

Writing and Tutorial Center

Essentials of a Research Paper

An effective research paper is a carefully structured argument that presents a clear thesis, supports it with credible evidence, and engages with the ideas of others in a thoughtful way. The essentials of a research paper remain largely the same across most academic fields; let's go over some of the core components:

INTRODUCTION

This section is important because it is the very first thing your audience will see. It should end with your thesis statement, but it is useful to begin with something more entertaining to draw in your reader. This “hook” can be an intriguing question, a memorable quotation, a surprising fact or detail, but it must be closely related to your topic, and allow you to transition to your actual thesis with a transitional sentence or two, often called the “tie-in”. Your thesis statement should follow and should end the introduction, clearly stating your argument in a precise way. Your thesis statement should be both arguable and provable with the evidence you will provide to your audience. If applicable, you can also provide the specific points you will use to establish your argument in your body paragraphs.

While it appears first in your paper, it is not necessary to write the introduction first. In fact, it is usually easier to write once the rest of the paper is written. Moreover, if you did write it first, read it again when you finish to make sure it properly introduces what you have written in the rest of the paper, and don't be afraid to edit/rewrite it if it doesn't.

BACKGROUND

This section of your paper is important to inform your audience of the context surrounding your argument. You need to provide your audience with some information if they are unfamiliar with the research area you are writing about. This section will usually consist of at least two paragraphs to establish a framework that will assist readers with a basic understanding of necessary information they need to know in order to better understand the detailed information you will provide in your body paragraphs.

BODY PARAGRAPHS

The number of paragraphs you develop in this section depends on the length of your essay. But, as a rule, it is recommended to provide at least two paragraphs per topic you will discuss through your research. This is the meat of your paper. As you are developing these paragraphs, you need to make sure you are balancing information from outside sources with your authentic voice in reaction to the material. Further, do your best to ensure you do not end any of these paragraphs with a direct quote or cited paraphrase. Each paragraph should begin and end with your original language as the author of your essay.

CONCLUSION

This section should summarize the main points you elaborated upon in your body paragraphs. It is important to use synonyms and differing sentence structures to avoid direct repetition of ideas discussed in previous paragraphs. Do not include any new information here. This is the last section of your paper and it lets readers know that you have come to an end of your discussion. Sometimes, researchers reflect upon potential areas to further investigate in the future.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND AS YOU WRITE

When formulating a research question to answer, remember that the writing process will go much easier if you're committed to finding an answer to your argument and investigating a topic that you are truly interested in. Sometimes that can be difficult—you don't have control over what your professor assigns—but in those cases try your best to connect it to things you are passionate about. Try to pick a topic that could prove beneficial to all who read it.

No matter the length of your paper, it's critical that you keep your audience in mind. Most essays you write for college-level classes will be conceptual in nature and try to convince an audience to think the same way you do. This means you will be responsible for explaining your argument with solid reasoning and empirical evidence to support your argument. The more time you invest in the planning and outlining stages, the stronger the paper will be.

Although a research paper is often written in the third person and conveys objectivity, which bits of information you choose to provide to prove your argument involves a level of subjectivity. What and how everything is presented to your audience should help them think in the way that you want them to.

Oftentimes, the original question you seek to answer can change as you begin to collect evidence and perceive information while accumulating evidence for your paper. Modifying your question is something to anticipate and is a natural part of the research process. Yet, if you find that you are unsure of how you want to move forward, make sure to consult your professor before committing to a revised research question. Always be prepared to evolve and acclimate as you accumulate more information and engage with your topic. Every good researcher begins to think outside of the box as they dive further into discovery.

Make sure to write down as much as you can while you are collecting data. When you are taking notes, write your ideas down using your own words. Engage with the material and do your best to paraphrase or elaborate on ideas using your own language to explain yourself.

As you conduct your research, keep all of your citations organized and easily accessible so you can show your process. Organization is key and it will make your life easier when you have to review or pull sources to further evaluate or even discuss in detail with your professor. Retracing your steps to try to untangle everything at the end is a nightmare. Finally, these materials are incredibly important and they can be used again for other projects in the future.

If you feel overwhelmed with the writing process and length of the paper, break it down into smaller steps to tackle individually. That means you should manage your time and commit to a schedule where you complete certain milestones. If you break down the writing process into smaller parts to complete one at a time, you will keep your stress levels down and the paper will feel less daunting.

Remember that you're **always** welcome to meet with a tutor at the Writing Center to talk about your research paper. We're here to help guide you through any part of the process, from ideation and planning to editing and revision!

Create a working thesis early.
Outline before you write.
Use credible, scholarly sources.
Don't just summarize—analyze.
Track your sources as you go.
Follow the required citation style exactly.
Give yourself time to revise.