

Research Paper Organization Guide

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Sir Joshua Reynolds: "There is no expedient to which man will not resort to avoid the real labor of thinking."

Good writing is clear thinking made evident, but too often we find writing without enough of the underlying thinking. It's seductive to worry about the external appearance of writing, finding just the right font style and formatting, putting off the harder work of reasoning out the underlying message. Full-featured word processors and reference managers that allow saving everything—meant to be labor-saving--can be a distraction from the “real labor.” Thus, some attention is needed in putting it back in.

Any good long-form research essay writing requires an understanding of the key moving parts: including study justification, concept explication, and narrowing down the research questions. Organizing a paper with a clear logical structure, is one of the most difficult tasks, given that most academics have been trained to write on a simple word processor (i.e., MSWord), with its inherent linear, stream-of-writing bias. That's why I recommend writing with an outline processor as a tool to help visualize and easily manipulate that structure. That in turn helps establish a logical flow as you set out an issue and elaborate on key topics, and it supports inductive sorting and grouping of related points as they are developed (see final note below). Below are some ideas about structure and key ingredients in the form of a final paper seminar assignment.

Normally, I tend to allow a lot of creative license in seminar papers, but it can be helpful to follow a fixed structure as indicated below. With your paper, turn in a topic outline of at least two levels, which describes the major heading and subheadings. The paper itself will mirror these same exact headings/subheadings so I can see how it has expanded. Of course, if you have been using an outline processor all along, you will simply suppress the notes and print the outline. You can have more, but must have at least these headings. You are basically writing what would be appropriate to submit to a conference, AEJMC or ICA--I prefer APA style, or Harvard, as long as the citations are in text (e.g., Reese, 2007).

Abstract

Include a 150 word abstract as an extra page. This is a useful exercise in itself to be sure you have clear idea of your paper. The abstract includes and condenses each of the key elements in the outline, from introduction to conclusion. If an empirical essay, don't forget to include what was actually found, not just that it was a study *about* something.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Global introduction

There's no one right way to get into your paper, but you need to introduce the topic in a way that compels attention. In a general way you will signal the key issue, concepts and elements in the paper. Quantitative papers follow a more strict organization, but qualitative papers can also use the following framework. (Later you can take some liberties, but for the purposes of this assignment just play along.) Set the stage. Paper structure can be thought of as an hour-glass. You start global with the big picture and progressively narrow to a more specific project, then in the discussion you broaden back out to the big view again to conclude.

1.2 Study purpose

Set out the basic purpose of the paper in general--don't get too specific and operational yet. Identify the research question(s) in general terms and in summary (you can enumerate them more formally later). That is, how would you describe the basic question(s) to be answered via empirical analysis? What is the more general reason you're interested in the question? The question should be compelling, so as to lead to non-obvious, and ideally counter-intuitive, findings.

1.3 Justification

Often the paper topic is justified briefly as part of the study purpose. It can also be broken out if need be and more attention devoted, especially if not particularly obvious. Justify it more broadly than "no one has done it before." How will it add to what we know in a way that really matters? If the question is about the media treatment of an issue, for example, what is the broader communication issue at the root of it? How does it matter? Note that settling some theoretical issue is usually not the main objective but rather a byproduct of a good study. You would never say, for example, that a theory "worked," but rather helped lead to a clear articulation of questions—the answers to which were found, making it a helpful way to view the world. Words to avoid: "exploratory," (isn't everything?) "base-line," (boring), and "in the new millennium" (pompous; we've moved on!).

2.0 Theoretical overview and review of the literature

2.1 Statement of the problem

The study purpose and "statement of the problem," closely related, are critical self-teaching sections (and might be combined in some formats). It's often omitted at beginning of this section but even a brief paragraph makes a helpful introduction to what follows. By writing and rewriting a clear statement of the problem at hand, you help clarify in your own mind what it is you want to say. You should set aside the literature for a moment, and write even a number of possible versions, try them on for size and pick the best. It should helpfully point to all the key concepts that will be explicated in this section. This is place where you can begin to make the distinction in your mind between premises (e.g., politics has become "mediatized"), contextual supporting facts (e.g., previous findings and social trends), empirical questions and arguments to be researched (the task at hand). Don't gloss over the logic in this broader section 2.0. Take time where appropriate to develop your argument. That's much more important than loading on additional references to bolster the same or obscure point. Most article submissions flounder on the lack of a clear conceptual focus, rather than lack of adequate literature citation.

