

## What is a Research Paper?

Research papers constitute their own genre and are qualitatively different from other forms of writing such as fiction, policy statements, personal journals, and news articles. While material produced using these other forms of writing may occasionally be used as evidence for research papers, or are in some cases designed to produce data for research, these forms do not themselves constitute a research paper.

The following pages describe the major components and standards of a research paper, and provide tips on how to write a good research paper. The last page is a sample checklist for grading a research paper.

### 1) MAKE AN ARGUMENT

**The main objective of a research paper is to use academic theories, accepted research methods, and reliable evidence to support a coherent argument that is relevant to a given topic** (namely your assignment). A research paper will use one or more of the following formats:

- a) use a theory or theories to explain variation in data.
- b) use evidence to support or challenge a theory.
- c) use evidence to compare or contrast more than one theory.
- d) use theory and evidence to compare given methods.

Since the purpose of a research paper is to make a clear argument, a good paper will state the main argument, its thesis, as directly as possible. Even if you conclude that there aren't enough data to come to a clear conclusion, that is your thesis. The main argument should organize the rest of the paper. Every section, paragraph and example used in a research paper should be explicitly linked to the thesis. I recommend that you put your thesis statement at the front of the introduction. Unless you are writing for publication, I recommend that you **bold** or underline your thesis as I have the thesis sentence above. The topic sentence of each following paragraph should be *italicized*. This method will prevent you from wandering from your thesis, or remind you to modify your thesis when necessary.

The catch is that, contrary to popular belief, a research paper rarely starts out with a refined thesis. The thesis often develops out of the argument (see section 9 Getting Started below). It helps to think of the thesis as a concept under construction, something that won't be finished until the last steps of writing the paper. This way you can feel comfortable starting with a crude thesis knowing that it will get better as you work with it.

Theories used in a research paper by definition come out of, and relate back to, existing bodies of academic literature. In general good theses develop from your own reaction to the theories and concepts discussed in the course and readings. Yes, this means you must engage with the relevant literature in order to write a research paper. Whether or not you agree with the theoretical framework of the course, or even if your main objective is to challenge a given theoretical framework, you must demonstrate your ability to use that framework and the available evidence to make an effective argument.

It helps to put on a new conceptual framework like a pair of sunglasses. Use it to reexamine what you already know. See what it allows you to see that other theories don't let you see.

Once you can do that you will be more likely to use the vocabulary and concepts of the course correctly throughout your argument.

## 2) SUPPORT YOUR ARGUMENT WITH EVIDENCE

Your argument must be supported by reliable evidence. Reliable evidence is collected by accepted research methods. Your evidence or data may come from a variety of sources including other texts, research articles, existing data bases, it may be assigned in a course, or in some cases may be data you generate yourself. Either way, whether you borrow your evidence or generate original data, the sources and methods used to collect the evidence that supports your argument should be made as explicit as possible. And any evidence cited in your research paper should be directly relevant to the thesis of the paper.

## 3) USE FULL CITATIONS

Every use of borrowed theories, methods or data must be fully cited according to the standards of your academic discipline. This includes references taken from the Internet, television, movies, personal conversations or otherwise. Failure to cite sources is called plagiarism. If you have any question about the standard reference format you should be using ask your instructor or teaching assistant. If you do not have a referencing guide for your discipline get one and use it. If you do not have a major then use the standard of the discipline in which the course is being taught. If neither you nor your course has a standard for citing sources then use either the APA or MLA standard.

## 4) THE FORM OF THE PAPER

Every research paper should have a title, an introduction with a thesis that relates to the literature, a body of argument that relates to the thesis, a conclusion, standard bibliographic references, and any necessary appendices. Unless otherwise specifically stated in your assignment there should be no part of the paper that doesn't bear directly on the main argument.

