

What Makes a Really Good Research Paper?

The most fundamental thing in writing any paper is that you understand everything that you write. Do not bring anything from your sources unless you understand it thoroughly. ***It is the effort to understand something that puzzles you that will lead you to your most interesting ideas and original contributions.***

Content, ideas, and information

- The paper has a single topic, and all parts of the paper contribute to that topic.
- The paper contains new and interesting ideas, and they are explained clearly and fully.
- Evidence and data are explicated in detail. You don't just present the data, you fully explain how to understand each piece of data and how it supports your ideas.
- Linguistic and other technical concepts and terminology are used correctly, and explained appropriately for the intended audience.

Organization and readability

- The paper must have some overall pattern of organization. Here are some possibilities (but there are others too):
 - A. From most important to least. This is the structure of news articles.
 - B. (1) statement of a readily-accepted assumption; (2) pursuit of its implications and consequences to surprising conclusions. A powerful essay format.
 - C. Hourglass pattern: (1) statement of broadest scope and importance; (2) narrow, close examination of your particular topic; (3) open up to broader significance or synthesis. This is often used in essays in the humanities.
 - D. (1) question; (2) evidence; (3) conclusion. An elaborated version of this is the standard pattern for experimental research reports in the sciences.
- Organized on the "local" level: each paragraph has a topic (though not necessarily a topic sentence!), each paragraph in the right place relative to neighboring paragraphs, each sentence contributes to the point of its paragraph.
- Explanations: not too much, not too little; just right for the specific audience you have in mind. (You *must* have a *specific* audience in mind!)
- Straightforward sentence structure: Try to state who or what is doing something in the subject of each sentence (or at least most), and what that who is doing in the verb.

Form

- English: standard, non-colloquial syntax and morphology, standard spelling and punctuation.
- Avoid **fragments** (incomplete sentences: *Because I told you so.*) and **splices** (two sentences joined without a conjunction or period: *I'm tired, I want to go home.*).
- Documentation of sources: You avoid unintentionally plagiarizing. If you use information or ideas you got from someone else (such as a book, article, teacher's lecture, or friend) you give credit to that person. How? *Both* of these are required and they work in tandem:
 - **Parenthetical citations** in your paragraphs to the source of each idea or fact.
 - List of **References** at the end of your paper, with bibliographic information, in standard format.
- You restate in your own way all ideas and information that you get from your sources and don't just change some of the source's words. This relates to the first and most important thing mentioned at the top of this page: understand everything you write. Restating it in your own way helps ensure you understand and shows your reader that you do understand.