A Brief Guide to
Writing Research Papers

Research papers are a necessary aspect of the academic learning process. They are an important tool in the development of writing skills and contribute substantially to one’s ability to synthesize and analyze information. The long and sometimes frustrating hours you spend in the library trying to make sense of many, and often conflicting, pieces of information will benefit you greatly in your future academic and career endeavors. If you go further in your education, you will write many more research papers. If you never take another class, your experiences with this paper will make you an infinitely better person (no joking).

Two important components of a research paper will be covered here: the organization of the paper, and the references used.

Organization

The most organized papers begin with a well-thought-out and well-written introductory paragraph.

The introductory paragraph will usually not contain any research information, but will simply state the topic to be discussed and then describe the format of the discussion. The creative types may be able to present this information in a more appealing or interesting manner than the accountant or engineer types, but the information given in the introductory paragraph will usually be the same. Knowing what the paper will address and how the paper will proceed will make it much easier for the reader to follow.

Of course, this requires that the writer know how the paper will be organized prior to beginning to write. One way to organize a paper on a topic in psychology (such as the legitimacy of ESP) would be to describe generally the historical background of the issue, present more specific research information which emphasizes a particular point of view (your view), discuss the issues associated with your view in contrast to other views, and then provide some summary and concluding statements. Whatever the organization of your paper, it should be understood beforehand, and it should be generally stated in the introductory paragraph(s).

You should think of your research paper as an opportunity to present your perspective or bias on the topic in question. Psychology, perhaps more than other disciplines, has research evidence to support many widely varying and conflicting views. The research you find for your paper won’t necessarily be the last word on the subject. In fact, one could argue that the research you include in your paper will likely consist only of the research that interested you or was consistent with your pre-existing beliefs. Thus, you are not likely an unbiased researcher. Realizing that there may be other research that
supports an alternative view, the writer can then use the research paper as a means of persuading readers that the view presented in the paper is at least a view that should be heard. The best research papers will not simply present facts, but indicate the particular position or view of the person who gathered the facts.

This view is best introduced early in the paper. It is appropriate to state your perspective in the introductory paragraph. You can then proceed to support your perspective through the research that you present in the body of the paper. The reader is then completely clear on how to interpret the material that is presented in the body of the paper.

For instance, you may want to write a paper about the validity of ESP. If you believe that ESP is indeed a real phenomenon, you may begin your paper with a brief mention of the controversy that exists surrounding this concept. You would then indicate that the purpose of your paper is to show that there is enough evidence that mainstream psychology should not just dismiss the concept. The body of the paper would be devoted to describing the research studies that those familiar with the field would consider to be the most important work in addressing the validity of ESP. You would obviously want to include the studies that support your point of view, but if you ignored the studies that supported the opposite point of view your credibility could be questioned. Therefore, be careful to include those studies as well. In addition, discussing those studies on your own terms will encourage the reader to interpret the results of these studies in the way that you want them to.

Once the research has been presented in the body of the paper, all that remains is the conclusion. Having indicated your perspective in the beginning of the paper, and having discussed the research with that perspective in mind, your conclusion should not be a surprise to the reader. However, at the end of the paper you can state your conclusion with greater depth and confidence than you did earlier. This confidence comes from the great support that you provided for your view in the body of your paper. The conclusion also serves as a summary of the points you have made in the paper that support your conclusion.

However, the conclusion can also be used to back off from extremely stated positions. Acknowledgment, and even specific suggestions, of the need for further research can be given at this time. A fault of many research papers occurs when the writer presents a view as though it were fact. Going out on a limb has some value, as it shows courage and creativity, but don’t go so far out that it makes it easy for the reader to saw off the limb with you on it.

References

For the paper that you are writing in my class, you should have a minimum of five references. They should also be fairly current. Generally, they need to have been published within the last five years. Sometimes you will want to reference a source that is classic to the field, such as something by B.F. Skinner or Sigmund Freud. Those kind of older sources are acceptable.
Your primary resource for your research paper should be the scientific journals. If you look at the sources cited in your textbook, you will see that most of them are of this variety. The studies published in these journals are usually conducted with the use of rigorous scientific methods and are carefully scrutinized by several experts prior to publication. They are the ideal source for original information. The main drawback for the lay person is that they are often difficult to understand. When first reading journal articles it takes a while to get used to the terminology and the format.

If you find that the journals available to you regarding your chosen topic are not sufficient, you should then search out books, magazine articles, newspaper articles, and the like. The problem with these last two sources is that they are often edited by non-experts and thus are lacking in sophistication. However, if you can find an article that is written by an expert in the field, of that contains many references to work done by experts in the field, and if the content generally seems to be substantive, it will probably be adequate for your current (undergraduate) purposes. Regarding newspaper articles, large national publications like the NY Times or the Washington Post often have good articles on psychology related issues. They are also online, with searchable archives. Magazines such as Discover, Scientific American, Psychology Today (beware that many of the articles in this publication seem designed to titillate or sensationalize rather than educate), or even news magazines like Newsweek, Time, and US News and World Report may contain worthwhile articles.

