

Organization and Outlining

Research papers tend to be formal in nature and tend to support an argument, so they can be broken down into several distinct sections. Not all research guided essay look the same, however, as every student's voice is different.

Research Paper: Parts and Their Functions

- 1) Introduction to Issue + Thesis: A strong introduction starts with a hook—which can take the shape of a narrative, question, quotation, statistic, or statement of issue—which then moves to a brief, compelling presentation of the issue, question or problem driving the paper, typically followed by a thesis statement at the end. Think of your Introduction as the plans for your paper. It presents the central issue and the viewpoint (i.e. thesis) that the rest of the paper will support in detail.
- 2) (Optional) Background Information and Opposing Arguments: Depending on your audience and purpose, you may choose to present a short section that can briefly deliver some background information that readers may need in order to understand and evaluate the thesis support. This section may also include a brief discussion of opposing views or arguments.
- 3) Thesis Support/Body: This is the main part of the paper—all of the ideas, arguments, facts, examples, statistics and so forth that support the thesis.
- 4) Conclusion: Effective conclusions don't replicate the introduction. Instead, leave something for the audience to think about. You can end with a strong supporting point or present questions or hypotheticals that support your thesis support or strongest argument.

Extended Explanation

Most college papers are around five-to-seven pages (1,500 to 2,100 words), so here are some guidelines to think about for organization and structure of your paper. Remember, writing should not be formulaic. The paper's purpose and audience, as well as the writer's style, can greatly change the format and structure of the paper. As you get more comfortable with writing college essays, try to develop your comfortable style and structure. The following suggestions are merely just proportions for best practices.

- 1) Introduction: 1 or 2 paragraphs—typically no more than about a page.

The introduction sets the tone for the paper by introducing the main idea. For a five-to-seven page paper, this should be no more than a page. Don't spend too much time telling the audience what you are going to talk about, spend the precious space showing them. In larger works, introductions are proportionately longer and can be several pages long.

- 2) (Optional) Background Information and Opposing Arguments: 1 or 2 paragraphs—typically no more than about a page. However, some topics may require a longer, more detailed explanation.
- 3) Thesis Support/Body: the majority of the paper—typically four to seven pages.
- 4) Conclusion: Since conclusions are not always necessary, only a 0 to 1 paragraph maximum.

In shorter college papers, the ending may be an extension of the last and strongest supporting point, and

therefore, not require a separate paragraph. If you conceive of a conclusion that contributes something new to the paper (and doesn't just restate the main points), add a paragraph but limit yourself to no more than one.

Filling in the Parts Effectively Addressing Function

As you conceptualize your paper, think about who your audience is, what the purpose, style, and tone are. Once you have a plan, apply it to the loose structure outlined above. Try to stay away from generic language, general information, the formulaic five-paragraph theme, and transitions that indicate what part of the paper you are moving into.

Remember, a good paper does not limit itself to holding to three supporting arguments. Good research will show many arguments, but they may have to be organized under larger umbrella topics. Your thesis should make a compelling point and the body of the paper should support that point.

Drafting Your Introduction—the Blueprint of Your Paper

A good introduction is a blueprint of a research paper for both the writer and reader. Drafting an introduction early—i.e. while you're still conducting research, pre-writing, and putting together an informal outline could help you conduct further research and write the rest of your paper more efficiently.

Most of your Introduction should be devoted to presenting the issue. If you've conceived your paper around a question or problem, you know the central issue well enough to draft a description of it for your introduction. It is important to understand your thesis and introduction can change by the time you are done writing your paper. Start with a draft and you can always change it later.

On the onset of your writing, you can draft a "working thesis" that poses the question driving your research (sometimes called a thesis question) or you can put forth a provisional thesis (similar to a hypothesis in science) that reflects a view that you want or expect your research to support but is subject to change.

Background Information and Opposing Views

Background information and opposing views are not standardized parts of a research paper, however, most paper would benefit from using both. Experienced writers can synthesize background information and opposing views into their introductions and their thesis support without disrupting the clarity and flow of the paper.

A common mistake that some students make is starting a paper with background information instead of defining the central issue so that readers can grasp the purpose of the paper right away. Also, some students are not always sure if or when to include opposing viewpoints; they sometimes undermine the conviction and credibility of a paper by floating an opposing view at the very end.

You can avoid these problems by fitting your background and/or opposing views into an intermediate section after your Introduction and before you start your Thesis Support. The virtue of doing this is that readers won't be confused. They won't be uncomfortable reading a few interesting paragraphs before the Thesis Support starts in earnest.

Thesis Support—Building to a Climax

While researching, you will find supporting arguments for your thesis, but remember that some pieces will be stronger than others. Building to a climax—i.e. weaker arguments to stronger—will help the paper not coming

off as anticlimactic. The goal is to organize your support in such a way that it builds to a strong conclusion where you will leave the readers thinking.

You won't always find the ideal sequence in your first draft. Remember, nothing is written in stone. Part of revision is to restructure, reorganize, and add/delete information. Discussing drafts of your paper with your instructor and classmates will help you determine the best way to organize your thesis support.

Larger Organizational Methods

When trying to organize your ideas, it is important to set the tone early and have a plan when organizing your ideas. Here are some strategies for structuring your paper:

- ▶ 5 paragraph "theme" | Report Style
 - ▶ Introduction (with key points, commentary, and thesis statement)
 - ▶ Supporting Body Paragraphs (for key points)
 - ▶ Conclusion summarizing points.
- ▶ Narrative with Case Study (Good for film, literature, poetry, and music)
 - ▶ Establish the use of a case study in the introduction to explain your supporting points.
 - ▶ Explain points first with supporting research, then show a "practical" example using case study.
- ▶ Narrative and History/Personal Experience (Good for experiential issues)
 - ▶ Structure the introduction as a historical/personal narrative and explain the main points of the narrative with supporting research.

Remember, rhetorical choices will change the structure and style you write in. Here are some questions to ask yourself when planning to write:

What citation style do I want to use?

Do I want to use section headings?

Base sections on image, study, or example?

Should I use footnotes or endnotes?

Should I represent multiple sides?

Take a stance? Be informative? Raise Questions?