

Understanding Research Papers and the Research Process

➤ STEP 1: UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH PAPERS

What is a research paper?

That may seem like an odd question, but do you truly understand the role of a research paper in your life as a student? Research papers play a vital role in our lives as students.



Research papers are more than something for our professors to read.

Often as students, we feel as if we were given assignments merely to do them. But, we are working on a degree in order to become part of a community of professionals, and research papers are an integral part of our process of becoming professionals. How so?

Our intended professions are made up of a community of people who dedicate themselves to something that we, one day, wish to dedicate ourselves to. Like any community anywhere, professional people communicate with one another about theories, about practices, about ethical issues, and about a range of other important topics. How do they communicate with one another? There are a number of vehicles for communication: organizations, conferences, websites, and academic journals.

Research papers are more than exercises in hunting and gathering.

Often as students, we believe a research paper is a process of hunting down information or ideas and gathering it together in some more-or-less organized way. But we are here to learn, and research papers provide an intensive, focused, and individual learning experience.

Research papers are individualized learning experiences.

Research and research paper writing are processes that allow us to learn. Learning itself is a process that calls for us to

- Read through source materials that offer ideas and information
- To comprehend what we read
- To evaluate it, analyze it, synthesize it, and/or apply it



In other words, our job is not just to gather chunks of information and fit them together like pieces of a puzzle. No. Instead, our job is to work the material so that something happens. That something is learning.

Research papers help us on the road to becoming professionals.



A working professional does not just graduate from college, step into a job, and do the same thing every day until they retire. Rather, working professionals grow and change as they learn their way into their professions, as new technologies become available, as new theories and new practices develop. Professionals keep on top of their fields, and doing so

involves...guess what? Research! Whether you are reading the latest study, participating in a study yourself, learning about advances in practice, or some engaging in some other type of professional development, you are engaging with research.

➤ STEP 2: STARTING YOUR RESEARCH

So where do I begin?

To understand what a research paper is, we first have to think about the community of professionals who work in the on-going development of our field. The professional world – whether it is the world of Social Work or of business, of psychology or of art – is in a constant process of growth and development. For this reason, professional people are always in the process of talking to one another about their fields. **Academic discourse** is a term that we use to refer to the conversation that academic people have with one another. All professionals communicate with one another about their fields. One of the major vehicles that professionals use for communicating ideas to one another is something that we become very familiar with as students: articles in academic journals.

What is the purpose of academic discourse?

Before we look at the different types of journal articles, let's think about this. Professionals in all fields explore ideas about their fields through written discourse (in academic journals). Depending on the field, they may:

- Undertake original research and report their findings
- Participate in case studies
- Argue the fine points of theories
- Develop new theories
- Share and evaluate practices
- Discuss ethical issues
- Review literature that has already been published



What is my role as a student participating in academic discourse?

As students we:

- Become familiar with the key professionals who work in our field
- Begin to listen to the conversation that professionals in our field are having
- Familiarize ourselves with what professionals in our field have been discussing
- Understand the various positions professionals take regarding issues related to our field
- Consider what professionals in our field are saying by comprehending key points, evaluating and analyzing material, and synthesizing ideas
- Apply information and ideas to our developing professional lives

How can I use academic discourse in my research?



As students, we find written discourse in a number of different places. Understanding something about the most common source materials can help us to manage our research.

Academic Journals

- **What they do:** Academic journals publish articles and other short pieces that allow the authors (professionals in their fields) to share research findings, case studies, issues related to practice or theory, or whatever else might be relevant to a particular field of study.
- **What students can look for:** Literature reviews (provide overviews of past or current research); case studies; articles on theories within a field; articles on the history of a field; articles on specific processes or practices within a field.
- ✓ **Where students can find them:** Academic journals can be found in library databases, in bound volumes in library stacks, and online (search via google scholar).

Government Reports and Legal Documents

- **What they do:** The government gathers and publishes information intended for its own use or for public use. The United States census, information on disease control, and various types of historical records are just a few types of information gathered and published by the government.
- **What students can look for:** Government documents can be an excellent source of factual information, including statistics.
- ✓ **Where students can find them:** Most government reports and legal documents can now be accessed online.

Books

- **What they do:** Professionals who have established reputations as experts in their field often publish books on the subjects of their research or studies. Books offer much longer, more developed discussions of academic topics than the discussions found in journal articles.
- **What students can look for:** Books offer a range of material that, depending on the book may include research findings, case studies, in depth analyses of processes or procedures, facts, informed professional opinions, to name several.
- ✓ **Where students can find them:** University libraries collect books on a range of subjects. Organized by fields of study, they can be found using the library's catalog.

Web Sites and Blogs

- **What they do:** Websites offer businesses, organizations, government bodies, and individuals a presence on the World Wide Web (commonly known as the Internet).
- **What students can look for:** Caution is necessary when using the Internet for the purposes of academic research. Anyone can develop a web site. Students have to be careful to look for web sites that offer reliable information or ideas. Most professional organizations have web sites. The American Psychological Association, National Education Association, American Nutrition Association, Modern Language Association, National Association of Social Workers, and American Bar Association are a few examples. Government web sites can provide useful statistics, information about laws and legal issues, and other helpful information. Many professionals or professional organizations also maintain blogs. A blog is a legitimate research source if it is maintained by someone with professional qualifications and a strong professional reputation.
- ✓ **Where students can find them:** Anyone with Internet access can visit websites and blogs. Google is a useful search engine. Try using the advanced search feature, which allows you to target your search.

➤ STEP 3: FROM SOURCES TO PAPER

How a research paper happens

Doing research means we have to read source materials that contain information and ideas – information and ideas that play a key role in the on-going conversation that professionals have with one another.

