

## Writing a Basic Research Paper

1. *Title/Title Page*: The title of your paper should fit the main theme of the paper. It should be centered in bold print (16-18 font) and should not be more than ten words. Place your name one or two line spaces directly under the title in a smaller font size. The date of submission and the class in which the assignment was made should also be included.

If you are presenting the paper at a conference, put your mailing address as well your phone number and email address under your name. Lastly, put the name, date and location of the conference under your demographic information.

Side note: You might want to construct a rough outline of the main headings in the paper highlighting the main point or items that you want to cover as you move along. This becomes more relevant as the length of the paper increases (for example, not necessary for a five page paper, but important for papers over 10 pages in length).

2. *Abstract*: This is a one or two paragraph synopsis of your paper. First and foremost, the abstract should identify your hypothesis/research question in the first or second line. Then, detail the procedure/application that you used to test your hypothesis/research question (survey data, archival study, regression analysis, content analysis, etc). This sentence [s] should also identify your main data sources (i.e. Survey data, Census data, etc). Lastly, the abstract should provide the reader with your main research findings if you have completed the research. Frequently, proposals for research are just that. If you have completed the research, provide the major findings in one or two sentences. If you have not completed the research, then leave this part out of your proposal. When you finish the research you can go back and rewrite this section with the exact findings. This step is critical because you should be able to polish and refine your statement at this point. An abstract should not be longer than 130 words or 3/4<sup>th</sup>s of a page.

3. *Introduction*: The introduction to the paper provides the main point of departure for your subject matter. The main objective is not only to clearly convey your hypothesis/research question, but also to validate your study relative to other studies. However, you do not want to delve too deep into the research of other scholars in this section. The literature review section contains this information. Do not force the reader to read more than one paragraph to find your hypothesis/research question. The purpose of your study should be crystal clear to the reader. Researchers frequently begin the introduction with several cursory sentences providing some interesting points or data concerning the subject matter. The introduction can range from half a page to two pages depending on how much background information you include. Ensure that you stay focused when writing this section.

Main Points Summarized:

- Present relevant background or contextual material
- Define terms or concepts when necessary
- Explain the focus of the paper and your specific purpose
- Validate your thesis or purpose statement by showing why it is important
- Reveal your plan of organization for the paper

4. *Literature Review/Previous Literature*: In short, this is a summation of the works of other scholars who have conducted research on your dependent variable/main subject. The bulk of your literature review should be based on scholarly refereed research. Generally speaking, web based articles are still only moderately acceptable in research. This does not include refereed journals that are available online. I am specifically referring to articles that were written and did not go through the process of having several other professional researches read it and provide some sort of stamp of approval (commonly called non refereed research). Literature can be ranked in terms of level of acceptance (most acceptable to least acceptable): 1. university press books and refereed articles, 2. non university press books and text books, 3. articles from research institutes, government agencies, or think tanks such as the Urban Institute, Brookings, Congressional Budget Office, and OMB, 4. web sites, news magazines (Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, etc.), and newspaper articles. There is also some disparity among web sites, newspapers, and news magazines, so be careful when citing them.

A literature review is normally written by date or subject matter. In some instances, there may be two areas of research that cover your subject, so it would be wise to split them into two sections with an appropriate heading for each and then discuss them by date. The most recent material should appear first. This is not necessarily true if there is a classic pioneering article or book in the field. If everyone else is citing the piece, then you should as well. Your goal is not to summarize the research, but to cite the research design and the findings as it applies to your work. If multiple authors have the same findings, then cite them together in one sentence. The literature review can range from two to four pages depending on how much work has been conducted in your area. Carefully cite the research you are building from, synthesizing the information as much as possible rather than just describing each individual research piece. Academic reviewers often go to this section first to see what basis the research is basing their theoretical/research design upon since this section demonstrates the writer's knowledge and understanding of the state of the current research in the area.

Main Points Summarized:

- Use your outline and prospectus as flexible guides
- Build your paper around points you want to make (i.e., don't let your sources organize your paper)
- Integrate your sources into your discussion
- Summarize, analyze, explain, and evaluate published work rather than merely reporting it
- Move up and down the "ladder of abstraction" from generalization to varying levels of detail back to generalization

5. *Data and Methods*: The main objective of this section is to inform the reader of your data sources, research application and model. It is not necessary to list the exact location of your data sources. For example, if you use data from the U.S. Census Bureau's web site, you should simply list the main web site. The reader simply needs to have enough information to find the location of the data if they look for it. You should also indicate the time frame covered in the research.

It is easier to describe secondary data than primary data. When using primary data, you must detail the exact collection method as well as any other nuances that you employed when collecting the data. This is particularly true with content analysis studies and primary survey data. Review the article “Advancing E-Government at the Grassroots: Tortoise or Hare?” in the January/February 2005, v 6 p 64-75 issue of *Public Administration Review* for an example of writing the data and methods section for a survey research article. Review the article “The Media’s Portrayal of Urban and Rural School Violence: A Preliminary Analysis” in the September/October 2001, v 22 #5 issue of *Deviant Behavior* for an example of content analysis. The article that is listed on our website with this handout also uses secondary data analysis. Methodology refers to the statistical application that you use in your study. This includes, chi square analysis, regression analysis, correlations, factors analysis, etc.

