Writing a Research Paper

Matthew Barsalou, Germany, matthew.a.barsalou@gmail.com

Pedro Saraiva, Portugal, pas@eq.uc.pt

The purpose of this white paper is to provide guidance in writing research papers.

It is the 15th paper in a series of thoughts collected, organized, and promoted by the Quality in Education Think Tank (QiETT) of the International Academy for Quality (IAQ).

The first paper addressed a broader scope of topics and put into perspective the overall field of "Quality in Education", which set a common ground for further reflection and guidance of QiETT activities. The forthcoming papers, such as this one, focus on more specific topics and delve deeper into particular topics based upon the collection of international inputs from quality and education experts.

To date, this collection of white papers comprises the following titles:

1-"Quality in Education: Perspectives from the QiETT of IAQ"
2-"Large Scale Training of Quality Professionals"
3-"Inclusive Quality of Education"
4-"Continuing Education in Quality Improvement for Healthcare Professionals and its effects on organizational improvement"
5-"Current Societal Challenges to Quality and Quality Management in Higher Education"
6-"Applying Quality Theory to Educational Systems"
7-"Training and Teaching Statistical Methods for Quality"
8-"Simple Hints to Help Trainers Improve Training Quality"
9- "Student Quality Circles: A Step Towards a Total Quality Society"
10- "Solving Problems in Education Using Quality Tools"
11- "Making Online Education Effective"
12- "Integration: The Key to Effective and Efficient Quality Education"
13- "Examining the Nexus of Workforce Development and Quality"
14- "Flashes of Insight – The Many Pathways to Creativity and Innovation"
15- "Writing a Research Paper"

1. Introduction

There are different types of research that may be performed, depending on the main intents of the research activities conducted. Hypothesis testing research is performed to test a hypothesis pertaining to a potential causal relationship between research variables. Descriptive research is performed to characterize phenomena. Exploratory or formulate research is conducted to gain new insights and diagnostic research is conducted to identify how often something occurs or is associated with something else (Kothari 2004).

2. Research Papers

According to Richardson et al., a research paper consists of a title, an abstract, an introduction, a section on experimental methods and materials, the results and a discussion of the results, a conclusion, and a list of references cited. A paper may also have supplementary information, acknowledgments, a description of the authors' contributions, a list of abbreviations, and statements pertaining to the availability of data and any conflicts of interest (2021), as well as a graphical summary. Most research papers have a structure based on IMRaD, which stands for introduction, method, results and discussion and conclusion, with the method section including experiment, theory, design and model (Mack 2018). Alternatively, the methods section may also be called materials and method (Mack 2018) and there is a variation called IMRD for introduction, methodology, results, and discussion (Supatranont 2012). A journal's specific guidelines should be consulted prior to submitting a paper (Simon et al. 2020).

3. The Research Paper Abstract

An abstract is the first part of a research paper that people see; therefore, it is critical that the abstract be well written because it will give readers and reviewers a first impression of the paper (Fried and Wechsler 2001), and readers often only read the main contents of a paper if they find the abstract to be attractive enough. Abstracts usually range from 150 to 400 words; however, the exact word count depends on the journal the paper will be submitted to (Sellheim 2017).

The abstract should explain the results as well as their meaning or importance (Sanganyado 2019), together with the scope covered, main contributions and conclusions reached. The abstract may be structured, such as listing background information, methods, the results, and a section on conclusions, or an abstract may be unstructured (Richardson et al. 2021) and the abstract should be written so that it can be understood by somebody from outside the field the paper pertains to (Bellemare 2022), whenever possible.

A journal may offer the possibility or even demand to include a visual abstract. A visual abstract is a graphical summary of the research, which also helps to spread the research both on the publisher's website and social media (Gloviczki and Lawrence 2018). Visual abstracts are highly effective in getting people to read abstracts, with studies showing that visual abstracts greatly increase the number of people who read the visual abstract compared to a traditional abstract (Chapman et al. 2019). This inclusion of a visual abstract is a trend that is likely to stay and become more common, since an increasing number of people, including younger generations, tend to place a high value on visual communication, as opposed to just plain text.

