

How to Write a Sociological Research Methods Paper v1.0
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This document is simply a preliminary guide for those who feel completely lost regarding how to write a research paper. It's preliminary because it is the first draft of the first version of "How to Write a Research Methods Paper", and so it by no means includes everything it could. Moreover, it is not as polished (grammatically, stylistically, etc.) as it could be. It is a guide, because you should feel free to (and may need to) deviate from the suggestions offered here in order to best present your paper.

At the present time, this preliminary guide is meant solely as a guide for those students taking Sociology 301 with preceptor Donnell Butler. Therefore, I will not be discussing issues related to any audience (or reader) other than myself. If you are not using this guide as a student taking Sociology 301 with preceptor Donnell Butler, then you may find that your target audience and expectations differ from those addressed in this guide. I advise you to read the book, "The Craft of Research" by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams for a more general and thorough guide to writing any type of research paper, report, or book.

I The Format

- Font: Times New Roman 12 or Courier New 10 or Arial 12
- Margins: 1" (inch) top and bottom, 1.25" (inches) left and right
- From Edge Header and Footer: 0.5" (inch)
- Pages should be numbered (page # of pages preferred, but not required)
- Section breaks, if desired, but not required.
- 15-20 pages of written text. All items in the appendices are not included in the page totals.
- I strongly suggest that you make an appointment to the writing center, get a draft down in time for your appointment, and then take the draft to the writing center for feedback.

II Sections - in general: *Remember this is a guide, and so certain section may not be relevant for you and perhaps others not stated here are relevant.*

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- Topic (Introduction)
- Research Problem (Research Question)
- Literature Review (Past Theoretical Explanations)
- Hypothesis (Hypotheses)
- Conceptualization
 - Conceptual or Nominal Definitions of Dependent Variable(s)
 - Conceptual or Nominal Definitions of Independent Variable(s)
- Operationalization
 - Operational Definitions of Dependent Variable(s)
 - Operational Definitions of Independent (or explanatory) Variable(s)
- Unit of Analysis
- Research Design (Research Methods)
 - Time Dimension
 - Mode of Observation
 - Method for Establishing Causation
- Sample
- Findings (Analysis and Interpretation)
 - Descriptive (or Univariate) Statistics
 - Bivariate Statistics
 - Multivariate Statistics
 - Interpretation of Key Results
- Summary and Conclusions
- Bibliography (Reference List)
- Appendices
 - Tables, Graphs, Charts
 - Endnotes and other written text
 - Printout of data

III Sections - in detail: *These are notes to guide what should be included in the section, how you should approach writing the section, and what questions you should consider addressing within each section.*

- **Topic (Introduction)** - Your introduction to the paper. Open by getting your reader's attention with a striking fact or quotation, a general statement, or a relevant anecdote. Basically, tell me why I am reading this, that is, why should I care about your topic. Sometimes the intro is the hardest thing to write, so I don't usually write it until after the first draft

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of the paper is complete. It is simple enough to start with the research problem.

- **Research Problem (Research Question)** - What is the basic problem/question? What is that we do not know or fully understand? What are the consequences for leaving this problem/question unresolved? What is the purpose of your research: exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory?
- **Literature Review (Past Theoretical Explanations)** - What literature was reviewed that is relevant to the research problem, research design (methods), or your hypothesis directly or indirectly (i.e., by introducing a theoretical framework)?
- **Conceptualization**
 - **Conceptual or Nominal Definitions of Dependent Variable(s)** - How are YOU defining /what do YOU mean by "Y" concept? (E.G., if your concept is love, then what conceptual or nominal definition of (i.e., what kind of/type of/) love are YOU using?
 - **Conceptual or Nominal Definitions of Independent Variable(s)** - How are YOU defining /what do YOU mean by "X" concept? (E.G., if your concept is confidence, then what conceptual or nominal definition of (i.e., what kind of/type of/) confidence are YOU using?
- **Operationalization**
 - **Operational Definitions of Dependent Variable(s)**
 - What indicators are used to measure the "Y" concept? Do these variables reflect the concept as indicators? Establish the validity and reliability of these measures / indicators? Could the study have been improved by using a different indicator? Based on the variables available, has the nominal definition of the concept changed from what you originally intended?
 - **Operational Definitions of Independent (or explanatory) Variable(s)** - What indicators are used to measure the "X" concept? Do these variables reflect the concept as indicators? Establish the validity and reliability of these measures / indicators? Could anything more in the study be done to establish measurement validity? Could the study have been improved by using a different indicator? Based on the variables

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available, has the nominal definition of the concept changed from what you originally intended?

