Four General Components   
Of A Successful Research Paper

The Introduction: Build the Case for the Research

The introduction should introduce the topic, build a case for the importance of researching it, and offer a thesis statement or pose questions to explored (or sometimes both).

To do this, stake out territory for a narrow research topic by identifying a topic and showing why it is important or necessary. Put forth a problem to solve or an issue to address—which will help you to develop your thesis or pose research questions. Notch out a specific area in need of examination and look at it. The sample introduction on women and capital punishment shows how this is an area society ignores and, in doing so, the paper demonstrates how society perpetuates gender discrimination—which the research illuminates. All research topics need to have an angle or a purpose that is substantive, noticeable, and worthwhile.

Poor introductions do not have a solid thesis or have a weak thesis. When this is the case, papers just run through information without a guiding principle. The information in the paper just hangs there and does not contribute to a core effort. Each paper must have a purpose, and that purpose needs to be very clearly stated in the introduction. What will you do? What will you argue? What will you show? What will you examine? A thesis answers these questions.

The Review of Literature: Showing Representative Scholarship

In the review of literature, discuss (and cite any words, ideas or concepts that you take from the published works of others) the scholarly information you found on your topic. What did you discover in books, scholarly journal articles, newspapers, etc.? You will want to include studies that agree with you as well as those that disagree with you. Use your review of literature to further explore your niche in the research. Pay special attention to establishing foundational information, to problems, to inconsistencies, to agreements/disagreements, and to anything that strikes you as strange or noteworthy. Be critical. You are the filter for all that is out there, so make sure that you find and include only the best representative information.

It can be easy to become overwhelmed by scholarship and information. This is where having a focused introduction and a thesis can help immensely, as you will have a guiding principle for your scholarship. Without a thesis, the scholarship has nothing to connect to—no purpose to further and no function to fulfill. Such papers convey information, but do not do anything creative with it. To get out of this rut, think about your purpose and then really try to integrate the scholarship you find into that purpose. Understand and work with your information—think about it and use it critically. Don't just pass it along like a water bucket in a fire brigade that is fighting a fire. Show connections, conflicts, and agreements. Evaluate, compare, and contrast. Be the observable scholarly mind working with the pieces of the scholarly puzzle. You are the expert; you have done the research, so the reader is relying on you to not only convey what you have found, but also to connect it to your thesis and to show how to read, understand and interpret the scholarship.
The Conclusion: Be Substantive

One of the biggest misconceptions of a conclusion is that it should just summarize what you have already said. Not so for research papers. If you think back to the principle that guided your introduction (finding a niche, solving a problem or arguing a point), your conclusion then needs to explain how to bring your thesis to fruition. As you develop your conclusion, think about questions such as these: What can/should we do now? What solutions can I propose? How can attitudes be changed? How much will this cost? How easy or how hard will my solutions be to implement? What looks like it will go well? What might go wrong? What best practices can I suggest? These are illustrative questions, so they will not apply universally to all topics. Use these questions as inspiration to drive the formation of questions that apply to your topic. You also may suggest in your conclusion where the research agenda you have investigated should go next.

Editing/Proofreading: Perfection is in the Details

This is probably one of the easiest areas to correct, but many submitted research papers lack even a fundamental proofreading to catch sentence problems and formatting issues (APA and MLA). Put the paper aside, gain some creative distance from it, and then re-read it to see if everything makes sense and sounds right. Common problems: sentence fragments; awkward or run-on sentences; lack of paragraph unity; insufficient development of ideas; incorrect or incomplete citations.
Research Writing
Rhetorical and Research Considerations

Development

Topic Quality  Clear Thesis  Effective Introduction

Paragraph Unity  Transitions  Flow of Ideas

Thoroughness of Ideas  Paragraphing  Comprehensive Review of Literature

Effective Conclusion  Evidence/Not Opinion  Writer/primary voice

Academic Tone  Analysis, Comparison, Critique, Integration of Scholarship

Editing

Clear Sentences  Fragments  Punctuation

Spelling  Wordiness  Capitalization

Run-on Sentences  Grammar  Consistent font size/style

Documentation

Appropriate Paper Format  Complete References  Accurate References

Reference Page Format  Quotation Marks  Long Quote Format

Scholarly Sources  Quality of Sources  Number of Sources
Research Proposal

Subject/Preliminary Title: What is the general area of your research? What would be a good, preliminary title for your paper?

Research Questions/Issues/Problems: What questions do you want to pose to help guide you through your research? What issues exist surrounding your topic that you want to address? What problems, misunderstandings or misinterpretations do you want to correct?

Preliminary Thesis: What is your angle or focus? What new perspective do you seek to bring to the topic? What problem do you want to solve? What current thinking or belief do you want to challenge or change? Show the value, purpose, need for and practicality of your research focus in your thesis.
Common Problems
With
Student Research Papers

Below are some common problems with student research papers. Preceding each example is a parenthetical explanation of a problem followed by an excerpt from an actual research paper illustrating that problem.