Citing references within the paper

Generally, all information that is not common knowledge or gained from your personal experience should be referenced in the paper. Personal opinions and information are not referenced, but they should be presented in such a way that it is obvious they are coming from your own experiences or thinking. Sometimes deciding whether or not a piece of information is common knowledge can be difficult. There may be room for personal judgment here. However, a good rule of thumb would be to reference every thing that could be questioned by the reader. Your goal should be to allow the reader to gain access to all the information that you had access to as you wrote your paper. Sometimes this requires you to dig deep in determining how you came to know something. Through this process, it is possible to find that what you thought you knew really has no basis in any scientific research. Thus, writing a research paper and being forced to reference your information can help you become more objective in your thinking. It can make you a better scientist.

Some good examples of how to cite references can be found in the textbook used for this class. The first thing to decide is whether or not you are going to spell out the reference in your actual prose or if you will do it parenthetically as an addendum to your prose. The first method would involve indicating the researcher’s name in your prose, while noting the year of the publication in parentheses. For example,

. . . A related idea was suggested by Wilson (1998) who concluded that most instances of reported paranormal phenomena are a product of . . .
The second method involves listing both the name of the researcher and the year of publication in parentheses, and not mentioning them in your prose.

. . . *It has also been suggested that most instances of paranormal phenomena are a product of group hysteria* (Wilson, 1998).

Which method you use is often a matter of style and preference. Sometimes, however, it seems more appropriate to include the name of the researcher in your actual prose because the person is widely known or because you want the person to be known to the reader for purposes of further discussion of the researcher later in your paper.

Even if there are several authors on a particular study, you would still list them all the first time you cite the study in your paper. Later, if you need to cite the study again, you can use the Latin, et al., to eliminate the need to list all but the first author. For example,

. . . *Substantiating the claim that the reporting rate of paranormal experiences is highly influenced by culture, there is much variability across countries in reports of apparitions, UFO’s, and psychic healings* (Miller et al., 1997).

Sometimes you will find yourself using a particular source for a large amount of information (however, remember that you need to use several sources and that you should not rely too heavily on any one source). In such cases it is not necessary to continually cite the reference in the paper. Instead, you may preface a large amount of information attributed to one source with a statement such as the following:

*Fishbein (1999) has conducted an influential study which examines the impact of culture on the reporting rate of paranormal experiences. His findings suggest that* . . .

You can then list much information under such a topic sentence. As you get further away from the topic sentence, it may be necessary to phrase your sentences so that the reader is still aware of the source. For example, after several sentences, and maybe even in a new paragraph, you may want to state something like the following:

*Fishbein also maintains that* . . .

Unless you have multiple references from Fishbein, there is no need to restate the year of publication in this case.

Sometimes you may begin a new paragraph with a new set of ideas/information and choose not to cite the reference until the end of the paragraph when all of the information pertaining to the topic sentence is described. Many novice writers do this. While it is not necessarily wrong in all cases, this method should not be over used for at least two reasons. First, the method can look too standardized and boring if used repeatedly (for that matter, any method of citing research used repeatedly becomes monotonous).
Second, it indicates a lack of thought or analysis on the part of the author of the paper (you). A reference at the end of the paragraph implies that the entire paragraph is a summary of someone’s research. If that is actually true, the lack of commentary on your part suggests that you are giving no thought to the research. It may appear that you are simply going through the motions of a mandatory research paper and regurgitating information only. Although the stating of pure fact or information has a place, you should not be afraid to interject commentary, interpretation, and analysis as you go.

**Listing references in the bibliography**

Once your paper is written you can look through it to determine which references you actually cited. These will be the references you list in your bibliography; no more and no less. If you found that you used a reference for general information but did not cite it in your paper, you have two choices: do not include it in your bibliography or find a way to cite it in your paper. If your source influenced your writing in all but the slightest degree, opting for the latter choice would be more correct.

Your bibliography lists all of your references alphabetically according to the first author’s last name. They should be formatted in a manner similar to the examples shown below:

**For journal articles:**


Note: The semi-colon is used to separate authors when there are more than two authors. The number 36 refers to the volume, and the numbers 176-179 refers to the page numbers of the article.

**For unedited books:**


Note: Hemisphere is the publisher and Washington D.C. is the city of publication.

**For edited books:**


Note: LaBerge is the author of the article on lucid dreaming found in the book on sleep and dreaming edited by Antrobus and Bertini.

**For magazine articles with an author (not the magazine editor):**

Note: Same as the journal article except the month in which the article appeared is listed. If the magazine is a weekly or daily publication, the exact date of publication should be indicated.

For newspaper articles with an author (not the news editor):

For magazine articles or newspaper articles written by an editor:

Note: This represents an exception to alphabetization by author’s last name. Since there is no formal author, you begin the reference with the title of the article. The "C-7" indicates the section and corresponding page number where the article is found.