4. The Research Paper Introduction

The introduction should make clear that the scope of the paper fits the scope of the journal the paper is being submitted to. The introduction should also clearly explain how the research is

both novel and significant enough to warrant publication (Mack 2018). The research questions being addressed have to be clearly explained (Crescentini and Mainardi 2009).

5. The Research Paper Literature Review

A literature review is needed when writing a research paper (Siddaway et al. 2019) and is performed to gain an overview of important topics pertaining to the research topic, points of agreement and disagreement of other researchers, an idea as to what details have been covered and what details have not been sufficiently covered, and which methods have been previously used to study the topic (McNabb 2010), as well as what are remaining knowledge gaps that relate to the paper under submission. This section of a research paper may occasionally be also called a theoretical framework section (Bellemare 2022).

The literature review should both provide context for the planned research in regards to the knowledge currently available on the topic and provide a theoretical background for the study topic (Kumar 2011). The literature review should also identify the difference between what has already been done and what the paper will do and explain the significance of the problem that the paper addresses (Jaidka et al. 2013).

A literature review does more than just summarize existing sources; it must provide a clear overview of the current state of knowledge on the research topic (Alsalami 2022) and different approaches may be used. For example, a literature review can provide arguments, integrate existing research, or provide a historical overview (Jahan et al. 2016).

Sources used in the literature review should be primary sources and not secondary sources, such as text books, and should comprehensively cover work published in the previous half decade, unless the source is considered a classic source (Jalongo and Saracho 2013).

In addition to journals, sources for humanities and social fields of knowledge may also include monographs and edited books, while technical fields often use published conference proceedings (Late et al. 2019). There is also gray literature, which is not published by commercial publishers. Gray literature may be published by businesses, governments, or even academics. Often, gray literature is not peer reviewed; however, some conference proceedings fit in this category and they may be peer reviewed (Paez 2017). Gray literature also includes theses, dissertations, scientific working papers, as well as official publications (Siddaway et al. 2019).

6. The Research Paper Methodology or Research Design

The methodology section explains both how the research was performed and why various research methods were selected (Jalongo and Saracho 2013) and is sometimes referred to as an empirical framework (Bellemare 2022), experimental section, materials and methods, or study design (Simon et al. 2020). The method section explains how researchers could reproduce the work, although references to literature are often used in place of step-by-step instructions (Mack 2018). The method section also explains how samples were selected and how the sample size was determined (Simon et al. 2020), when that is part of the research conducted, or what experimental protocols or standards were adopted, as well as the materials and equipment used, when the research involves laboratory experiments.

Research may be qualitative, quantitative, or adopt mixed methods. Crescentini and Mainardi illustrate the difference between qualitative and quantitative research using school

abandonment as an example. Determining why and how people abandon school is qualitative research, while determining how often school is abandoned is quantitative research (2009).

There are both advantages and disadvantages to quantitative research. Quantitative research uses measured quantities, which can often be analyzed using statistical methods, even when there is a small or large amount of data to analyze. Quantitative research also lends itself to being easily presented in the form of tables, plots, or models. But, quantitative research is only as good as the data used for the analysis and there is a risk of reaching false conclusions if the data is not correct or representative (Dawit 2020) of the subject of study. Quantitative research often consists of a research hypothesis that is evaluated with the use of surveys (Hancock and Algozzine 2006) or experiments (Simon et al. 1996).

In contrast with quantitative research, qualitative research does not use numerical data. Qualitative research often consists of interviews, observations, and even documents with detailed descriptions (Butler et al. 2021) as well as focus groups or a review of historical documents (Hancock and Algozzine 2006). The availability of software and AI tools that are able to handle text, images, or voices as raw data has opened new ways for handling these sorts of qualitative data for research purposes.

