

# Writing a Research Paper

## 1 The paper should have a thesis that answers a question

### 1.1 A good research paper will have a thesis

A good research paper will have a thesis—an argument, or position, that you support with evidence. It should not be just a summary of articles you have read about the topic. You need to evaluate the material you read and develop your own position, using the sources as evidence to support your argument.

### 1.2 The thesis answers a question

For most term papers, this means you must pose a *research question*. The answer to the research question becomes the thesis of the paper. Although you will probably start with a general topic, your preliminary research should allow you to develop a research question within that topic.

Note the difference between a general topic and a research question:

Topic	Research Question
World War II	What were the causes of World War II?
World War II	Did bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki shorten the war?
Witchcraft	Which types of societies practice witchcraft?
Teens use of social media	Does teen use of social media help or hurt literacy?
Sex education	Do abstinence-only programs work?
Homicide	Does homicide have evolutionary roots?
Homicide	Does income inequality increase homicide rates?
Religion:	What is the function of religion in society?

Some of these research questions are better than others. The first one (“what were the causes of World War II”) is far too broad, but it’s a start if you don’t know much about the topic. As you do your research you will often start with a broad question like this, then narrow it as you learn more about it. You may decide you want to focus solely on the economic factors that led to the War, or to a specific hypothesis about that. “What is the function of religion” is also too broad; you will do better to focus on one type of function that interests you. Some of the questions are also vague (“Does homicide have evolutionary roots?” “What is the function of religion?”) but they will become clearer when they are made more focused.

The thesis of your paper is the answer to the research question.

### 1.3 Finding a good research question

Choosing a good research question is often the hardest part of writing a paper. If your instructor doesn't suggest a topic, you can get ideas by looking over section headings and review questions in your textbook. If you have a very general topic in mind (say "sleep" or "religion"), the wikipedia article on the topic will probably contain sub-topics and questions that can be the start of a good paper.

A good research question has broad implications. It should not be a simple question of fact about a particular place or event. A good research question is also one that can be answered with evidence. Finally, and more practically, it must be something about which evidence exists, or can be collected.

## 2 Writing the paper

### 2.1 Finding credible sources

General sources, like Wikipedia, are good places to start, but they are not adequate references for a research paper. If a source like Wikipedia makes a claim, you need to look up the source of that claim. The source will usually be an article in a journal, or sometimes a book, written by someone with expertise in the subject who has done original research.

The best place to find such sources is by using "google scholar" at <https://scholar.google.com>. If a pdf for the full text is unavailable you can get it by linking to the Marriott library: From the google scholar homepage, click the "hamburger" (3 lines) button, then the settings (gear) button, then click "library links" and follow directions. After you save these settings, your searches will show "get it at UU." Click on that link, log in, and you will be taken to the article without further searching. Other databases specific to particular areas can be accessed through Marriott library at [www.lib.utah.edu](http://www.lib.utah.edu), clicking the tab for "Research databases".

### 2.2 Developing the thesis

You can do a good term paper even if you don't have a clue about the answer to your research question when you begin. However, you may well have a hunch about the answer, perhaps because of explanations that have been suggested in your classes. These suggested explanations are hypotheses, and you can often make a more effective term paper if you focus on one (or a few) specific hypotheses.

if you don't have a hypothesis, your term paper will probably be an evaluation of several ideas that you find as you research the topic. You may decide that some arguments are contradicted by evidence you have read elsewhere, or that a hypothesis works only under particular conditions, or that two hypotheses can be integrated into a single explanation. This then becomes your thesis, and your paper provides the evidence to support it.

## 2.3 Writing the paper: Content

If you are collecting original data or conducting analyses of primary data, see your instructor for advice. The following suggestion is for the usual term paper, where you will be synthesizing material in the existing literature.

It is unlikely that the literature will present a clear answer to your research question (if it does, you should celebrate your good fortune). It is more likely that the evidence will be contradictory, ambiguous, or not directly relevant to your question. This is frustrating, but is also an opportunity to show your skill at interpreting what you read.

Perhaps different results are due to differences in the circumstances surrounding the studies; if so, you should explain this. Perhaps you think that some results are simply stronger than others. If so, explain the limitations of the studies you find less convincing. If you find critical evidence lacking, explain the kind of evidence that would be needed to answer the question.

## 2.4 Writing the paper: Organization and style

Your thesis should be introduced early in the paper. The first paragraph (or two) will usually consist of a general introduction to the topic and your thesis. A common mistake is to begin instead with lots and lots of background. Avoid this, because the reader doesn't understand the point of the background without some context.

This [link](#) has some useful tips for writing introductions.

The organization should be clear to the reader. Tried-and-true advice is to begin paragraphs with a topic sentence and make sure that each paragraph follows from the one before. One self-check is to read through the paper reading only the first sentences of your paragraphs. Can you get a sense of the logic of the argument and the organization of the discussion? If so, your paper will be easy to read and understand. (Like all stylistic rules, these are for guidance, not blind adherence).

Use quotes sparingly, and only if the wording in the quotation is important.

## 2.5 References

Unless your instructor advises otherwise, your paper should have a "References" section that lists all the sources you used. Do not include sources you read but didn't use in the paper. Different disciplines have different styles, but social scientists usually use the "author-date" system, where the last names and date of publication are included in the text where you refer to their findings, for example (Sagan and Jones 2012). The full reference is given in the References list at the end. There are many styles for formatting the references; unless your instructor gives specific advice, you can follow the reference formatting style used by one of your sources. The most important thing is to make sure that you give enough information for the reader to find the source.