

THE RESEARCH PAPER

Online: www.ufv.ca/writing_centre

Research papers vary according to disciplinary, course, and assignment goals. It is best to consult the assignment sheet given by your instructor and to follow the guidelines outlined by her or him. That said, there are features common to academic research papers that are outlined in this handout.

Student and professional research papers:

Student research papers are novice versions of expert activity conducted by academics (your professors). What academic writers do is investigate a very specific topic within the contexts of their disciplines; they look at a topic through a particular lens. This involves examining what is already known about a specific topic (review of current literature in the field), identifying what can be called “knowledge deficits” (gaps in a body of research about a topic, problems arising from situations in the world, extensions of knowledge to other contexts), and making new knowledge claims that address the knowledge deficits (developing a thesis that makes a claim and provides a map for readers of how the paper will proceed). Academics publish their papers in journals for other academics to read and respond to by conducting more research. When students write research papers, then, they are participating in a similar activity on what is usually a smaller scale.

Identifying your topic:

You may have been assigned a topic or given the choice to determine your own, but in both cases, you will want to have an idea of not just a broad topic, for example an aspect of Criminology/Criminal Justice, but a narrower topic within it. So a broad topic like policing or offender rehabilitation or youth crime is most effectively discussed in academic settings if the writer narrows discussion to aspects of these things, perhaps the notion of excessive force in policing or recidivism rates for those who commit particular types of crime, or impacts of family violence on young offenders. The possibilities are endless! It’s up to you to decide what is most important and interesting. The thing to remember is that it is not enough, as an academic writer and researcher, to look at your topic in a generalized way.

How to do research:

Librarians are experts in research, so they are the best people to go to to learn more about how to search for material. Some advice is to ensure you know what kinds of sources are acceptable for your particular assignment. Assignment goals vary, and some instructors will specify the need for academic sources only, while others will not. Use of keywords is also crucial—the narrower and more precise the key words, the more applicable sources you will find.

What to do when you have gathered sources:

The next step, after selecting some sources, is to figure out what to do with them, to decide how to advance a claim about the topic. It is important to draft a tentative thesis and an outline before you begin writing as this helps you to determine what sub-topics you will address in what order and how much material you need from sources. Many of you will be familiar with the term “thesis.” Some people believe that a thesis must be contained within a single sentence, and some people believe that a thesis can be presented in more than one sentence. Generally, though, the thesis is understood as a statement that signals the topic of your text, your interpretation of that topic, and a “map” for your reader that outlines which sub-topics you will address and in what order. Your thesis will be determined, in large part, by what your sources say about a topic, but it is up to you to summarize and synthesize information in order to advance your own claim.

Features of academic research papers:

Introduction:

Introductions parallel the activities of academic researchers noted above: they begin with statements about what sorts of things are known about a topic; they begin by contextualizing the topic, by describing why it is an important issue to consider and for whom. This is often done through use of citation to demonstrate the body of research being drawn upon. Introductions then point to knowledge deficits which can arise from different situations--from gaps in a body of research about a topic, problems

arising from situations in the world, and extensions of knowledge to other contexts. Your introduction should then offer your thesis—the thesis sets up readers’ expectations for your work; it provides them with a map and a set of more precise categories to assist them in interpreting the information you offer. There are no exact rules about the length of introductions, but generally speaking, you want your thesis to arrive on the first page—typically, introductions are half to three quarters of a page in length, and typically, the thesis comes at the end of the introduction.

Student Sample:

As the population of the city of Abbotsford continues to increase, so does its level of criminal activity. Included in this increasing crime rate is an increase in the levels of prostitution. Police forces in small towns do not need to expend a lot of resources to suitably deal with the issue of prostitution. A small town may only have a few prostitutes, so it will not be difficult for the police to monitor and control the situation. However, there will come a point in the growth of that town, as it becomes a larger city, that the police will need to change their protocol, and allocate necessary resources to properly control the sex trade industry. **<writer contextualizes narrowly defined topic>**It is my contention that Abbotsford is at that point, or will be soon, and that the Abbotsford Police Department should be looking at ways to properly handle this issue; one possible way is with the introduction of a vice unit, a team of individuals who would focus on the sex trade industry and would implement and follow through on various projects to deter pimps, prostitutes, and “johns” from coming to Abbotsford. **<writer introduces knowledge deficit and makes new claim. In this case, the knowledge deficit is derived from a situation in the world that affects particular populations.>** In this paper, I will examine some of the causes of increasing rates of prostitution in Abbotsford, the necessity of a police vice unit, and the pros and cons associated with it. **<writer provides map for the reader, aspects of his topic he will examine in the order in which he will examine them>**.

