

How to Organize a Research Paper

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Before you start writing...

Express your Ideas and Organize your Thoughts:

Free-writing or Brain-storming

Diagramming or Thought Maps

Talking with others

Reviewing notes, data, or source material

Be thinking about what sort of unique contribution you could make

You might find a set of directed questions helpful for narrowing down and defining your topic. Consider:

How should I define this topic?

How can I describe this topic?

How does this topic resemble or differ from other topics?

What argument can I make about this topic?

How does this topic affect other things?

What interests me about this topic?

What other ideas tend to be associated with this topic?

From Pre-writing, move to Formulating a Thesis

A well-written thesis both helps to clear your thinking and directs the direction of the rest of the paper.

Before you start writing, keep revising your thesis until it clearly expresses an idea. Be sure to consider whether you have enough information to argue that thesis, and that the thesis fits the size of your intended project.

Especially for a shorter-length paper, you should be able to express your thesis in one, or at most 2, sentences.

Example: "Because of the advent of the internet and other electronic sources, the research process utilized by today's graduate students for papers greatly differs from that of students in the 1960s"

You can prewrite in your native language, but at the stage of the thesis and beyond, start writing in the language of the paper, so that you can check that you know how to express your ideas effectively in that language.

Tests for a Good Thesis:

Is it a complete sentence? (and not a question)

Can someone argue against this thesis?

Is each word unambiguous in meaning? Do you clearly express your idea?

Does your thesis call for additional information (i.e., the argument your paper will make?)

Is the thesis too large or too small for the space of your paper?

What evidence is needed to prove the thesis true? Can you muster that evidence?

Moving from Thesis to Outline (or Plan for Writing)

Your goal is to come up with an outline that succinctly and clearly supports your thesis. An outline is your paper's 'best structure.'

But you may also have to revise your *outline* to fit your thesis or your *thesis* in order to fit the outline you create, according to the information you are presenting, and the arguments you are able to make.

Check:

Does my thesis control the direction of my outline?

Are all main points relevant to the thesis?

Does my argument progress logically?

Do I have sufficient support for each of my points?

Once you have a Thesis and an Outline...

You can start writing!

At first, try to follow your original outline, but throughout the process, keep considering whether outline, thesis, or both should change.

Since you might end up altering your structure and argument along the way, begin with body paragraphs, not with the introduction.

Individual paragraphs

Each paragraph should have a main idea; the main idea should always develop the main argument of the thesis of the paper.

Each paragraph should have enough evidence to support its main idea. But do not clutter the paragraph so that the argument becomes lost.

No paragraph should address more than one main idea.

You can check that your paragraphs fit these criteria through outlining.

Achieving coherent writing

Sentences should look backward as well as forward—in order for a paragraph to be coherent, each sentence should begin by linking itself firmly to the sentence that came before. If the link between sentences does not seem firm, use an introductory clause or phrase to connect one idea to the other.

Use repetition to create a sense of unity. Repeating key words and phrases at appropriate moments will give your reader a sense of coherence in your work—but don't overdo it. You'll risk sounding redundant.

Usher your readers through the text

Move from Old to New, at the paragraph and sentence level.

First, ensure your reader is on solid ground before you proceed to the unknown.

Second, because we tend to give emphasis to what comes at the end of a sentence, the reader rightfully perceives that the new information is more important than the old.

Use transition markers wisely:

Announce to your reader some turn in your argument.

Emphasize one of your points.

Make clear some relationship in time.

Examples: Furthermore, alternatively, particularly, with regards to, similarly, however, nonetheless, since, first, to conclude

Introductions and Conclusions

You may want to write these last, as they are meant to synthesize and provide context for the whole argument.

Introduction:

Get your reader interested!

Place your argument into a larger context.

Present any background material important to your argument.

Define any key terms.

Acknowledge other points of view

Conclusion:

Summarize argument.

Return to points brought up in the introduction.

Use compelling language.

Remain precise.

This paragraph should be able to answer the question **so what?**

Writing an Introduction

In your introduction, you should accomplish three 'Moves'

Move 1: Establishing a research territory

Move 2: Establishing a niche

Move 3: Occupying that niche.

Move 1—Establishing a research territory:

(Optional) Show the general research area to be important.

(Obligatory) Introduce and review items of previous research in the area.

Move 2—Establishing a Niche:

Indicate a gap in the previous research.

Extend knowledge in some way.

Move 3—Occupying that Niche:

(Obligatory) Outline purposes.

(Optional) List research questions or hypotheses.

(Optional) Announce principal findings.

(Optional) State the value of the research.

(Optional) Indicate the structure of the paper.

For more, see Swales & Feak, *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (2004).

Other Resources

EAP Tutoring

Notre Dame Writing Center: www.writingcenter.nd.edu

Purdue Online Writing Lab: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/658/01/>

How to Structure and Organize your Paper:

<http://depts.washington.edu/owrc/Handouts/How%20to%20Structure%20and%20Organize%20Your%20Paper.pdf>

Bad and Better Thesis Statements:

http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/098_PDF/ME3_Argument/Thesis/05Sep04Bad%20and%20BetterThesisStatements.pdf

Recognizing and Fixing Weak Thesis Statements:

<http://create.arizona.edu/content/weakBthesisBstatementsBrecognizingBandBfixingBthem>