

Good Papers in Higher Education – Genres and Quality Criteria

Chapter 1 from the book:
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with contributions by Signe Skov

The Good Paper - A Handbook for Writing Papers in Higher Education

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1. Good Papers in Higher Education – Genres and Quality Criteria

This book is about learning how to write a research paper. Not all papers you write will be of this type, but they will be a step towards it as they, in some respects, will prepare you for and teach you how to meet the requirements of this particular genre.

In this chapter and the next, we will describe the different types of papers you may encounter in higher education. We will especially make an effort to describe the conditions and requirements of the independent, investigative (scientific) paper. We will not just describe how to meet these requirements; we will also explain how to write a good paper. We devote a lot of time to explaining and defining the book's concepts and points of view.

Genre – a definition

The concept of genre is central to this book. A genre is a group of texts that share similar elements, structures and possibly language and therefore have the same purpose, function and speech act (i.e., something you do using words, for example, describing, analysing, evaluating).

The research paper as a genre

By “research papers”, we mean texts written by students that in principle must meet the same requirements and criteria as academic texts in general.

Research papers are modelled on professional genres: these are texts that are, for example, written by teachers in the field for the purpose of academic progress and research. And it is this genre that in many cases will serve as the best example for students: the research article. This genre also requires a high level of independence from students. When writing a research paper, the writer himself must choose a subject area, formulate a research question, search for and choose literature (theory), choose a suitable method and research design, and analyse, evaluate and draw his own conclusions.

A bachelor thesis is an example of a research paper. In a bachelor thesis independence can mean that the writer analyses data or discusses subject-specific points of view. By writing research papers, you will train yourself in treating material in a professional manner.

However, the demands for independence can be limited by the fact that some decisions regarding the paper will already have been made by your teacher or institution. This will be made clear in the assignment question or the curriculum. These limitations could be requirements regarding subject matter and/or the research question and/or choice of sources. Later in this chapter, we will expand on how to qualitatively demonstrate independence in papers.

Research papers in higher education especially include:

- dissertations, master's theses
- MA papers
- projects
- bachelor theses, including professional bachelor theses
- smaller papers and assignments at BA level.

At some institutions, projects and research papers are used as general terms for dissertations. What we write about research papers largely applies to projects as well.

With regard to genre, projects do not differ from research papers. They contain the same elements and are both based on research, argumentation and documentation. We have read many projects from Roskilde University and Copenhagen Business School (for example, when acting as external examiners), and the only difference is that projects ordinarily take practical societal and commercial challenges as their starting point and are the result of group work. However, requirements and criteria for the text of projects and research papers are the same. Higher education also includes other types of assignments. We discuss these on page 30 and in chapter 3.

When having to write a text, knowing what genre to write in or which genre you have chosen will prove a great help. The more clear this is to you, the more equipped you will be to make each individual decision down to word level.

The research genre investigates a subject-specific problem

Common to research papers is that they research a single, subject-specific problem in a disciplinary context in a professional way. Here is a definition:

The research genre – a definition:

- Documentation
- of research
- of a single subject-specific problem
- in a given field's (or adjacent fields') "state of the art"
- by means of the theories and methods of the field
- with the purpose of convincing
- peers
- of the accuracy of the results and conclusions of the research
- presented in a way that is accepted in the field's discursive community.

Most researchers will agree with this definition. In the box below, we account for the individual concepts.

Concept definitions

- *Research* is the overriding concept in scientific and scholarly writing and is also the most important speech act (see p. 24ff.). However, carrying out research does not necessarily mean *solving* the chosen problem: in the human and social sciences, you are usually expected to analyse, interpret, discuss, evaluate (you can read more about this in chapter 4 on research questions).
- A *single problem* means that several problems may only be treated in the same paper if they can be united by a single focus.
- A *subject-specific problem* is a problem that falls under the given field. To ensure that it does, your supervisor must confirm that your subject matter is connected to the field. The expression "a subject-specific problem" does not mean that a research question must be based on something highly problematic. Instead it should be understood as something that requires a subject-specific answer; a problem that needs to be explored within the given field. You can read more about what a problem is in chapter 4 on research questions.