as a broad topic can be overwhelming.
- ◆ Make an outline. Outlines can assist with organizing your ideas and paper. They can be in “typical” outline format, or diagrams that show



ideas and how they connect. Does each idea lead back to and/or support your thesis statement?

*Questions to consider:*

- ◆ Why is this topic important?
- ◆ What background information do I need to give the reader so they understand?
- ◆ Are there any field or discipline specific terms or jargon I need to define?
- ◆ What approach should I use? For example, are you making an unlikely connection, challenging a common misconception, reframing older research in a new way, or completing a meta-analysis by looking at all the literature on a particular topic and summarizing it?

### **Components of a Research Paper**

This is a fairly standard format for research papers, however, professors and institutions may have their own guidelines and requirements, so always double-check the assignment requirements before submitting your work.

**Title Page** (formatting may vary depending on citation style used – APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.)

- ◆ Title of paper
- ◆ Author name
- ◆ Name of institution



## **Abstract**

Brief overview of what is included in the paper. This includes introducing the topic, stating the findings, and summarizing the conclusions. Word limits can range from 150 – 300 words.

## **Introduction**

The introduction provides relevant background information and/or context for your topic. This is also where you introduce your research question/thesis statement, offer a preview of your supporting points for your research question/thesis statement, and provide an overview of how your paper is organized.

## **Methods**

The methods section needs to be clearly stated so that others can replicate your work if needed. Items to include are the methodology used (e.g., case study, interviews), information about your study site/group (e.g., location, specific population of humans), any equipment used, and the type of analysis to be performed.

## **Results**

Simply state what you found. Unless otherwise directed, there is no need to elaborate on what you think the results mean in this section as that is the purpose of the discussion/conclusion section.

## **Discussion/Conclusion**

Summarize your question and results, and elaborate on/explain any findings whether they are significant or not. Sometimes “non-significant” results may still reveal an important trend or finding. Move from a detailed to a more general discussion. For example, although your results mean “x” for your group of participants or a specific wildlife population, how can those results apply elsewhere in the “bigger” picture? This section



is also where you can include suggestions for future research based on your findings and/or unanswered questions.

## References

List all references cited throughout the paper.

## Other Items to Consider When Writing and Reviewing Your Work:

- ◆ Is your thesis statement clear?
- ◆ Does your paper have a logical order of ideas?
- ◆ Are your sources properly cited?
- ◆ Read out loud to yourself or someone else to listen for awkward words or phrases.
- ◆ Keep track of references as you go along.
- ◆ Take good notes.
- ◆ Use headings/subheadings to help with organization.

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