**INTRODUCTION.** Write a full introduction. The introduction is a road map for the reader, it sets out your thesis, introduces the sources you will use, and outlines the argument that will be made in the rest of the paper, and foreshadows the conclusion. A good introduction states in plain terms what the paper is about without using technical terms that have not yet been defined in the paper. It should leave no room for surprises in the paper. It is usually safe to assume that the majority of your readers won't get past the introduction. They will read it to see if your paper contains anything of interests to them. For these reasons the introduction is often the last part of the paper to be written.

**BODY.** The body of a research paper will by definition take one of several definite forms. You will be combining theory and evidence to support a thesis that is relevant to issues in the field. You will often use theory to explain variation in the data or behavior, or you may use evidence to compare competing theories, or to argue for the use of one method over another in particular situations. No matter which way you go, your objective should be to make clear connections between defined concepts and reliable evidence in a direct, convincing manner.

**CONCLUSION.** The conclusion of your paper should retrace the main points of your argument, point out the examples you have used to support your argument, and restates the thesis in its final, fully supported and most sophisticated form. From this it should be clear that both the introduction and conclusion mirror each other. This repetition and structure is crucial for the reader (me) to be able to follow what otherwise may look suspiciously like impenetrable, pointless blather.

**CITATIONS.** Include either a list of “Works Cited” in your paper or a more comprehensive “Bibliography” depending on either the requirements of the assignment or the standards of your discipline. Make sure every source of borrowed material in the paper is cited in the text and the source listed in the bibliography.

**ATTACHMENTS.** Attach any appendices that are necessary to your argument. For example, it may help your reader if you attach copies of any pictures, graphs, or source articles that are central to your argument. At the first reference to the attachment in your text notify your reader (in parenthesis) that the material is attached.

#### 5) MAKE STRONG TRANSITIONS

Academic research is not easy to write or to read. In order to keep your reader with you as you progress through your argument you should notify the reader of transitions. In its simplest form, a research paper should have a transition sentence at the end of each paragraph that clearly shows the relationship of that paragraph to the topic of the next paragraph (for example, use “but,” “then,” “however,” and “nonetheless” statements). Repeated use of key terms and consistent use of defined vocabulary helps the reader follow your connections. Section headings can be most helpful to those of us that read hundreds of papers. In addition to labeling your introduction and conclusion, use simple section headings like “Summary of Newton’s Theory,” and “Methodology,” wherever possible and appropriate. Taken together the sections and paragraphs of your paper should form a continuous, coherent, logical chain. Achieving this with an academic paper takes practice and several revisions. If you want your argument to be understood (translation “good grade”) take special care to develop this skill.

#### 6) BE EXPLICIT ABOUT THE CONNECTIONS YOU ARE MAKING

Take special care also to spell out the dot-to-dot connections on which your argument hinges. Bring the underlying logic to the surface. If  $A + B = C$  then say so. Don’t assume that I understand why you think that this theory fits the evidence better than the other one. Make connections and comparisons in as direct a way as you can. For example, “I have summarized these points of Marx’s theory of surplus labor in this way in order to highlight their connection to similar points in Durkheim’s theory. The corresponding points in Durkheim’s theory are..”

The same emphasis on making clear connections applies to using examples, evidence and graphs. In any argument a simple and well placed example can be the single most effective tool you can use to communicate complicated or abstract ideas. However, even if the appropriateness of the example seems entirely obvious to you, be very careful to spell out exactly how the example connects to your argument.

For example: “An apple fell from the tree yesterday. That apples fall from trees lends support to Newton’s law of gravity, and more specifically to the law that bodies of mass attract each other. The apple fell because the mass of the apple and the mass of the earth were attracted to each other. If the apple had not fallen from the tree under these circumstances then Newton’s theory could have been called into question.”

#### 7) HOW TO USE YOUR OWN OPINIONS

Your interests, opinions and values are an integral part of any research paper. They will necessarily influence your thesis, the material you select, and how you structure your argument. In general, I find that students that are excited about their thesis start their papers earlier, do more work, and end up with a more interesting product (provided they are not so excited or

involved that they can't be reasonably objective about the argument). If a topic that interests you is beyond the immediate assignment, but still related to the topic of the course in some way, then make the effort to contact your instructor for permission to write on that topic. Most instructors will appreciate your interest and encourage you, within limitations.

