

Crafting Your Social Sciences Research Paper

The following sections give an overview of the sections generally included in a research paper for the social sciences.

The Abstract

Abstracts provide readers (or journal reviewers) with a quick overview of your project, its context, your hypothesis, and its implications. Successful abstracts will:

- Locate your work in the context of your field by referring to prior work (or a lack thereof).
- Raise questions to extend that prior work and suggest a new possibility or hypothesis that will contribute to a better understanding of the topic.
- Briefly explain your project.
- Suggest larger implications of your work: how might your research affect the field?

The Introduction

The introduction is an important part of your research paper. While your introduction should be relatively brief, accomplishing the goals below may take more than one paragraph. Your introduction should

- Capture the interest of the reader. You can do this by pointing out a puzzle that is not yet understood or a controversy in current scholarship. You can also focus on the overall importance of your topic.
- State your research question and conclusions clearly and explain why readers should care about the answer.
- Explain the value of your study. How does your work advance knowledge? Where does your work fit into the established literature? Are you developing a new argument? Are you extending an existing argument? Are you evaluating an argument in a new way?

The Literature Review

In this section, situate your research project in relation to current literature. To do this, you must demonstrate your understanding of the current state of knowledge on your topic and the ways in which your proposed project improves upon existing work.

- Short, well-focused literature reviews are more effective than long, meandering ones
- The purpose of the literature review is NOT to show that you have read a lot of material. Summarizing as many books and articles as you can is not an effective strategy.
- The literature review is meant to explain both the basis for and contribution of your research project; it should be focused on issues directly relevant to your study and should call attention to the contributions of your research.
- For more on lit reviews, the UCR Graduate Writing Center has a resource on them specifically.

Argument and Hypothesis

In this section, you must clearly explain your argument. This requires that you

- Identify the assumptions you are making.
- Show how you derive expectations about causal mechanisms and causal effects in a logical manner from those assumptions.
- Suggest a theory or hypothesis to explain those mechanisms.

A good theory or hypothesis must:

- Provide a discussion of cause or explanation.
- Advance the understanding of the field overall.

- Be potentially verifiable (or potentially provably false). In other words, you must be able to identify evidence that, if uncovered in empirical evaluation, would convince you your theory was wrong.

Do your best to identify as many observable implications of your theory as possible, even if you will not be able to test them all in this paper. Try also to identify the bounds of the theory. Under what conditions would it apply or not?

Explanation of Research Design

This section explains how you will evaluate your hypotheses. Important questions to address include

- To what population should the hypothesis apply? What sample did you study, and how/why did you select this sample?
- What is your unit of analysis, and how have you have measured your dependent and independent variables? You must explain the sources of your information, and how you determined the values of the variables. *This step is necessary even if you are evaluating only a few cases and using words rather than numbers in your evaluation.*
- What, if any, control variables are necessary to include in your analysis? Why did you include these control variables? Where did you get information on these variables?
- What method of analysis did you use to draw inferences and why? Make sure to explain any particular aspects of the data analysis that require specific attention.

Analysis of Results

Here, present your analysis and a discussion of the results. If you use tables or figures, make sure you provide clear labels and titles. It is important, however, that you not only present the data in tables, but also explain it in words. Readers should be able to understand your key results simply from reading the text.

Not only should you present the data, but you should also evaluate the results. This section is important—*remember, the data does not speak for itself.* Some questions to consider:

- What conclusions have you reached? Did the data support your initial theory or challenge your expectations?
- Are there weaknesses in the tests of the hypotheses?
- Are there particular cases that stand out as not matching expected patterns? Why might that be? It is useful to think as skeptically as you can about your findings and think of any other possible interpretations.

Conclusion

The conclusion is your last chance to make an impression on your audience. Strong conclusions will:

- Summarize the overall point of your work. What did you argue and what did the evidence show?
- Discuss directions for future research. What does this project lead you to believe must be studied in the future? Did your analysis raise new questions? Were there things that you would have liked to evaluate but were unable to? This allows you to open up the critical conversation in new and productive ways.
- Explain why your work is important. How did it advance scholarship or contribute to a larger cultural context?

Further Resources

- The Purdue Online Writing Lab has a “Sample APA Paper” in their APA Style Guide.
- The University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill Writing Center also has a “Writing for Specific Fields” section that breaks down social sciences into different fields and explains different genres within each field.