

Writing a Formal Research Paper in the Social Sciences

This handout provides guidelines for writing a formal research paper in the social sciences. Although it is a type of *research paper*, the process is not the same as writing a research paper for an English or history class. In fact, a formal research paper is much more similar to a formal lab report for a chemistry or biology class. The “research” in the title refers to conducted scientific research rather than the gathering of information. For psychology classes, one will typically write about a behavior observation, a survey, or an experiment. Sociology (and occasionally psychology) includes interviews as well. The usual format for a social science research paper is APA; however, always follow the instructor’s guidelines on formatting.

Note. For detailed information about social science research, visit the [Research Methods Knowledge Base](#).

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General Tips

- ❖ **Be concise.** Scientific writing often requires a lot of information, and it is important to relay this information in a detailed but straightforward manner. The research should be presented as clearly as possible, without excess wordiness or repetition. Always stay focused and on-point.
- ❖ **Write in the third person.** Avoid using the first person, such as “I” or “we,” when discussing research procedure. For example, rather than writing, “I surveyed 35 participants,” it is better to write, “The survey was administered to 35 participants.” The focus should stay on the research, and using the first person can make it appear more like a personal narrative. This type of writing may seem awkward at first, so try to pay close attention to the wording throughout the paper.
- ❖ **Use correct verb tenses.** Students are often unsure of whether to use the past or present verb tense when writing about research. There are a couple of general rules to follow regarding verb tense usage:
 - Since the study has already been conducted, discuss it in the *past tense*. For instance, one could say, “It was predicted that...” or “The observation was conducted...”
 - Since the theories and current research paper still exist, discuss them in the *present tense*. For example, one could say, “research shows that...” or “according to Bandura, children are more likely to show aggression when...”

- ❖ **Write accurately about the research.** Write about what actually happened instead of what “should have” happened. Research results do not always turn out the way one hopes, but that is to be expected. Instructors do not grade based on whether or not a student achieves the expected results but rather how well the student conducted and understood the study. If the results are not favorable, explain possible causes or errors and what could be improved in future research.
- ❖ **Use APA Format.** For a social science research paper, APA format is typically expected. APA format was developed for the social sciences, so it is followed fairly strictly in these types of papers in both formatting the paper and citing sources. When in doubt, follow APA guidelines.
- ❖ **Use peer-reviewed sources for research.** If background research is needed for the paper, only credible sources should be used. Online psychology or sociology journals are good resources; however, any website that is not peer-reviewed should be avoided. Credible, peer-reviewed sources can be found using the [GCC Library Databases](#). In addition, textbooks and reference books may be helpful for theoretical discussion.
- ❖ **Cite sources.** Always use parenthetical, in-text citations to reference all of the source material used. *All* ideas or research that is from an outside source *must* be cited. As previously mentioned, APA formatting is expected when writing research papers for the social sciences. For information on how to cite and format using APA, see the [APA Format Guide](#) handout on the Academic Center for Excellence’s webpage or visit the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#).

Format

There are four main sections included in most formal social science research papers: introduction, method, results, and discussion. As APA formatting requires, subheadings are centered and bolded. Font size does not change for subheadings. Each section is not necessarily its own page, so do not feel the need to begin a new page for each subheading. The remainder of this handout details the content expected for each of the most commonly included sections in a formal research paper.

Note. Instructors often give their students basic formatting guidelines when they assign a formal research paper. All of the sections presented in this handout may not be included in every instructor’s guidelines, but the content of the paper as a whole should be similar. It is always best to ask instructors for their format preference; however, they are typically more concerned with content than formatting, so following general APA guidelines is likely fine. Be sure to follow the instructor’s guidelines for content, including no more or less than what is required for each section.

Title Page

This is the first page of the paper and follows APA format guidelines, as shown in the illustration below. Include the following information:

- Title of the paper
- Name
- Name of institution (e.g. Germanna Community College)

Running head: SHORT TITLE OF PAPER	1
Title of Paper	
Your Name	
Name of Institution	

Note. An instructor may ask for additional or different information to be included on the title page, in which case it is always best to follow the instructor's guidelines.

Abstract

The abstract is the second page of the paper and provides a brief summary of the research. Only report the information—do not try to interpret or give any new information in this section. The paragraph should be 150-250 words and include one or two sentences about each main section of the paper. Focus on the following points:

- Purpose and hypothesis
- Method: participants, design, measures, and procedure
- Results
- Discussion/interpretation of results

Note. It is best to complete the other sections of the report before writing the abstract, since this section is meant to be an overview of the entire research paper.