There are also both advantages and disadvantages to qualitative research. Qualitative research can provide a level of analysis that may be missing in quantitative research and there may be more ambiguity in qualitative research due to the nature of the research topics and goals, but this ambiguity lies at the essence of qualitative research. However, qualitative data may not be representative of the bigger picture and the researcher's own interpretation may be mixed into the research and influence the conclusions reached. Qualitative research also carries with it a risk of over simplifying explanations (Dawit 2020) and it is difficult to extrapolate and assure that insights obtained will apply to all similar contexts that were not studied.

Mixed methods research is research that uses a combination of approaches, such as both qualitative and quantitative data analysis (Cameron and Molina-Azorin 2011). Data may therefore appear in different forms, such as a questionnaire for analysis with quantitative methods and semi-structured interviews for analysis using qualitative methods. Alternatively, researchers may use a case study approach supplemented by quantitative data (Amadi 2021). The multiple sets of data can then be analyzed using different tools to identify the research findings (Jogulu and Pansiri 2011).

Mixed methods research is ideally suited for when one research method alone is not sufficient (Creswell 2009), begins with one type of research, such as quantitative research consisting of an experiment or survey, and then transitions to another type of research, such as qualitative research, consisting of an interview or observations, but this order can also be reversed, for instance when one uses interviews to define the most appropriate survey contents. Triangulation can then be used to gain a synthesis of the results coming from the different research methods used (Golicic and Davis 2012).

Literature reviews are sometimes also a form of research, and there are different types of literature reviews that can be used for that purpose. Any synthesis of more than one paper can be considered a review (Gopalakrishnan and Ganeshkumar 2013); however, there are different types of literature reviews, but regardless of the type of literature review, a spreadsheet should be used to list key details coming from the literature, such as authors, publication year, objective of the study, methodology used, and the results of the study (Arksey and O'Malley 2005). Review papers

should generally consist of around 4,000 to 6,000 words with all but 10 to 20% of the text being in the review section (Dhillon 2002).

A systematic review originated in the medical field and is performed to consolidate and analyze the results of previous studies (Alsalami 2022) in a systematic way. Given the current easy access to online published materials, systematic reviews did become common ways of presenting knowledge available in a field for many areas. Systematic reviews systematically collect and combine articles to reach a new conclusion based on existing articles (Pollock and Berge 2018) to answer a research question (Kahn et al. 2003). A systematic review guideline, such as PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis), can be followed when performing a systematic review (Siddaway et al. 2019). A systematic review requires a research question and a search strategy with criteria for entering papers into the study. There also needs to be a location to consolidate located papers. Multiple databases of articles are then searched, results consolidated, and duplicates eliminated. Papers should then be screened by a minimum of two people to determine if they should be included in the study (Muka et al. 2020). Criteria for excluding articles must be determined ahead of time (Jahan et al. 2016). Potential exclusion criteria may be low-quality articles or articles without sufficient detail for analysis (Bradley et al. 2005) or articles that do not match certain keywords or publication criteria. The number of articles excluded from the study should be given together with an explanation of why these papers were excluded (Yannascoli et al. 2013). Systematic reviews can also serve as a basis for further empirical papers on the systematic review topic (Hallinger 2013) and may be analyzed using a meta-analysis, which is a statistical method for evaluating the combined results of multiple studies (Harris et al. 2014).

Not all literature reviews consist of systematic reviews. An integrative review is intended to provide an overview of a topic and potentially expand the theoretical foundations of the topic (Alsalami 2022) using multiple sources of evidence (Riege 2003).

A scoping study, also known as a narrative review, or conventional literature review (Pollock and Berge 2018), is a literature review that is less systematic than a systematic review. A scoping study is much quicker than a systematic review and is performed to gain an overview of the research in a field of study, to determine if a systematic literature review is warranted, or to summarize and spread the findings of existing research (Arksey and O'Malley 2005).

