

Writing in the Social Sciences

Most papers written in the social sciences, life sciences, nursing, and education usually follow the same basic structure and use APA style. Although these areas of study may be different, the methods of writing, presenting evidence, and explaining the research process are very similar. Most quantitative (and some qualitative) papers include the same organization and order:

1. Introduction
2. Review of Literature
3. Methodology
4. Findings (also called Results)
5. Discussion
6. Conclusion
7. References (according to APA style)
8. Appendices (if needed)

This document gives you a basic overview; your discipline will have specific requirements that may deviate from what is provided here. Read journals in your discipline to discover its expectations and consult your professor for further specifications.

Introduction

Your introduction should state the problem you are going to address. It will likely pose the research question as well. This is sometimes referred to as identifying a gap in the disciplinary knowledge. Briefly discuss what the discipline (your audience) already knows about the subject. Background information such as summaries of current practices within the field, histories, and/or theories that help your reader “get up to speed” on the problem should go here.

Briefly explain how you will fill this gap in the knowledge. State the principle results of the study and the principle conclusions. What did you do to get to this conclusion? The rest of the paper will discuss your findings and add to the information. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does your clearly identify the problem or state the research question and its answer?
- Does it tell your reader why you will be discussing it?
- Do you establish why your audience should listen to you?

Review of Literature

This is an expanded discussion of what the discipline (your audience) already knows. This may include more developed discussions of definitions, histories, and/or theories. It may also make connections between similar research and display any contradictions that you found. It establishes for your reader that you understand the topic and that your contribution is valuable. The object of this portion of the paper is to explain the research thoroughly enough to allow your audience to understand the material without having to do any additional reading.

Sometimes, students have trouble understanding the concept behind literature reviews. If this portion of the paper confuses you or you would like more information, see our Literature Review handout posted on the UNA Writing Center website or ask your professor.

Methodology

The methodology section should explain what you did in your research so that anyone who reads it can replicate your exact process. Preciseness and detail are essential. You must describe your methods for choosing subjects, collecting data or measurements, and conducting analysis as specifically as possible. Consider all of the following in detail and address any of these that are appropriate for your study:

- What type of study did you choose and why?
- Who or what did you study and why? Did the study adhere to UNA and [Institutional Review Board](#) requirements? How did you do it?

- How did you identify your pool?
- How did you identify your sample?
- What tools did you use to collect data? Why? How did you design them?
- Should your additional data be included in an appendix?
- Did you describe your process for collecting data in as close to chronological order as possible?
- Did you describe the statistical or data analysis procedures that you used?
- Were there any problems or limitations with your research methodology? Did you mention a margin of error?

Findings (sometimes called Results)

These are the answers that your research produced. This is not a presentation of raw data, but a presentation of the numbers or facts determined from the analysis. If you are using a hypothesis, this is where you state whether you accept or reject that hypothesis. Properly formatted tables and charts can make this a very short but very effective section. It is not always necessary to repeat in paragraphs what you show in a chart. Text should lead the reader to the chart or table, not repeat what can already be seen.

Discussion

In this section, you should avoid repeating what you showed in the “Findings” section. Essentially, this section answers the question “What do these findings mean?” Offer generalizations, principles, or relationships. Develop paragraphs based on critical themes and trends revealed in the findings. Identify points that lack correlation or offer exceptions. Show how your research agrees or disagrees with similar or prior studies.

Conclusion

Some disciplines forego the conclusion (especially life sciences). Discussion serves as their closing argument instead. Ask your professor before you begin a conclusion section, as it is not always required. A good conclusion should restate your answer to your research question, hypothesis, or primary claim based on your findings. It should also make recommendations for further studies or changes that should be made in practice.

References

For most social sciences, your reference page should follow the guidelines of APA Style. If you are uncertain, consult your professor regarding the proper style. If APA style applies, see our Introduction to APA Style guide for help or schedule a writing center appointment.

Sources Consulted

Day, Robert A. *How to Write & Publish a Scientific Paper*. 5th ed. Phoenix: Oryx, 1998.

Johnson Jr., William. A., Richard P. Rettig, Gregory M. Scott, and Stephen M. Garrison. *The Sociology Student Writer's Manual*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002.