

Research paper

Academic Tip Sheet



This academic tip sheet:

- explains what a research paper is;
- outlines what is expected in a research paper; and
- provides guidelines for developing each section within a research paper.

What's a research paper?

The term 'research paper' refers to a particular genre of academic writing, in which the writer's own interpretation, evaluation, or argument on a specific issue is given prominence). There are some similarities between a research paper and a literature review; for instance both require an extensive study of the literature.

A research paper involves surveying a field of knowledge in order to find the best possible information in that field. Such information is then utilised to present a competent argument

on a topic. Hence a research paper requires a presentation of your own thinking backed up by others' ideas and information.

In short, a research paper is:

- focused on a specific issue/problem;
- a presentation of facts that are based upon extensive reading and extraction of information from several sources; and
- original in selection of literature, evaluation, expression and conclusion.

What is in a research paper?

When writing a research paper, you are expected to:

- identify and briefly describe the works you have consulted;
- analyse and interpret relevant literature;
- frame the literature as evidence to support your argument; and
- make conclusions.

This may be achieved by:

- defining and clarifying the 'problem';
- summarising previous studies to inform the reader of the state of current knowledge;
- identifying agreements and disagreements in the literature, examining contradictions, inconsistencies and gaps in the literature;
- drawing conclusions based upon your analysis; and
- suggesting the next step/s towards solving the 'problem'.

Organising a research paper

The following structure is recommended when writing a research paper.

- Title page.
- Contents page.
- Abstract.
- Introduction.
- Discussion (this section may be further organised into subheadings if the paper is extended in length).
- Reference list.

Structural guidelines

1. The abstract

- Describe the topic (in one sentence).
- State the purpose/thesis/organising construct of the paper.
- Outline the scope of the paper.
- Identify the key sources of evidence that substantiates the argument (i.e., published literature).
- State the key conclusions.

2. The introduction

- Introduce the specific 'problem' under study.
- Summarise relevant arguments and data to give the reader a firm sense of the issue (in a couple of sentences).
- Develop the background.
 - Discuss the literature without giving a detailed historical account.
 - Assume the reader is knowledgeable about the field.
 - Cite only works that have direct relevance to the topic.
 - Demonstrate a logical continuity

between earlier and current work (this helps to develop breadth and scope of your work).

- Note controversial issues where applicable (treat opposing viewpoints fairly).
- State the purpose and rationale (i.e., your approach to solving the 'problem').
- Define the variables and state your thesis).

3. The discussion

- Organise the subheadings to reflect theoretical relationships (i.e., group related ideas together).
- Under each subheading summarise and synthesise relevant information from the literature.
- Analyse and discuss (evaluate and interpret) the information.
- Consider the implications in terms of your thesis (i.e., support vs non support for your position on the issue).
- Based on conclusions you make, consider inferences that may be drawn (where applicable).
- Acknowledge limitations and address alternative explanations.
- To conclude, comment on the importance of your findings.

4. The references

- Ensure technical correctness in all citations and reference list entries as per the APA referencing system conventions.
- Proofread carefully to avoid plagiarism and technical errors.

Common difficulties

The most common difficulties experienced by students include:

- failure to research the general topic before deciding on a thesis statement;
- failure to construct an appropriate thesis statement;
- failure to provide a connection between the thesis statement and the topic sentences in the paper;
- failure to support the paper with adequate information that is relevant to the specific focus of the paper; and
- failure to correctly cite all sources.

How to avoid common difficulties

Carefully read the assessment instructions and guidelines. Then preview relevant literature to develop an overall understanding of the topic. Use this basic knowledge to construct your argument/thesis; exercise caution to ensure that your thesis statement is neither too

broad nor too narrow to effectively enable you to fulfil the assessment requirements (e.g., length of the paper).

Develop a working thesis statement, and revise this to improve clarity and specificity as your paper begins to take shape. Your thesis statement should be sufficiently compelling to persuade the reader to a particular point of view if you are adopting an argumentative approach, or clearly express the gist of your position if you are adopting an informative approach within your paper.

It is also important to provide adequate and relevant support for the assertions you make within your research paper as this will strengthen your argument. You should insert research findings that are appropriate to specific points you make, throughout the paper, rather than simply providing overall summaries of sources (or inserting references that are weakly integrated).

Research paper checklist

- **Have you read your assessment instructions and guidelines?**
- **Have you reviewed the relevant literature to develop an overall understanding of the topic?**
- **Have you used this basic knowledge to construct your argument/thesis?**
- **Have you developed a working thesis statement?**
- **Have you strengthened your argument by providing adequate and relevant support for your arguments?**
- **Have you submitted your research paper on time and in the correct format?**
- **Have you kept a copy of your research paper?**

References

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Acknowledgements

This material was modified from source documents prepared by Kuki Singh, ECU, 2007. Editor: Trevor Bennett.