A conceptual paper is also to some extent a type of review (Hulland 2020), but one that mainly puts forth a claim or statement together with support for the claim or statement and the author's interpretation of how the claim or statement is supported. A conceptual paper may appear to be simply an un-academic essay; however, much academic rigor can be needed when writing a conceptual paper (Jaakkola 2020). Conceptual papers are oriented towards linking currently existing theories (Gilson and Goldberg 2015), adapting theories, providing a typology that categorizes variations on a concept, or building a model that provides a theoretical framework that explains relationships between variables (Jaakkola 2020). Like other types of reviews, conceptual papers should thoroughly review the relevant literature pertaining to the paper's topic (Hulland 2020).

A case study is a form of qualitative research (Alam 2021) that examines a phenomenon within the phenomenon's context (Amadi 2021). Case studies are often of a narrative nature (Hancock and Algozzine 2006) and highly descriptive (Patnaik and Pandey 2019). Case studies offer answers to the questions of how and why and should seek to be more than just a description of what happened. Case studies should attempt to provide new knowledge (Rowley 2002), insights or hypotheses. A case study may consist of one unit in a specific period of time (Hancock and

Algozzine 2006), or may be a multiple case study, consisting of additional case studies from other locations, such as different industries (Riege 2003), locations or entities. Case studies may also use a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Case studies can serve multiple possible purposes. Case studies can be used to illuminate a phenomenon that is not well-described by theory, to address gaps in the research when theory is limited, to illustrate the actual real-world application of concepts (Verleye 2019), gain important insights, or build new concepts, models, or frameworks. A case study is a versatile form of research that can provide new insights into a phenomenon (Harrison et al. 2017). However, it may be difficult to generalize from a single case study. But, a case study may be a starting point, providing insights on which ways future research should go (Simon et al. 1996) and this can be enhanced using support from replication, consisting of additional case studies arriving at the same conclusion (Patnaik and Pandey 2019).

The analysis of the study data may be performed as part of the methodology section (Jalongo and Saracho 2013), but will be in the results section if a results section is used.

7. The Research Paper Results

The results are described and analyzed in the results section if a results section is used. Statistical hypothesis tests may be used and described, but without cometary or interpretation, in the results section (Ecarnot et al. 2015). The analysis may involve arranging data, tabulating or visualizing data (McNabb 2010), triangulating results to synthesize data from multiple sources (Golicic and Davis 2012), or performing statistical hypothesis tests (Dawit 2020).

8. The Research Paper Discussion

There is variation in the discussion section, with some journals referring to the discussion section as results and discussion (Richardson et al. 2021). Typically, a discussion section describes the results of the research, how the research fits within the literature, the strengths of the study, the limitations of the study, and what the implications of the study are (Cals and Kotz 2013), unless results are described in a results section.

The discussion section should explain the results obtained according to the methods section and describe how questions from the introduction have been answered. Often the discussion moves from a summary of results, to explaining if the results were anticipated or not, a comparisons of results to previous research, and then an interpretation of the results (Mack 2018) and how they answer the main original research questions and goals.

The discussion section should also explain if there were any deviations from test protocols or if anything happened to the data used in the study (Simon et al. 2020). Undesired results also need to be mentioned; reviewers will notice and may not look favorably upon attempts to obscure undesired results or problems (Cals and Kotz 2013), which provide very useful knowledge for other future research and researchers efforts.

The relevance of the findings need to be explained so that it is clear that the results are both something new and how the results will be relevant to (Simon et al. 2020). It is important to avoid overstating the value of the findings, or going beyond what the data actually supports (Jalongo and Saracho 2013).

Limitations of the study are described in either the discussion section or the conclusion. Limitations explain details such as the use of a proxy variable in place of the actual variable

(Bellemare 2022), sample sizes and biases, lack of additional data or information sources, equipment constraints, among many other possibilities.