- **Unit of Analysis** - What is the unit of analysis? How is this unit of analysis appropriate for the research question? In your final draft, make certain your statements reflect the unit of analysis, in other words avoid the ecological fallacy.
- **Hypothesis (Hypotheses)** - Is there a stated hypothesis for your study, and if so what is it? What are the independent and dependent variables are in the hypothesis? What direction of association is hypothesized? Were any other variables identified as potentially important that are not included in the hypothesis? Justify your hypothesis in terms of a theoretical framework, prior research, or a logical self-developed guess. If using a logical self-developed guess, present evidence or an argument to support the hypothesis. Make certain the independent and dependent variables are in the hypothesis.
- **Research Design (Research Methods)**
 - **Time Dimension** - Was the study design cross-sectional or longitudinal, or did it use both types of data? If the design was longitudinal, then what type of longitudinal design was it? Could the study have been improved by using a different design (i.e., panel data versus trend data, cross-sectional versus longitudinal data)?
 - **Mode of Observation** - Was an experimental, survey, participant observation, or some other design used? How well is this design suited to the research question posed and the specific hypothesis tested, if any?
 - **Method for Establishing Causation** - Are any casual assertions made in your hypothesis? What approaches are you using to demonstrate the existence of causal effects? Were all four criteria for establishing causal relationships addressed? What, if any, variables were controlled in the analysis to reduce the risk of spurious or intervening relationships (Think: the elaboration model)? Are there any other variables not included in the analysis be measured and controlled? How satisfied are you with the internal validity of the conclusions?

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- **Sample** - Was a sample or the entire population of elements used in the study? What type of sample was selected? Was a probability sampling method used? Is the sample generally representative of the population from which it was drawn? How likely is it that your findings will be generalizable to other populations?
- **Findings (Analysis and Interpretation)**
 - **Descriptive (or Univariate) Statistics** - Describe and present a table of central tendency and variation for all variables in your analysis. Describe and present a table of frequencies for all nominal and ordinal (5 or less categories) variables in your analysis. Charts and graphs are welcome only to enhance the verbal presentation by using visual information to highlight important information or key discrepancies.
 - **Bivariate Statistics** - Don't forget when examining a Nominal or Ordinal level (3 or 4 categories) dependent variable use cross tabulation, chi-square, and phi/lambda statistics. For more See SPSS Lab Number 2 and review Norisus for help with interpretation of SPSS results. When examining Interval, Ratio, or Ordinal level (5+ categories) dependent variable use group means and analysis of variance. For more See SPSS Lab Number 3 and review Norisus help with interpretation of SPSS results.
 - **Multivariate Statistics** - Investigate any interaction or conditional effects, and interpret the results.
 - **For those doing non-statistical projects** - It is still expected that describe the observations, and describe the relationships between variables, as well as the conditions under which certain relationships do and don't exist. This can be done verbally, and should be presented in the form of an argument using data (observations, interviews, artifacts ,etc.) as evidence to test the hypothesis, support your claim, or make an assertion.
- **Summary and Conclusions** - Summarize your findings. Are any other interpretations possible? Are your results substantively important? Do you think your findings would have been different under different methodological restraints (e.g., different size sample

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or different research design)? What light did the study shed on the theoretical frame? How do your results relate to social policy or the greater world beyond academia? What additional research questions and hypotheses are suggested or could be posed by your results? If you were the head of a federal agency, how would you design the study to address the weaknesses? (Note: ethics is still a factor, but cost and time are in greater abundance)

- **Bibliography (Reference List)**
- **Appendices**
 - **Tables, Graphs, Charts**
 - **Endnotes and other written text**
 - **Printout of data**

IV Final Thoughts: *You now have a roadmap a toolkit to writing a well-structured paper, that addresses all of the pertinent questions that a reader of a research paper would ask and should ask. You should consider using this when judging papers research papers that you write and read. I would also suggest reviewing Babbies's "Consumer's Guide to Social Research on page 493. A well-written and well-structured paper that addresses all of the aforementioned questions can easily overcome bad or uninteresting data. Show me that you have a breadth of understanding of what we learned in this course. The conclusion is an excellent opportunity to score points by intelligently describing to me the flaws and weaknesses in the methods related to your study, and how if given ample money and time, you could design an even stronger methodologically sound research project to address the original research question. Good Luck, and an example of a research methods proposal using the steps from TOPIC to SAMPLE can be found on our blackboard course website in GROUPS -> Wednesday's Precept -> Group Discussion Board -> The Sociological Research Methods Paper folder.*

Good Luck,
DJB