2.2 Explicating concepts and overall framework

Alternatively to the “literature review,” with its typical linear and tired (in the case of familiar research lines) recitation of prior studies, this section is helpfully organized around important theoretical concepts. Have key concepts been identified and defined? Has the literature been invoked properly, integrated into and in support of the key concepts? If it's a comparative study, for example, have you explained why the comparison is instructive, and what dimension it taps? You will include that prior literature and explication necessary for us to make sense of the concepts selected for your study. Don't just list studies; reference manager software tools often have created bloated bibliographies without the corresponding intellectual filtering work. Synthesize and point us to the present study. Studies you cite are there for a reason—to lead you and the reader to the direction, concepts, and measures you will utilize.

This section should not just be a grab-bag of concepts, and not a just an indirect tie-in with a theoretical tradition (i.e., “Because of the power of the agenda-setting press function, we need to know what the media are saying about ____.” That’s an all-too-frequent kind of descriptive question dressed up with theoretical context.) Somewhere in here include your own take on key theoretical choices—especially where there is disagreement within the field. For example, given that news framing research is a “fractured” perspective, have you specified in doing such a study your particular approach and justified its choice?

2.3 Other areas to review as needed

Include whatever else is necessary to set up the study. For example, if a case is being proposed, some background and contextual detail is needed here.

2.4 Study and research questions (or hypotheses)

Sometimes broken out as a separate section or chapter, this is often the most difficult section, bridging the literature and the study at hand. There shouldn't be an awkward clunk when you move from your literature review to the present study without proper transition. You can restate the research questions more formally and their rationale as appropriate. What will you be looking for? How will you know when you've found it? How will it be presented in the paper? The research questions should be phrased at the appropriate level of generality (that is, at the level they can actually be answered).

3.0 Methods

How will the method answer the questions posed? In qualitative studies the method is more intrinsically linked to the theory (and so not always broken out as a separate section), and the writer is more self-reflexive about methodological choices. But similar issues of clarification remain. Among the issues to be addressed:

3.1 Describing the case

What is the "universe" of materials you think are relevant to the question? How have you chosen to select from among them and on what basis?

3.2 “Unit of analysis”

Where relevant, what's going to be counted or examined? How will they be grouped and presented?

3.3 Measures

How are you defining all of your major measures or variables?

3.4 Any other methodological issues to describe

4.0 Results

Normally, you would proceed in the order of the research questions, beginning with a general statement of the findings (e.g., descriptive statistics) before proceeding to the specifics. Stick with the facts here for the most part, saving broader interpretation or speculation for the discussion. And it's certainly not the place to introduce new concepts and literature.

5.0 Discussion

Restate the basic conclusion from your study and what you think it means in the larger context. This is another chance to return to the theoretical argument and purpose stated at the beginning. Are there any caveats, strengths, and weaknesses to disclose? What is the next step, the broader implications for research, for the field...the planet? This is where you broaden back out on the other side of the hourglass.

Note:

This guide was prepared originally for my graduate seminar in framing research at the School of Journalism, University of Texas, where (even though there are numerous social science writing guides out there) it seemed helpful to them and proved useful to others. I'll keep revising it and welcome comments: steve.reese@austin.utexas.edu. My students (stuck in their ways) have been reluctant to follow this advice, but if you are not using a software tool to help write and organize your papers, you are wasting a lot of time in being able to see quickly and clearly how your paper should best be put together—with logical flow, completeness, and hierarchical integrity. A number of websites have reviews of various products (e.g., “About This Particular Outliner”). I've used them since the early days of personal computers, but now “OmniOutliner” for OSX, and prior to that “Inspiration” (for either Mac or PC), but pick whatever works best for you. “Scrivener,” a more general writer's tool, supports outlining and has been well reviewed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* ProfHacker blog; it has a more “wordprocessory” look and feel, so the choice may be a matter of personal taste.