Writing an Academic Paper

1  **INTRODUCTION**

A research paper is a piece of academic writing that requires a more abstract, critical, and thoughtful level of inquiry than that to which you may be accustomed. The purpose of writing a journal paper is to reflect the experiences of researchers in conducting both research activities and critical thinking processes.

Writing an academic paper is more a recursive than a sequential process. Not only does it take a lot of time to actually “sit down and write”, but also time is also needed to “continuously think” and “organize information and ideas”. This section will explore the process of writing an academic paper including how to start, differentiate between different types of research, what constitutes a good abstract, how to conduct a critical literature review, how to design the appropriate research strategy and develop valid arguments based on the empirical data or theoretical analysis.

2  **WHERE TO START**

Before you start writing, always ask the “W” and “H” questions:

1. What is the paper about?
2. What is the key statement?
3. What is the research method?
4. What is the supporting evidence?
5. Where can I find the resources (primary, secondary)?
6. How is research conducted?
7. What is the contribution to knowledge?
8. What are the policy implications?
9. Who will be the readers for the paper?
10. How long am I going to take to finish the paper?
11. With whom am I going to collaborate/(or seek advice from)?
12. Which journal am I going to target?

You may not have the definite answers to all the questions, but as a useful technique you may write down any ideas, key words, information or issues needing to be solved on a piece of paper. You may also discuss your work plan with your colleagues in order to articulate your thoughts. It is also useful to know where you may find the relevant information and resources such as databases, research websites, newspapers, reports, conference proceedings, government publications, etc.
3 DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESEARCH AND ACADEMIC PAPERS

Although journal papers may cover editorials, commentaries, book reviews and interview features etc., academic papers based on research still constitute the major content of the academic journals.

3.1 DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESEARCH

The types of academic papers are usually informed by different types of research. Easterby-Smith et al. (1991) classify research into three main categories: pure research, applied research, and action research.

The key nature of pure research is that it is intended to lead to theoretical development; there may or may not be any practical implications. University of Phoenix does not have a focus on this type of research, but it is worth to be explained. The pure research (also called basic research) aims to

- Expand knowledge of business and management processes
- Result in universal principles relating to the process and its relationship to outcomes
- Generate findings of significance and value to society in general.

The second type of research is applied research, which is intended to lead to the solution of specific problems and usually involves working with clients who identify the problems. Sometimes the researchers may be paid as management consultants. The main aim of applied research is to:

- Improve understanding of a particular business or management problem
- Result in a solution to the problem
- Generate findings of practical relevance and value to managers in organizations (source: Saunders et al. (2007), Research Methods for Business Methods, FT Prentice-Hall).

The third type, called action research, typically starts from the idea that the researchers and/or participants would like to change or improve a situation; thus research is needed to provide justification or a formal account in order to impose changes. The benefit of action research lies in the fact that both researchers and participants are active learners during the process of research in order to address the issues, problems or deficiencies within the existing management and organizations.

3.2 DIFFERENT ACADEMIC PAPERS

Based on different forms of research, the research papers may be classified broadly in two types: theoretical-oriented and empirical-oriented. The theoretical-oriented paper is driven by the researcher’s own understanding, evaluation and interpretation of existing theories in order to develop his/ her own stance on an argument or particular issues. Theoretical-driven papers can be further classified into analytical and persuasive papers.

The empirical-oriented paper tends to focus on the particular real-world issues or specific problems in order that new knowledge can be created and added to the existing body of knowledge. Empirical research papers usually start by challenging the assumptions underlying existing theories, followed by the
design and implementation of empirical data collection to support/verify hypotheses. Empirical-oriented papers may even be further divided into qualitative and quantitative approaches based on the different research design and data collection methods (see section 6).

4 CREATING A STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

The abstract or annotation enables a researcher to distil and articulate the research project into a concise and clear summary. Emerald has specific requirements on how the abstract should be constructed. In order to complete the abstract, the following sections are mandatory:

- The aims and objectives of the paper
- The research strategy and methodology employed
- The statement of the findings
- The originality/value of the paper.

Abstracts should usually contain no more than 250 words. Table A is an example of a structured abstract.

The shaded areas (Research limitations/implications, Practical implications/social implications) are sections which may be used but which are not mandatory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heading</th>
<th>Abstract text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Examines the effects of incentives on industrial productivity in China’s food industry. Seeks to determine whether economic reform, promoted in China from 1979, has brought significant changes to industrial enterprises at a provincial level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design/methodology/approach</td>
<td>Uses data covering the 1990-1996 period collected from 30 food enterprises in Guangdong Province – a province given more economic freedom than others in China. Employs the Cobb-Douglas production technology method which explores changes of production behavior over time to estimate an aggregate production function.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

The empirical results support the use of bonus schemes to motivate enterprises to achieve higher levels of productivity. They also indicate an important variable affecting productivity: the proportion of temporary workers in the total labor force. Flexibility in the use of temporary workers could produce a positive effect on enterprise productivity.