Body paragraphs:

Body paragraphs are ordered so that the direction laid out in your thesis is the order in which you will present information. So for this example, the first paragraphs in the body will address causes of increasing prostitution rates in Abbotsford, the second portion of the essay the necessity of a police vice unit, and the third, pros and cons. It is a common misconception that these aspects of a topic should be dealt with in a single paragraph each. For example, it is reasonable to assume that the sections about causes and pros and cons will likely be much longer than the one about the necessity of a vice squad. So, what you want to do is use the broader categories laid out in your thesis as sectional guides; the number of paragraphs for each is best decided as you draft, consult sources again, determine what information you want to present, and decide what you want to emphasize.

Each section of your body will need a topic sentence, as will each paragraph. A topic sentence functions as a way for the writer to signal to the reader that the essay is moving to the next section—topic sentences call up key words and phrases from the thesis.

Sample:

Now that it is indeed clear that Abbotsford needs its own police vice unit to deal with the problem of increased prostitution, it is important to examine the pros and cons of implementing such a squad. **<writer refers to the topic of the last section (vice unit) and the main topic (increased prostitution in Abbotsford) as he also reminds his reader that coming next is the talk about pros and cons.>**

Within the section on pros and cons, we can expect that there would be at least two paragraphs, one for pros, one for cons. So, topic sentences are needed within sections, too, to guide readers through the more specific details.

Sample:

Despite numerous advantages of implementing a police vice unit, it is important to also examine disadvantages to gain a sense of whether or not implementation is possible. **<writer refers to information presented in previous paragraph and also to what will be addressed in the next one.>**

Choosing material to use from sources:

Body paragraphs are also where citation comes into the equation. There are many different citation styles based on discipline specific research practices. Some of the most common are APA, MLA, ASA, and Chicago Style. Regardless of the citation style requested by your instructor, there are three general ways to incorporate sources into your paper: summary, paraphrase, and direct citation. Decisions about when to do what are decided by your assignment guidelines as well as by the emphasis you wish to make on certain points. Summary and paraphrase are used to make more generalized claims, while direct citation is used to discuss details. A balance of all three is typical.

Summary:

- involves reporting some main points from a piece of text in your own words
- involves reporting on the text in a very general rather than specific way

Paraphrase:

- very much like summary as it involves summarizing the source's contribution into your own words, but it refers to summarizing a specific part of the text rather than the work as a whole
- some citation styles and disciplines prefer to have the page number identified when paraphrasing so that a reader can locate the precise point in a work

Direct citation:

- involves including the exact wording of the original in your own paper
- must have quotation marks to note which material has been cited
- must have page number identified, no matter what citation style you are using

Conclusion:

Advice around conclusions is often to restate what you said in your thesis, to restate what you examined in the essay. The goal, though, is not only to summarize the claims you have made in your essay, but to provide avenues for other writers to create new knowledge from what you have said. You want to refer to your thesis, reminding readers of the main concepts the essay has addressed. But you want to go further than that.

Imagine your paper as part of a conversation undertaken by people who care about your topic. Academics, as noted above, build new knowledge from the knowledge presented by others. Though this is not normally the case with student writers, your reader will likely find your essay interesting, and may want to develop new ideas from the claims you make in your essay. Your conclusion should include what you feel is most important—what you want your reader to remember most significantly. The goal is to offer possibilities for further research, information about what else is interesting in relation to the topic or other contexts where such information is relevant and useful.

References, Works Cited, Bibliography:

Each citation style has a different way of indicating a source's bibliographic information. Consult the style guide for the style you are using.

Revision:

Effective writers typically go through many revisions of their original draft. Revising your own work takes practice and concentration. Look for the things mentioned in this handout—do you do them? Can a reader follow? Ideally, you'll want to get a second pair of eyes (most effective if these are academic eyes) to read your essay. This way, you will be able to see places where readers may be confused, require more or less detail, etc. Edit for grammar, punctuation, and proper citation as the last stage.

The Writing Centre at the University of the Fraser Valley

- *promotes and researches writing as a foundational activity connected to critical thinking and learning in a post-secondary setting,*
- *provides a confidential service offering writing instruction to students who wish to become effective writers in their fields of study, and*
- *engages in dialogue with UFV's community of learners about the teaching of writing in discipline areas.*

The Writing Centre