

Tips for Research Papers

The following is meant to be a tool to help you as you begin working on your research papers. For many of you, this will be familiar, but experience is showing that many people are graduating college today without even rudimentary skills for conducting research and reporting those findings. This is obviously not exhaustive material on the subject of research papers, but the intention is to familiarize you with some of the essentials.

Research Question. Every paper must have a clearly articulated research question. Research is not simply gathering and compiling information. Research always begins with a question or a problem. You will then collect and interpret data in your attempt to answer the question or solve the problem. This means that your research must be focused. However, remember that you might not find an answer to your question or a solution to your problem. Sometimes that is the nature of research.

Example: “The purpose of this paper is to determine an effective methodology for preaching difficult passages of Scripture.” This is not worded as a question, but it tells what problem we are trying to solve.

Thesis. The thesis basically tells the reader what you are going to do. You will not always state this as a hypothesis. In longer papers, this can be explained in a methodology section. Essentially, the thesis tells the reader what you are going to do in order to answer your question or solve your problem.

Example: “The writer will review available literature on the subject of preaching difficult passages as well as widely accepted principles for expository preaching in order to determine an effective methodology.”

Hypothesis. The hypothesis (or multiple hypotheses) tells the reader what you expect to find in your research. This might or might not be what you actually do find, as a hypothesis can be either supported or refuted. Essentially, this is an educated guess based on assumptions you make before beginning your research.

Example: “The writer expects to find common and overlapping principles from available literature on preaching difficult passages that will align with principles of expository preaching.” By the way, this is a hypothesis that was unsupported, as very little has been written on the subject of preaching difficult passages. Moreover, what was written was not from a theologically conservative position. The research, therefore, led the author into a newly developed methodology.

Definition of Terms. Do not assume that everyone who reads your paper is going to understand your terminology or define it the way you would. This can either be an independent section or included in your introduction with the elements above.

Example: In the aforementioned examples, you would want to define what you mean by “difficult passages,” “effective methodology,” and “expository preaching.” You may use your own definition, but when possible a definition by someone considered an authority is best until you have your terminal degree.

Literature Review (also called Survey of Relevant Literature). This should be a section in your paper where you give a brief overview of the books and articles already published that are relevant to your research. You should then be able to show why your paper needs to be written (either incomplete research in the field or so much research that you need to boil it down to essentials).

Conclusion(s). Once you have conducted your research and reported your findings, you need to summarize for the reader what you concluded. Did you achieve your goal of answering your question or solving your problem? Was your hypothesis (or hypotheses) supported or not? Why or how?

Suggestions for Further Research. Give your reader a brief summary of suggestions for more research in the area. Here you are basically saying what other research questions could be posed or how your research could have gone in another direction or been expanded.

Example: A suggestion for further research might be to expand on the research of the paper by evaluating how certain well-known preachers have handled difficult passages to see if they implemented the methodology you are recommending. This would help evaluate the effectiveness of your conclusions.