(Problem: Just noting the name of a researcher is not sufficient, as in the example below. When citing the names of researchers, be certain to include the full in-text citation).

A number of research papers, such as a study by Stephen Fuller focusing on the economic and fiscal impacts of hosting the Olympic Games, and a study by Jill Haynes analyzing the socio-economic impact of the Sydney Olympics, have been conducted in the past to consider the various economic implications on the winning countries.

(Problem: When noting “researchers,” be certain to include the name of those researchers either in the introduction of the sentence or in a full in-text citation).

Researchers have revealed that in 22% of school shooting incidents the perpetrators had been the victims of bullying, or teasing themselves.

(Problem: Check the math. Always make sure that the numbers in cited material calculate correctly—and are conveyed correctly. Note the problem with the math in the statement below—along with the fact that there is no citation to give credit to the source).

Last year, approximately 128 soldiers killed themselves that is roughly 20.2 percent out of the 100,000 soldiers.

(Problem: Failing to format the reference correctly. Note that direct quotes must include the page number or numbers. In addition, using full names, the month and degrees is not consistent with APA or MLA in-text citation format).

“ADHD affects approximately 7% of school aged children globally”(Frances E. Kuo, PhD and Andrea Faber Taylor, PhD September 2004).

(Please see other side for additional examples)
(Problem: Which researcher applies to the quote? Citing multiple researchers is fine when conveying an idea that many researchers or scholars have included in their scholarship. However, quotes can be attributed to only one person—not to multiple people as seen here. In addition, there is no page number, as is required when referencing quotes, nor are the quotation marks placed correctly).

Research confirms that “students of all ages with ADHD are at risk for academic achievement problems and school failure and are less likely to complete a post secondary education (Barkley, 1998; Faraone, Biederman, & Lehman, 1993; Gaub & Carlson, 1997”).

(Problem: Where is the writer? The primary problem below is that almost each sentence comes from another source. Writers should be the primary voice in a research paper, and the cited material should be support for that voice—not the other way around. What we have here is an assembly of another researcher’s words and ideas with no analysis, interpretation or guiding thoughts from the writer. In short, the writer has eclipsed him or herself behind the words of someone else. In addition, there are problems with formatting (such as no page numbers for direct quotes and some questionable wording).

There is a new pattern in drug use by teenagers and the college-aged crowd. “Illicit street drugs are decreasing in popularity, whereas the nonmedical (sic) use of certain prescription drugs is on the rise.” (Friedman, 2006) Also stated by Friedman (2006) is that many of the users of prescription pills for non-medical purposes, believe that using prescription pills is safer than illicit street drugs. Professionals, such as physicians, are seen as part of the reason that teenagers and those in the college age bracket believe that prescription pills are a safe alternative to street drugs (Friedman, 2006). “Clearly, physicians play an important role in this problem, given their apparent laxness in prescribing controlled drugs.” (Friedman, 2006) The large amounts or prescriptions obtained by people are purchased for only a few dollars per pill, depending on the milligram dosage of the pill. Many students were also willing to admit that friends and relatives who were prescribed the medication were willing give pills away at no charge (Friedman, 2006).

(Problems: This small line has three key problems: 1) the quote itself doesn’t seem to be worded correctly as it essentially restates itself; 2) the citation is not formatted correctly; and 3) the date of the source is old. On this last point, older sources can be valuable if they are pivotal texts or if they are used to show some evolution of an issue. Otherwise, seek more current sources).

This is because the “poverty of culture is one of the cultural traits of the culture of poverty” (O. Lewis, 1966: 25).
Research Formats

Primary Research: Collecting data that does not currently exist—seeking information and understanding that is new.

Secondary: Uses current research to summarize or as a foundation from which to piece together different pieces of information for a new understanding of a phenomenon. (Sometimes called Empirical Research—research that summarizes primary research).

Quantitative: Research based upon numbers and statistics.

Qualitative: Research based upon words, narrative and "thick description."

Naturalistic Inquiry: Studying people or a phenomenon in a natural environment.

Ethnography: A research method that involves writing very detailed descriptions of human societies or of groups within that society. Direct, first-hand observation of daily behavior (sometimes known as field studies). Can be combined with questionnaires to validate observations.

Participant/Observer: A form of ethnography in which the researcher becomes a member of a community (overtly or covertly) to study its dynamics or some element of its existence.

Case Study: An extensive (longitudinal) study of a person, a group of people, a situation or an event. Observations lead to data collection, analysis of results and presentation of findings.

Experiments: A study under controlled conditions that is designed to demonstrate a known truth, examine the validity of a hypothesis, or determine the efficacy of something previously untried.

Theoretical: Identifying a scholarly theory and applying it to the reading or understanding of a piece of literature, an understanding, a social issue/problem, etc.

Narrative Inquiry: Learning about people and culture from their writings. Field notes, interviews, journals, letters, autobiographies, and orally told stories are all methods of narrative inquiry.