Introduction

The introduction begins on the third page and does not need a subheading; it is understood that the introduction is the first section of the paper. In general, the information provided in this section sets up the study. The main components of this section are the following:

- **Purpose of the study.** Identify the problem being explored by the current study and why it is important. After discussing what the problem is and why it warrants further research, formally express the purpose of the current research study clearly and concisely.
- **Background literature.** The main purpose of including background literature is to set up the current study, showing the progression of research in the topic area and how the hypothesis was reached, why the design was chosen, and so on. Background literature can be previous research and/or theories that are relevant to the current study. Only include information that a reader would need to know in order to understand the purpose, hypothesis, and method of the research; remember to be concise. Do not forget to cite any and all resources used.
- **Hypothesis.** The hypothesis details what is expected to happen in the study based on background literature. Typically the hypothesis is only one sentence. As an example, a hypothesis for a study on behavior patterns in children could be, “It was predicted that older children will show greater behavioral inhibition than younger children.”

Method

The method section describes the way in which the study was conducted. It should be thorough enough that someone could replicate the study based on the description given in the paper, but there should be no excess information. There are generally four main subsections: participants, design, measures, and procedure. The headings and division of the subsections may slightly vary, but the content should remain similar.

- **Participants.** This subsection should include demographic information that pertains to the current study. Information could be about participants’ age, gender, ethnicity, year in school, marital status, etc. If required, give data such as percentages, mean, and standard deviation.
- **Design.** In this subsection, the design of the current study is detailed. Was the study an experiment, a survey, an interview, or a behavior observation? If it was an observation, was it naturalistic or structured? Why was this particular design chosen? It is important to answer these types of questions so that the reader can fully understand and evaluate the research.

- **Measures.** Information about the measures used to record observations and responses is discussed in this subsection. Examples of measures could be checklists used for behavior observation, interview or survey questions, or experimental materials. For more detail, give examples of the items in the measure, such as a sample question from a questionnaire or a couple of items from a checklist.
- **Procedure.** This subsection describes the process of the study exactly as it occurred. The information should be detailed enough for someone to replicate the study, but it should also be *concise*. Usually it is best to give the information in sequence. For example, first give the sampling procedure (how participants were selected), then how the measure was administered, and so forth. Results should never be discussed in this subsection—the next section will be entirely dedicated to providing the results of the study. Only give information regarding *how* the study was carried out here.

Results

This section contains the results of the study. The information can be organized into tables or figures if necessary. Be sure to reference and briefly explain any tables or figures in the text, but the actual graphics will go at the end of the paper after the References page. It is important to remember to *only* give the data or results of the study in this section; do not interpret or attempt to analyze why the results turned out a certain way and what that might mean. The next section (Discussion) deals with exploring and analyzing the results in detail.

Discussion

In the discussion section, the results are explained and interpreted, allowing the student to show that he or she has a thorough understanding of the concept and results of the study. This section typically begins with an assessment of whether or not the results support the hypothesis and why. The main question to answer in this section is, “What is the significance of the results?” The following are several possible focus questions for this section:

1. **Was the hypothesis supported by the results?** The results may or may not support the hypothesis. Either way, state whether or not the prediction was accurate. It is perfectly acceptable for the results to turn out differently than expected.
2. **Why might the results have turned out that way?** Link the results of the current study to the background literature. In addition, think about the sampling strategy, design, and procedures of the current study and how they could have affected the results.
3. **How could the study be improved?** Think about what could have been done differently. Perhaps more participants could have been recruited, the design could have been better, or a

different measure could have been used. There is a degree of error in every study, so it is important to mention potential problems with the research. Be as specific as possible about potential errors, such as participants not being truthful with responses or questions being leading. For example, when measuring level of aggression after viewing a video clip, ask a question such as, “How do you feel after watching that video clip?” rather than, “Do you feel more aggressive after watching that video clip?” Do not suggest a desired answer to the participants.

4. **What is the future direction for research on this topic?** After discussing the current study, analyzing the results, and determining ways to improve the research, try to assess what the next step could be.
5. **What are the practical applications of the research?** Discuss what the research suggests for the problem being examined. Does it offer any solutions or courses of action? In other words, why do the results matter?
6. **What can be concluded from this research?** The answer to this question should form the conclusion of the paper. It should relate directly to the problem being explored and the hypothesis. The conclusion reiterates whether or not the results support the hypothesis and how confident the author is in these assessments. A couple of sentences are all that is necessary to summarize the definitive conclusions drawn from the results.

References

If outside sources have been cited, a separate reference page is necessary. As mentioned previously, instructors will typically tell students their preference for formatting references; however, if an instructor does not specify, use APA formatting guidelines. Once again, for instructions on formatting references in APA style see the [APA Format Guide](#) handout under the “English” section on the Academic Center for Excellence’s website.

Tables and Figures

It is not necessary to include tables and figures, but if they are included, place each one on a separate page following the References page. Every figure and table should be labeled. For tables, write “Table 1” (change number for any subsequent tables) at the top left of the page and name the table in italics below that. Underneath each table should be a “*Note.*” that indicates what is displayed in the table and, if relevant, what measure(s) was used to obtain the results depicted. For figures, write “*Figure 1.*” (change number for any subsequent figures) below the figure and describe what is shown. Instructors probably will not ask for tables and figures, but for reference, formatting follows typical APA style. Visit the APA section of the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#) for more information.