

Handout: The structure of a research paper

The majority of research articles in the field of counselling are written according to a standard format. This structure gradually evolved through the first half of the 20th century (psychology papers published during that period display a great diversity of reporting formats). The guidelines produced by the American Psychological Association (APA) have been highly influential – even among non-APA journals.

The advantage of a standard format is that it makes papers easier to read – the reader knows where to look for key pieces of information. This makes it possible to summarise complex information in a succinct manner.

The disadvantage of a standard format is that it can stifle creativity, and it may not be as appropriate for some types of report compared to others – for example, it could be argued that it is hard to write personally or reflexively within APA style.

The structure of a research paper generally adheres to the following pattern:

1. Title of the article
2. Names of authors
3. Abstract (brief summary of the paper)
4. Keywords
5. Introductory section, which usually includes:
 - a. The hook: an opening statement of the general interest and significance of the topic
 - b. Literature review – placing the study in the context of previous research, theory and policy debates
 - c. Statement of the aims of the present study, and sometimes also a brief summary of the design of the study

Note: the introduction follows a logical progression, and tells a story that starts with a general statement of the topic, narrowing down to specific research that has been carried out in relation to the topic, drawing some conclusions about the gaps in the literature, explaining what kind of further research is now required, and introducing the aims of the current study, which has been designed to fill some of these gaps. The introduction is mainly written in the present tense (apart from the aims bit at the end) to reflect the fact that it is a statement of established fact.

6. Method section, which usually includes a series of sections with subtitles such as:
 - a. Participants – who took part in the study
 - b. Measures/instruments – the techniques through which data were collected
 - c. Procedures – how participants were recruited, what happened to them during the study
 - d. Ethical issues
 - e. The researchers – sometimes in qualitative studies there is a brief paragraph describing the background and expectations of the researchers
 - f. Analysis – procedures/strategy for analysing data (mainly found in qualitative studies).

Note: the method section is usually written in the past tense – ‘this is what we did’.

7. Results section. Here, the factual findings of the study are presented, with no interpretation or explanation. If quantitative/statistical data are reported, there will always be a corresponding written statement that states what the numbers actually mean. This is written in the past tense: ‘this is what we found’.
8. Discussion. This section usually includes:
 - a. A brief statement of what the study aimed to do, and what it claimed to find
 - b. Rehearsal of the strengths and weaknesses of the study
 - c. Careful comparison of the results of the study in contrast to results of previous studies (ie those mentioned earlier in the literature review – no new literature is introduced here), along with an interpretation of any contradictory findings (eg ‘our results contradict those of Smith and Jones (2002) because’)
 - d. Discussion of the implications of the findings for theory, further research, and practice
9. References
10. Appendices – eg copy of questionnaire that was used

Studies carried out on the reading strategies of experienced researchers have found that they rarely read a research paper straight through from start to finish. First, they use the title, author list (what are these people up to?) and abstract to decide whether the paper is of interest. Then, if the paper is potentially relevant to them, they sample the aims statement, the method and the start of the discussion, to assess the ‘guts’ of the argument. Only if there is anything puzzling or unexpected about the findings, do they read the paper all the way through from the start, for example, to check whether

the literature review has missed anything or is biased, the procedures or sample were unusual in some way, or the authors might have missed something in the analysis.

The structure of a research paper can be thought of as similar to an egg-timer shape: starts off broad (general statement of interest), narrows down to very specific details in the middle, and finally broadens out again to conclude with a general statement.

Further reading:

American Psychological Association (2001) *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th edn. Washington, DC: APA (see also: <http://www.apastyle.org/styletips.html>)

Greenhalgh, T. (2006) *How to read a paper: the basis of evidence-based medicine*. 3rd edn. Oxford: WileyBlackwell.