

The Components of A Social Research Paper

1. Introduction (Sometimes entitled "Statement of the Problem."), 3-5 pages.

Purpose: Frame the Research Question.

This section introduces the project. This usually occurs with an opening discussion of previous research, or with a discussion of why the work was undertaken. The topic is typically introduced in terms of a basic research question, defined in terms of an independent and dependent variable (or set of variables). The section also may include a narrative as to why answering the question would be interesting or useful. If there is a personal interest for the author(s), or a compelling public interest in the answer to the research question, this is often stated. The text also includes a brief overview of some existing literature and usually begins or ends with the framing of the research question.

2. Literature Review or Theory Section, 5-7 pages.

Purpose: Build an argument which poses a hypothetical answer to the research question.

This section illustrates a basic assumption: You are not the first person to ever examine the relationship between the independent and dependent variable in the research question. The intent of a new piece of research is to expand the scope of previous research, or to extend the logic of other work in a new direction. A literature review accomplishes two things:

1. Provides an overview of what we already know, or what has been argued is the case, regarding the question before us.
2. Helps the researcher frame the logic of a theoretical argument.
 - A. Previous research has found ...
 - B. Applying the logic of that work to our research question, we find ...
 - C. Therefore, we expect to find ...

The "punchline" to a theory section or literature review is the Research Hypothesis. This is usually stated at the end of a brief summary of the theoretical argument.

3. Methods. (Page length varies – whatever it takes to get the job done.)

Purpose: Test the Research Hypothesis.

This section details the chosen method for data collection, and the plan of analysis. These methods include, but are not limited to:

- A. Collection of Survey Data (conducting interviews or distributing questionnaires)
- B. Experimental designs (rarely used, but compelling when appropriate).
- C. Participant observation or other qualitative/ethnographic approach.
- D. Unobtrusive measures of existing data: Secondary Analysis or Content Analysis.

The "Methods" section has the following components:

- A. An opening discussion of the type of data to be collected.
- B. Operational definitions of the independent and dependent variables.
- C. Plan of analysis.

The opening discussion is often quite brief. The intent of this section is to help the reader understand the nature and limits of the scope of the project.

Variables must then be operationalized such that the reader knows how the components of the research question have been narrowed, and what will actually be measured. For example, "Religious Practice" might be an independent variable which is operationalized in terms of church attendance, reading sacred or meditative texts, and/or watching and listening to religious broadcasts. Often, these various components of the variable are scaled together in order to enable statistical analysis. With quantitative methods (questionnaire data collection, some experimental designs, or secondary analysis), the Analytic Plan includes defining the variables in terms of the questions or scales used from the questionnaire. This is followed by a discussion of the statistical methods which are employed in the analysis.

When using a more qualitative approach, such as when doing participant observation work, the variables are less precise. The discussion of variables and analysis takes the form of a story or narrative descriptions of behavior and action.

4. Results. (Page length varies as above).

Purpose: To report the answer to the Research Question in this instance.

This section parallels the Analytic Plan posed above. You essentially report what you found when you did what you said you were going to do. Often this includes references to tables which you construct to report your statistical analysis. In other cases, it includes quotes from interview subjects, or narrative descriptions of what you were able to learn through participant observation.

5. Discussion or Conclusions.

Purpose: To present implications of the answer to the Research Question.

So What? That's what this section is for. Ideally, the project has plugged a gap in the existing literature. In practice, there are many questions left unanswered. Every project has limitations posed by the methods chosen and the data used. These limitations must be acknowledged. That said, scholarship was advanced, even in the case of a "non-finding." The best research leaves the author and the reader thinking about what more needs to be done. Often, published work is part of a larger research agenda for the authors. Often as not, however, the paper becomes part of the next paper's literature review.

And the beat goes on ...