Research limitations/implications (if applicable)

Practical implications (if applicable)

Strongly supports the need for flexibility in employment policies. When compared to state-owned and collective-owned enterprises, their counterparts, e.g. foreign ventures and joint-stock enterprises, were relatively more efficient in production.

Social Implications (if applicable)

Originality/value

Confirms the observation that, entering the 1990s, China’s economic growth was largely attributable to the emergence of an energetic non-state sector.

Table A Example of a structured abstract

## 5 HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of conducting a literature review is to develop a thorough understanding of, and insight into, previous research that relates to your research question(s).

The literature review will:

- Enrich your knowledge in the research subject
- Define your research boundaries
- Put your research into context
- Provide background and justification for the research undertaken
- Identify the gaps/arguments/opposing views in the literature
- Identify research methods that are relevant to your research
- Avoid reinventing the wheel and repeating other researchers’ mistakes
- Move forward from the point other researchers have reached.
By critically reviewing existing literature, you will be able to draw out the key points and present them in a logically argued way, and also highlight those areas where they will provide fresh insights. Though there is no one correct structure for conducting a literature review, Saunders et al. (2007) suggest the following when planning the literature review:

- Have clearly defined research question(s) and objectives
- Define the parameters of the research
- Generate keywords and search terms
- Discuss your ideas as widely as possible.

In order to organize your literature review in a critical and cohesive way, it is also worthwhile considering the following questions while reading relevant articles for your research:

- What is the purpose of the author?
- What are the key statements made by the author?
- What is the evidence supporting those statements?
- How is the supporting evidence collected and analyzed?
- Is the evidence sufficient to support the statement?
- To what extent do you agree with the author’s argument?
- Is there any flaw in logic or inaccuracy in any statements made by the author?

Figure 1 presents the literature review process developed by Saunders et al. (2007). Further information on the critical review of literature can be found at: www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html

Figure 1: The process of a literature review
6 DESIGNING AN APPROPRIATE RESEARCH STRATEGY

How research is conducted is as important as what has been identified from the research project. Designing and implementing the appropriate research strategy forms the foundation of successful research.

The design of research is informed by different layers of processes, approaches and philosophical thinking, which are described below:

6.1 LEVEL 1
All research starts from the beliefs (research philosophy) on what knowledge is and how knowledge is developed, which forms the so-called the positivism and interpretivism paradigm.

6.2 LEVEL 2
Such research philosophies orientate researchers toward two main research approaches: deductive and inductive. The deductive research takes a “top-down” approach and usually starts from a particular theory, which is followed by hypothesis, testing/observation, analysis and finally confirmation and conclusion. The inductive method takes the opposite approach and starts from a specific observation, moving to a broad generation and theory building.

6.3 LEVEL 3
Under the broad research approach, researchers may choose different research strategies including: experiment, survey, case study, action research, grounded theory, ethnography etc., which reflect and underpin the deductive and inductive nature of the research.

6.4 LEVEL 4
Once the research strategy is defined, the researchers need to make decisions on the appropriate research methods: qualitative or quantitative or mixed method of research.

6.5 LEVEL 5
Researchers also need to consider whether the methods will be implemented according to the time horizon (i.e. longitudinal studies) or cross-sectional (change research objects or comparison studies).

6.6 LEVEL 6
Finally, researchers need to commence the process of data collection and choose the appropriate data collection and analysis techniques.
7 DESIGNING AN APPROPRIATE RESEARCH STRATEGY

The academic paper usually includes an introduction, main body of content and conclusion. How an individual author organizes and presents the main body of the paper depends on the nature of the materials and research methodologies.

The Western academic style encourages authors to put the main point at the beginning of the paragraph, then try to build the paragraphs by using various supporting evidence and finally drawing conclusions. Some academics, however, are used to the style of “brush painting” and usually do not get to the point directly, which often affects the overall structure and the logical presentation of the paper.

Although most academics are proficient in English, writing a good academic paper requires a very high standard of comprehension in particular theories and issues in order to make a sound argument and analysis. Often, these theories related to management or economics were developed in the Western context and written in English; therefore special attention needs to be paid to the English language of the paper. One way of achieving this is through collaborating with experienced researchers with an excellent control of academic writing, so that the content of the paper can be checked to avoid any mistakes.

References:


Saunders et al. (2007), Research Methods for Business Methods, FT Prentice-Hall, Hemel Hempstead.