However, please recognize that your unsupported opinions and values are different from a research argument. Everyone has an opinion, but opinions are not scholarship. If you can't support your opinion with evidence then it doesn't belong in a research paper. Scholarship is about making well structured, soundly supported, convincing arguments that are in some way related to existing scholarship.

#### 8) REVISE AND REWRITE

If you are writing your paper at the last minute, and you do all of the above correctly, you will end up with a B paper, or less! To write a sophisticated, university-level research paper requires time, insight and several revisions. In the first revisions you will pick up technical errors including misspelling and bad grammar, improper references, unnecessary information, etc. At this stage please make every effort to also eliminate clichés, colloquialisms, jargon, and familiar qualifiers (like, really, very, pretty, rad, so, sort of, kind of, etc.). Also work to smooth out your transitions and make your links clear.

More importantly, the process of revising your paper will allow you to reflect on and refine both the structure and quality of your argument. To achieve a high level of refinement in a research paper you must leave yourself time to put the work down, have colleagues read and comment on your paper, and then return to the argument yourself to critically rethink your earlier drafts. The end goal of all this, creating publishable research, takes years of practice, and even then it takes many revisions.

#### 9) ONE RELIABLE WAY TO GET STARTED (BACKWARDS)

If you have done the reading for the course, talked to the instructor about your interests, tried to adapt the framework of the course to your previous interests, and you are still having trouble selecting a specific topic that you are interested in for your research paper, then try the Summarize-Compare-Contrast method outlined below:

**Step One:** Since the existing literature is by definition the context of a research paper, a good way to start working backwards toward a thesis is to select one reading from the course that you either liked or disliked (at this point you don't even have to know why you did or didn't like it). Do a simple summary of the author's argument. Write down, in abbreviated form, what the author's thesis was, how the author supported that thesis, what kind of evidence was used, and what methods were used to collect the evidence. Extract any interesting quotes and write down what you either liked or disliked about the work.

**Step Two:** Look at how the instructor organizes the readings for each week. Using one of the themes from the course as a guide select two or more related readings. Unless otherwise specified by your assignment, these can come from an assigned reading list, the bibliography of the first work you summarized, or from a topic search in the library. In the same fashion outlined above briefly summarize these new works one at a time. Be sure to collect interesting quotes, paraphrase their arguments, and write down your reactions as you go.

**Step Three:** Compare and contrast the theories, methods and/or evidence used in each of the works that you have summarized. Discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of each argument. What parts would you use in your own research and under what circumstances?

Why? In most cases if you properly summarize three arguments, and then compare and contrast those arguments, you will have the outline of a research paper.

Step Four: Look back at how you organized the parts you have compared and contrasted. Write transition statements from one section to the next. Ask yourself why you contrasted the material the way you did. When you answer that question you have a tentative thesis for a research project. Use this thesis to reorganize your argument.

In addition to the basic requirements common to all university research papers, there are probably expectations for your written assignment that are specific to the course. Make sure you know what those requirements are and get the instructor's approval before you deviate from them.

The highest grades will usually be given to students that demonstrate the ability to construct a sound argument with the basic concepts of course, and then are able to go beyond these requirements to make a creative argument that clearly links evidence to the more complex concepts from the texts and lectures. To pull this off you must make use of your instructor's office hours.

If you need additional information on how to write a university level research paper, or help writing one, please contact Campus Learning Assistance Services in building 300, or call 893-4248. They offer writing workshops tailored for many academic disciplines, and can sometimes arrange paper writing workshops for specific courses. Please send any comments, suggestions, or requests to reproduce or modify this guide for use in a course reader to [mccarty@sscf.ucsb.edu](mailto:mccarty@sscf.ucsb.edu)

Checklist