
HOW TO WRITE A SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH PAPER

COMPILED BY THE NORTHWESTERN GRADUATE PLACE

WHAT TO EXPECT

What follows is a general guide to writing a research paper in the social sciences (e.g., an undergraduate honors thesis, MA thesis). In particular, we review common sections in such papers and what they generally entail. Please note that the format of a particular paper may vary by discipline and/or class, so it is important to make sure to check with the appropriate reference (e.g., a course syllabus, journal submission criteria).



INTRODUCTION

The introduction section in your paper provides your readers with an overview (or preview) of what your paper will be about. As such, this section often contains the following parts:

- (1) An explanation of why readers, including those outside of your specific subfield (e.g., economic sociology), should care about your claims and/or findings – e.g., what are some practical implications? What do we learn about the social world?
- (2) A brief explanation of the main arguments and results
- (3) A brief overview (or “roadmap”) of the rest of the paper: this will help readers follow the overall logic of your paper. Sometimes, writers will provide a 1-2 sentence explanation of each subsequent section.

One way to think about the introduction section is that it is your opportunity to explain why your readers should finish reading the rest of your paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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One of the most common mistakes in writing a literature review is making it too comprehensive and long. The purpose of a literature review is not to provide a comprehensive overview of everything that is remotely related to your topic. For example, if your research question is about the effects of educational attainment on earnings, you do not want to provide an extensive discussion of the studies that have been published on the differences between public schools and private schools, why some parents prefer charter schools, or what principals look for in potential teachers.

Whether writing a paper for a class or an academic journal, literature reviews should be focused and intentional. A good literature review develops a coherent and tightly argued narrative that addresses the following questions: what existing (especially recent) studies have already addressed your research question(s)? What have they found? What are the existing gaps or limitations in our knowledge? For example, perhaps there are 10 studies that have addressed your research question, but they lack external validity. Explicitly state this limitation and why it matters.

Sometimes, you will be writing a paper about a topic where there simply are no papers that have directly addressed your research question; in that case, describe the results of studies on related topics. For example, assume that your research question is about the link between temporary (non-standard) employment and long-term mental health issues—and there are very few studies on this topic. In this case, you could look for studies that assess the relationship between unemployment and long-term mental health issues.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

This is where you explain the logic behind the argument(s) you wish to test. For example, assume that you think some independent variable (e.g., educational attainment) has a causal effect on dependent variable Y (e.g., political ideology): explain to your readers why you think this relationship is plausible or even likely. Why would we expect the amount of time spent in formal education to change someone's political ideology?

While theories and hypotheses are related, they are not the same thing. Theories are the actual arguments while hypotheses are observable implications of these arguments that can be empirically tested using data. For example, a well-known argument in the social sciences is that educational attainment increases earnings. If this argument is true, what would be one example of an observable implication? An obvious one is that people with higher levels of education would on average earn more money. Is this what we observe in reality? This prediction can be tested empirically in different ways. Of course correlation does not equal causation, but that discussion is outside the scope of this guide.

RESEARCH DESIGN (DATA AND METHODS)

This section is also often called the “Data and Methods” section. This is where you need to describe your research design. How did you test your hypotheses? It is important to emphasize that what counts as acceptable forms of evidence varies across social science disciplines.



For example, economics and political science tend to favor quantitative methods (e.g., statistical models), while anthropology and sociology are more open to mixed methods or qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews, ethnography); in psychology, experimental methods are popular. These are generalizations of course, and even within disciplines certain methods or approaches rise/fall in popularity over time.

The important thing to remember is that the research design should be appropriate for your specific research question: i.e., explain why you selected your data source and analytical strategy. In many cases, it would also be beneficial if you briefly explained why you did not choose alternative approaches; for example, perhaps the method you selected addresses some well-known disadvantages of the alternatives.

RESULTS

Describe the results of the analyses. For example, if you used regression models, then you would interpret the regression coefficients related to your hypotheses. If the study is based on in-depth interviews, you would provide some excerpts from the interviews along with your commentary and analyses.

DISCUSSION (CONCLUSION)

Students often wonder how to distinguish the Results and Discussion sections; after all, they are indeed related to each other. Here is one way to think about the key difference: in the Results section, you should focus more on presenting the results of the analyses, whereas in the Discussion section, you explain why those results matter. What are their practical implications? For example, do the results suggest that we need to revise our understanding of certain social or political phenomena? Do the results have any policy implications that the readers should consider?

In this section, it is also common to describe any potential limitations in the study, which may affect the inferences that can be drawn: e.g., those related to your research design. In addition, you could briefly mention whether any robustness checks (e.g., supplementary analyses) were performed and what the results were. Finally, it is common to end the Discussion section by offering your thoughts on potential directions or areas for future research—that would build on your findings and extend them in some way.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

Here are a few additional resources that you may find helpful:

- For a more detailed review of the sections within a social science research paper (from psychology): <https://www.apa.org/education/undergrad/empirical-social-science.pdf>
- For tips on how to actually begin the process of writing a social science research paper: www.columbia.edu/itc/hs/pubhealth/P6700/misc/writing_guide02.pdf