Figures and tables are particularly useful in the results section. However, information presented in tables or figures should not be duplicated in the text (Simon et al. 2020), to avoid redundancies.

9. The Research Paper Conclusion

The conclusion is the last main part of the paper and it should tie together concepts from the introduction and state the main results and conclusions reached, such as a hypothesis being rejected or supported, as well as the major contributions made regarding the research question and goals. The implications of the results for the field of knowledge under consideration should also be explained in the conclusion (Richardson et al. 2021).

The paper should be briefly summarized in the conclusion and main limitations should be mentioned. Implications of the results are also explained in the conclusion and directions for future research building on the results are also elaborated (Bellemare 2022) as well as general recommendations for future actions based on the research results obtained (Mack 2018). However, simply stating that further research is needed is inadequate (Cals and Kotz 2013) if not done with specific recommendations coming from the research conducted.

10. The Research Paper Reference List

Unless a fact is generally known by most people, any fact stated should be backed up by a citation (Dhillon 2002). Papers may also be cited for reasons such as providing context, showing the contributions of previous papers to a topic, or to criticize a previously published paper (Teplitskiy et al. 2022). Authors must also cite themselves when they are using content that they have previously published, otherwise, they are committing what is known as self-plagiarism (Noe and Batten 2006), but care should be taken to avoid having too many self-citations, since an unbiased overview of all relevant previous scientific contributions is expected. All papers cited in the text must be listed in the reference list and all references must have a citation in the text (Thompson 2005).

Figures and tables reproduced from other sources also require a reference. Copyrighted material, such as figures and tables, will also require written permission to reproduce the material and there may be fees for using such copyrighted material (Fried and Wechsler 2001).

Journals will usually dictate which style of reference to use (Jalongo and Saracho 2013). Ideally, the paper should also have references from the journal that it is being submitted, since editors may check for this (Richardson et al. 2021) and use of the proper reference style reinforces alignment with the journal editorial strategy. References can be managed using reference programs such as Mendeley, EndNote, or Zotero (Dhillon 2002).

11. Concluding Remarks on the Topic of Writing a Research Paper

As mentioned above, research may be qualitative (Crescentini and Mainardi 2009), quantitative (Dawit 2020), or use mixed methods (Creswell 2009). Journals may be academic research journals with peer review, or practitioner journals that publish papers of a more practical nature and may or may not be peer reviewed.

Submitted papers must have an abstract. Abstracts may be structured or unstructured and journals will have specific requirements for what should be in the abstract as well as word counts. For unstructured abstracts, the structure from a structured abstract maybe helpful as a template for writing the abstract. Table 1 lists the common key elements of an abstract.

Table 1. Key elements of an abstract

Element of Abstract	Description
Purpose	Reason the research was carried out
Design / Methodology / Approach	How the research was conducted
Findings	Results of the research
Limitations	Limitations of the research
Implications	What the research implies
Originality	The way in which the research provides new knowledge
Value	Why the research matters
Key words	Key terms related to the paper

Many journals require the IMRaD structure (Mack 2018); however, journals will often require a specific structure that may or not perfectly match IMRaD (Simon et al. 2020). Table 23 presents the main elements of the structure of a research paper.

Table 2. Key elements of the body of a paper

Element of Structure	Description
Introduction	Explains the reason the research is being performed; the literature review can also be made here if there is no dedicated literature review section
Literature Review	Provides background information including what was done before
Method / Experiment, / Theory / Design / Model	Describes how the research was conducted in a way that makes it possible to repeat the research and presents the analysis of the data
Results	The analysis and results of the research
Discussion	Describes what the results mean and how they fit together with previous research as well as limitations of the study; conclusions are presented here if there is no conclusion section
Conclusion	Briefly summarizes the paper, describes limitations if not described in the discussion, explains possibilities for future research, and elaborates on implications and limitations of the research

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