

The Paper's Structure and Elements

Chapter 10 from the book:
Lotte Rienecker and Peter Stray Jørgensen
with contributions by Signe Skov

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

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10. The paper's structure and elements

To structure is to divide your content, relate the separate parts to each other and put them in order: Which elements make up your paper, how should they be subordinated each other and what order should they appear in? Working with structural elements is both a tool for processing and part of the finished product.

In this chapter we focus on the structuring of papers' main sections and academic text types (e.g. analysis, discussion, evaluation). At the end of the chapter you will find a brief guideline for the formal sections, i.e. frontpage, contents, introduction, literature list, index. Read about source and literature lists in chapter 7.

When and how to structure

You can write down the first structural elements as soon as you have formulated a temporary research question to base your literature search on. A fully developed structure requires that you can answer these questions:

- *Division*: Which elements must be included to answer the research question? Which sub-questions must be answered before you can answer the research question's main question? The information must be divided into connected "clusters".
- *Relation*: How are the elements interrelated in the paper's main reasoning and argumentation? The connected information must be placed in relation to each other.
- *Order*: Where do the elements appear in the paper's reasoning/argumentation? Elements must be placed as prerequisites for and consequences of each other.

When structuring your paper, we suggest you use:

- the research question
- the general structural conventions of research articles (which we will examine in the following)

- the principal research design (see “The research paper’s standard structure” on p. 257 for an overview”), which always includes sections about the object of study, disciplinary systematisms (theories and methods), the research itself, its results, etc.
- a bird’s eye view to raise you above the worm’s eye view’s multitude of details
- possible curricular requirements for the paper’s elements.

These structuring tools can be used individually as a line of approach, but are in practice inherently linked.

Here are a couple of examples of classically well-structured papers, each awarded a high mark (Sociology of Religion, MA-level).



Title: Moslem Websites in Denmark

Research question: “How do moslems in Denmark communicate their faith on the internet?”

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Note how the writer moves from the general problem, theory and method to concrete analyses, and then moves back “up” to a general summary (chapter 6). Also note the systematism of the subsections of the analysis.

Here is another example of a table of contents that is governed by the research question. Note how the research question’s topics and concepts appear throughout the table of contents (Teacher Training, professional bachelor).

.....

Topic: Children’s faith and how it affects Religious Education

Research question: How can Religious Education at intermediate level in a late-modern and secularised society take into account pupils’ own religious views?

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Use the research question as a structural guideline

The structure of a paper points from the research question in the introduction towards the answer in the conclusion. As previously mentioned, the research question is a statement about the paper's content, and the structure is a statement about the form of the content.

When structuring, it is a good idea to begin with the most central aspects – the aspects that must be included to answer the main research question. Following this, ask yourself: "Based on the aspects I have decided to make central to my paper, which prerequisites am I required to present to the reader?". Structuring from the centre (which will often be found in the middle or at the end of the finished paper) and towards the more peripheral parts is a good idea, and better than structuring chronologically from the introduction, chapter 1, chapter 2 and so on. The result of this will too often be that prerequisites (history, going back to Adam and Eve, theoretical prerequisites, perhaps even theoretical history and philosophy of science) expand and the paper becomes predominantly summarising and descriptive. The structure's design must indicate that the paper is knowledge transforming, not merely knowledge telling.

Structure is determined by genre

In fact, the *research text* genre has quite a bound structure which spans departments and fields – both in terms of the elements that must and can be included, and the order in which they usually appear. This is a clear advantage to the writer, who can simply follow these conventions and focus on content. Thus the research paper's structure is not completely optional, but is, in most cases, a variation of this standard structure:

The research paper's standard structure:

- Observation of a “problem in the world”
- Research question, a relevant, disciplinary question
- Method, procedure to reach a solution
- Theory (explanatory model) to explain and substantiate the method
- Collection of data
- Processing, analysis of data
- Result(s), solution (or attempted solutions)
- Evaluation, discussion of results (solution)
- Conclusion in relation to the research question
- Perspective, relevance in the field and “the world”.

The research structure reveals the “ideal” research design (=the paper’s general method) as the foundation for the paper’s structure. By “ideal”, we mean the edited and revised design – in practice the process is seldom linear. The goal is that the reader is able to follow the research process, reasoning and argumentation, so he/she can accept the results and conclusion.

The structure is meant to (1) demonstrate what you want to study (topic description and research question), then (2) explain why you want to study this, and with which method(s). Then (3) account for what others have said about the topic and which possible objections can be made against this. Then (4) state where you position yourself in your own research, which you then (5) carry out. Following this you (6) conclude and answer your research question: What does your research show in terms of the object and the theories and models used to study the object and (7) what are the limits and perspectives of your own method. Lastly (8) emphasise interesting finds, their implications, limitations and perspectives.

Each element forms an action which is carried out in your research. These elements are also present in the standard “table of contents” of research texts:

Standard structure

- Abstract
- Table of contents
- Introduction
- Theory, method, “state of the art”
- Research
- Results
- Discussion
- Summary
- Conclusion
- Recommendations
- Literature
- Appendices.

The experimental, empirical papers of the natural sciences follow the standard structure most consistently. These papers are often called IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion). This example (Biology, BA thesis) follows the IMRAD-template, and section 1-3 constitutes the introduction.

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