

Guidelines for writing a good research paper ¹

Introduction. The purpose of this section is threefold. First, you want to trace previous work on the subject and set up the problem. Second, you need to identify how your paper addresses that problem. That is key: formulate a research question, puzzle, or problem. Then explain why your question is important.

Theoretical framework. Reviewing previous work is necessary but not sufficient. The purpose of this section goes beyond an accounting of what others have done. One way to understand the purpose of the theoretical framework is to see it as leading your reader through gaps in the literature that your paper addresses. It's specific to what you are doing in the paper. It also includes information that your reader needs to know in order to understand your argument. For example, you should incorporate any relevant foundational texts. If we view research as a conversation, then the framework signals who you are in conversation with - that is, the relevant audience and broader contributions of your work.

Data and methods. This section answers the question "How do you know what you know?" That can be further broken down into three parts:

1. On what kind of information or material are you basing your findings (e.g., interviews, statistics, documents)?
2. How did you find that information, or where did it come from (e.g., National Archives, fieldwork)?
3. How did you analyze that information? That is, what software or analytic strategies did you use to come up with your findings?

Results. This section contains the essence of the paper, where you present the findings from your work. You should keep two points in mind. First, make sure that your results speak to the theoretical and empirical questions that your paper raises at the beginning of your paper - in other words, that your paper is cohesive throughout. Second, and particularly for qualitative papers, organize your results analytically or thematically - not, for example, in chronological order or according to some other simple accounting. You should be thoughtful about how to present your results to get the most out of your findings.

Discussion or conclusion. You may also find a combined discussion and conclusion at the end of the paper. What are the differences between a discussion and a conclusion? That can vary by author or paper, and it depends on how you've written up your results section. One way you can think about it is that the discussion section allows you to step back from the results section and reflect on the broader story or themes of your results and how they tie together. If you see a discussion section this way, then you can think about a conclusion as addressing three things: 1) summarizing what you did in the paper, including its main findings, 2) acknowledging the limitations of your work and 3) proposing steps for future research that builds on what you've done in the paper.

¹ Based on article of Victoria Reyes <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/05/09/how-write-effective-journal-article-and-get-it-published-essay>. You might also <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IMRADwo> want to read more on typical paper structure IMRAD <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IMRAD>