Lastly, you should put your model in this section. This includes items such as illustrations describing your model or regression models. Each of the terms that you use to describe your illustration or variables in your model must be described in detail. For example, you may have an education variable in your model. It is necessary to inform the reader how you measure education: in years?, grades?, or degrees completed? Depending on how many variables that you have in your paper, it may be necessary to include an appendix or footnotes/endnotes with the full description of the variable along with any coding that you used.

Main Points Summarized:

- Provide the location of data sources
- Describe the variables used in your paper (in the paper or in the appendix)
- Describe the methodology used and its limitations (regression, survey or content analysis, archival studies, etc)
- Present your model/paradigm/etc

6. *Findings/Results*: This section provides the reader with the results of your analysis. No conclusions are drawn in this section. So, if you test three hypotheses, you might simply list them one by one and provide the results for each. If you have tables and charts describing your findings, place them in this section. Your tables should stand alone. That is, the reader should be able to discern what is in the table or illustration without reading the text. However, the text should clearly explain what is in the table [s]. You should not refer extensively to the literature review in the findings. The tables and charts must be carefully constructed so that the reader can readily understand labels, headings, sources or data, etc.

Main Points Summarized:

- Repeat research question/hypothesis followed by the findings
- Present tables, charts and graphs
- Do not draw any conclusions based on previous research

7. *Conclusions*: The first thing that you want to do in your conclusion is remind the reader of your hypotheses/research questions. Then, confirm or reject those propositions as well as compare them to the findings of other scholars. It is okay to indicate that you did not find what you expected to find. Scholars frequently indicate how their research was limited and what they

would do or recommend to future researchers. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel in this section. It is a summary, not a regurgitation of the findings. Depending on the number of hypothesis tested, your conclusion can range from a paragraph to a couple of pages in length.

After you have drafted your conclusion section, go back to the introduction and make sure that the two are still linked! Did you do what you said you were going to do? Is the paper organized the way you said it would be? Does your concluding paragraph (s) clearly address the purpose of the paper?

Main Points Summarized:

- If the argument or point of your paper is complex, you may need to summarize the argument for your reader.
- If prior to your conclusion you have not yet explained the significance of your findings or if you are proceeding inductively, use the end of your paper to add your points up, to explain their significance.
- Move from a detailed to a general level of consideration that returns the topic to the context provided by the introduction.
- Perhaps suggest what about this topic needs further research

8. *References/Bibliography*: Please consult a style manual for proper citation methods. There are three main techniques (APA, MLA, and Chicago Style) and they do change over time. So, you should consult the most recent version of the technique that you are using. The MPA faculty have agreed that students in PADM classes should use the most recent APA style.

9. *Endnotes/Footnotes*: These are short explanatory sentences that are conservatively used throughout your paper. For the most part, they are used to offer additional explanation, definitions or other pieces of information that may be useful to the reader. Do not put things in the notes that can be included in the paper. If you are using quantitative analysis in your paper it may be better if you use an appendix along with notes. Use notes sparingly.

10. *Appendices/Footnotes/Endnotes*: The appendix contains information that is not needed directly in the text. This would include items such as the coding scheme for your models, definitions of terms, and additional information about your data. There is no set amount or type of information that should be included in your appendix.

**Notes:** The items that are included in this summary should be included in a basic run of the mill research paper. There is no exact model to follow when writing a research paper. Different journals use different models and professors often want different things. The more you read scholarly research and write research papers the more adept you will become in your writing skills.

You may also include other items such as a background section discussing a policy or a definition that your paper focuses on. However, it is recommended that you do not go overboard in this process.

The information contained in this summary is not applicable and should not be mistaken for “research papers” that are really literature reviews. It is possible to conduct a content analysis or an archival study on the work of other scholars. However, to simply go to the library and find articles and books on a subject and write a paper is not a research paper, but a literature review disguised as a research paper. The term research suggests that you have gone beyond what other writers have done and conducted some sort of analysis that presumably has not been done before.

Research papers frequently use a Times Roman 12 point font and are double spaced. Unless indicated otherwise, there is no real page limit. However, research papers do not tend to extend beyond 40 pages. The following websites offers additional information on writing using the APA style <http://webster.comnet.edu/apa/> or <http://www.apastyle.org>.

### **Aids to Writing Research Papers**

*Guidelines for writing a research report.*

*Harbrace college handbook.*

*Making sense : a student's guide to research and writing : social sciences.*

*MLA handbook for writers of research papers.*

*Model research papers from across the disciplines.*

*Put it in writing: learn how to write clearly, quickly and persuasively.*

*Research and report writing [videorecording].*

*Research paper smart: where to find it, how to write it, how to cite it.*

*Understanding style : practical ways to improve your writing.*

*Webster's new world student writing handbook.*

*Writing handbook.*

*Writing research papers: a Norton guide.*