

# The Research Paper Puzzle

A research paper can be an intimidating project for any student. However, by following a clear plan of action and understanding the parts of a paper, it can be a manageable and enjoyable process. Think of this plan as a roadmap. You can't drive down the street and expect to end up at your final destination. You need a map, a plan to get you where you want to go. If you understand the basic principles of research papers and plan out your project ahead of time, you will end up at your final destination – a great paper.

## So what is the point?

Trust us; your instructor did not give you this project in order to make your life miserable. By understanding the objectives for these kinds of assignments, you will be able to figure out how this all fits together. In fact, the skills you learn while researching and writing will be invaluable in other courses, as well as in your career.

The objectives for writing research papers are to:

- Make and defend a reasoned argument;
- Display critical and analytical thinking;
- Find and correctly use credible sources to further your argument;
- Correctly cite sources so other researchers can find and use your sources for their research; and
- Write a coherent, well organized, grammatically correct paper.

If you understand the objectives for the project, then it will make more sense as you are working on it.

## How do I get started?

**1.** First, you have to identify the **research question**. The research question is the question you want your paper to answer. For example, if you were going to write a history paper about Napoleon, you might want to know about his childhood and its impact on his life. So your research question would be, “How did Napoleon’s childhood affect the success of his military career?” The research question can then be transformed into your thesis statement.

**Research Question:** How did Napoleon’s childhood affect the success of his military career?

**Thesis:** Napoleon’s difficult childhood had a detrimental impact on his military career.

All of the points in the paper would then be used to substantiate/prove the thesis statement.

**2.** Next, you need to decide what points you want to make in your paper. Remember, only one point per paragraph! Example:

- I. Introduction
- II. Early childhood events
  - a. Facts
  - b. How it impacted his military career
- III. Relationship with father
- IV. Conclusion

By outlining your points ahead of time, you will be able to focus your research and ignore things that do not apply to your topic. You only have a limited amount of time; don't spend it wandering aimlessly through the library!

## Writing the paper

A major problem most students have is that they don't understand how the points should fit together to form a whole. Think of your paper like a math problem. All of the parts add up to form a conclusion, just like adding  $1+1+1 = 3$ .

- I. Introduction
  - a. Background
  - b. If Bill has 6 cats, Suzie has 12 cats, and Bob has 9 cats, how many cats do they have? (This is our research question/thesis statement – it is what we are trying to prove in our paper.)
- II. Point 1: Bill's cats
  - a. How many cats?
  - b. Sources?
  - c. Significance?
- III. Point 2: Suzie's cats
  - a. How many cats?
  - b. Sources?
  - c. Significance?
- IV. Point 3: Bob's cats
  - a. How many cats?
  - b. Sources?
  - c. Significance?
- V. Conclusion (tie all points together. Also think of it as the “therefore” of your paper).

Notice how each of the points in the paper directly relates to/helps prove the thesis statement. The small points/arguments add up to the overall project.

Now, what would happen if Point 2 was about dogs rather than cats? Would that make sense to the reader? See how staying on topic makes us understandable and more credible as writers?

## Within each point

Not only is it important to have related points, you must also explain to your reader your reasoning (how you came up with your conclusion). For example, let's say my argument is that the moon is made of cheese (yes, it's crazy, but you will remember this!). My evidence or proof for this argument is that the moon is round, yellow, and has holes in it. Now, if that was the extent of my paragraph, have I convinced you? Do you understand how my evidence proves my point or how it might relate to my thesis? No way!

I have to explain how my evidence proves my point. My explanation may be that if object A visually appears to have characteristics similar to object B, then it must be object B. So if the moon looks like cheese, then it must be cheese. Can you see the difference? Think of it this way. If you explain your point to a friend, and what you said aloud did not come up in your paper, then you haven't explained your reasoning.

## Other Resources

Check out these Writing Center handouts for more help:

*Introductions & Conclusions*

*Using Sources in Your Paper*

*Thesis Math and Outlining*

*Revision Tips*

*Common Grammar Mistakes*

*Making Sense of MLA*

*Thinking About Your Assignment*

*Thinking About Your Audience*

*Brainstorming*

*Conducting Research*

*Planning the Paper*

*Thinking About Your Thesis*

*Revising for Content*

*Editing*

*Documentation*