



A+

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HOW TO WRITE AN EXCELLENT RESEARCH PAPER

A TA's Guide for Undergraduate
Students

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write better.

As a Teacher's Assistant (TA), I have read a lot of undergraduate papers. Some have been bad, some of have been good, but then there are those that have been excellent. Over the next few pages, I will share a brief guide to help you go from writing a "good" paper to one that establishes you as a standout student who produces phenomenal work. We'll go over the basics, I'll give you a few game changers, and then you'll hear from other TA's on what they believe makes a great paper as well. So, let's get started.

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the basics.

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A RESEARCH PAPER

Writing a 10-, 15-, or 20-page research paper is something that every student will have to do at one point (often more) in their college career. While the necessity may not seem clear now, the reality is that the critical thinking and analytic skill that it takes to construct a paper that is well thought out is undoubtedly necessary regardless of your major. That being said, I would like to start off by making sure you have the correct foundation for writing before we graduate from "just okay" to A+.

So, what does every basic research paper need?

- **a claim**
- **evidence**
- **to repeat the claim**
- **conclusion**

Seems simple enough, right? Every research paper, regardless of topic, is going to need these four elements.

Let's say you're writing about the impact of streaming services like Netflix on traditional television cable companies. That's an interesting topic, but it is broad. Your paper must start by letting me know what it is you are claiming *about* Netflix's impact on

traditional television cable companies. Has your research shown less people are purchasing cable packages? Is there a particular age group that is more likely to choose Netflix over cable? What are you telling me your research has shown about Netflix and its relationship to cable television?

After you make your claim, I need to see evidence. The evidence you need could include news articles, scholarly articles, or books. You should show me evidence from the novel or book of poems you are writing about if you are writing a paper for an English course. Your evidence is how I know you did research, and is the meat of the paper. To use the Netflix example, what are news sources like CNBC saying about Netflix and cable? Have there been

any books written about the impact of streaming services on popular culture? What scholarly articles (which can be found in your library database or on Google Scholar) can you find to support your claims about Netflix and cable?

The conclusion of your paper should include a repetition of your original claim and a few sentences to bring everything all together.

Now, if you give me these foundational elements along with clear sentence structure, little to no grammatical errors, and meet the page limit requirements I would say you have written a fairly "good" paper. Quite frankly, "good" papers are those that meet the full requirements.

However, the key term is "full requirements." While students may have a lot of good thoughts, if the thoughts are not clearly articulated in an organized and well-written paper that paper will not receive the best grade. Furthermore, if the paper does not meet the page requirements it will not receive the best grade. I often encourage students to visit a writing center on campus or even sit with me if they are not sure about whether or not they are writing something that will receive the grade they are looking for. I encourage you to do the same as well so that you can know whether or not you are on the right track before turning in a final edit.

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from good to great.

WRITING SOMETHING
WORTH READING

While the paper on Netflix I described in the first chapter was "good," if you have stopped at this chapter you want to write something great. I am a firm believer in getting to the point so I won't make you wait any longer. Here are three elements I believe shift your paper from just "good" to great.

01

Thematic Elements

An excellent paper illuminates the thematic elements that are attached to its claim. For example, if you are writing a paper on the music artist Solange's latest album, and you are claiming she uses this album to represent southern womanhood out of Houston, Texas, I want your paper to talk about southern womanhood in general, the tradition of R&B and hip-hop music in Houston, and black women musicians in Houston in general. In other words, I want to see two or three major thematic elements that are relevant to your topic and claim discussed in your paper.

Need another example?
Let's say you are writing a

paper on Haiti's
independence from French
colonial rule in 1804.

Thematic elements could
include colonialism, slavery,
and racism. Expounding on
these thematic elements will
help me to better situate
your claim and research into
a larger conversation. This
leads me to point number
two.

02

Clear Context

Set your topic into context. Now some might argue that this should be a foundational requirement, and it is. Even a "good" paper should explore and explain any events surrounding the topic. However, speaking from experience, while students may touch on some context, they often do not go into depth. I want you to go into the deep waters of research to give some life to your paper. To continue with the Solange example, I would want to know how this album fits with Solange's other albums. What did her discography look like up to this point and how does the new album differ or stay the same? The context of your claim and research matters because without it I am

forced to view Solange's latest album in a narrow vacuum.

If we want to look back at the Haitian Revolution we need to understand why and how France came to control Haiti, what led to the revolution, who the major players were and their backgrounds, etc. I want to know the circumstances surrounding the Haitian Revolution so that I can better understand the claim you are making or even the chain of events you are relaying to the reader.

03

Tell Me Why I Should Care

An excellent paper tells me the "so what?" early and uses the evidence throughout the writing to support its call to action.

What is the "so what"? The "so what" is what keeps me (the reader) engaged in the research- it tells me why I should care about what you are saying.

Listen, I know that, for the most part, the assumption for undergraduate students is that I should care because I have to, and I do care about your work. But, an excellent paper will cause me to care about why the research is important. For example, why is it important to pay attention to Solange's new album and it's sonic and vocal tribute to Houston, Texas?

Why should I care about the Haitian Revolution? Why is that moment important in history? Why is it important in black diasporic history? What makes that moment unique?

The "so what?" lies at the heart of your paper, and so it is important to find that "so what" early and make sure it is clear for your reader.

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here's what a TA really thinks.

**ADVICE FROM OTHER PH.D.
STUDENTS WHO TEACH**

While I have given you what I believe makes an excellent paper, I think it is important to hear other voices. Here are two other TA's to help you be a better writer.

NORRELL EDWARDS

PH.D.

A great research paper takes the reader on a journey. It guides the reader through all of the evidence like a tour guide. Just like how a college campus tour guide is making the case for you to attend that school. You're making the case for your argument.

- Ensure that every point you make relates back to your argument. Don't let any readers get lost on the tour.
- Smooth out transitions between paragraphs. This ensures that readers understand how they traveled between two points and their connection
- Conclude creatively. Predict what will happen with this topic in the future or how it relates to a larger, national dialogue. This way you leave your reader eager for your next tour.

CLAUDIA ALLEN

PH.D. STUDENT

The three things that make a good research paper a great research paper are :

1) An issue-based argument that looks at the complexities and nuances of an issue and steers clear of arguments built on binary thinking.

2) The paper ethically and empathetically places the ideas of others in conversation with their own.

3) An excellent research paper has seen many revisions and edits prior to submission.

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