Writing a Research Article
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Below are some ideas to assist you in the knowledge production process. Sometimes what works for one writer will be useless for another; sometimes the beauty of writing is in the eye of the reader. Let the below contribute to your own unique style of work.

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Literature Searches

1. Give the proper time to research what’s been done on a topic. This means everything on it. This could take a couple of months, perhaps less if the topic is new or there isn’t much on it. But be careful of writing that nothing has been done—you’re still going to need to situate the topic in some literature.

2. Reading what’s been done helps you see the limitations of current knowledge and where your work fits, and keeps you from embarrassing yourself when something you thought was novel has already been written.

3. Read classics to establish broad knowledge and the foundation of a topic, but generally spend most of your time on more recent work.

4. Read in chronological order so that you are aware of the works that the current work is citing. It will help you to see the progression of knowledge.

5. Use Google Scholar. When you find an especially relevant article, get the works that the article cited, and click on the “cited by” button to get articles that have since cited that article.

6. Use scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. Use books from academic or well-respected trade presses. No websites, magazines, or newspapers. The occasional popular cite is okay if you are making the point that something is featured in popular press or media coverage.

7. There is no one best way to go about reading and taking notes on an article or book. Do whatever works best for you—underlining, highlighting, rewriting elsewhere, and so forth. Experiment with different methods and switch them up.

8. Come up with a system where you can quickly look over a work again and be able to get the main ideas and important points without having to re-read the whole thing.

9. Do your best to synthesize from past works you have read and comment on how everything ties together. This will allow you to better see the unique contribution of each work. The most important part of any work is how it adds to or fills a gap in the literature.
10. Take note of arguments that may be counter to what you have been reading or plan to write about—as these should be addressed rather than ignored in any work.

11. Pay attention to quotes that can be valuable to reuse in your work. (Also, pay attention to what types of writing you direct quote and copy that style of writing so that others may direct quote you).

12. Identify a research question that you find interesting. Identify a research question that you can convince others is interesting. Identify a research question that makes a contribution no matter what the answer. Often this is easiest in some derivative of “Does X affect Y?” If yes, what’s that mean? If no, what’s that mean? Setting up a research question in which statistically significant results are required to make a contribution to the literature is a shaky strategy.

13. Inevitably, you will feel that there’s always more to be read. It’s tough to decide when you’re done reading, but you eventually have to commit to that and move on! Remember to always go back to your research question and decide whether a reading is relevant.

Writing

14. Write, rewrite, and rewrite.

15. Give attention to firsts. First paragraph. First sentences of paragraphs. First sentence of the paper. What do you want the reader to experience first?

16. And give attention to lasts. What’s the last thing you want to leave with the reader?

17. In finding your unique voice in writing, try to avoid writing things you wouldn’t actually say in real life. I stopped writing “To be sure,”

18. Write simply; simply write.

19. Use your thesaurus, but there’s a fine line between crisp writing and writing that is al dente.

20. Use the active voice for most writing.
21. Break your writing down into pieces. An entire paper is daunting; a section is manageable; a paragraph is achievable. Outlines help immensely.

22. Maintain tense.

23. Don’t use quotation marks for emphasis or sarcasm. Google Chris Farley Bennett Brauer and you’ll never do it again (Maybe I do “eat my own dandruff.”).

24. Use direct quotations sparingly. Too often and it’s difficult to see your comprehension and your contribution.

25. Vary up your sentence length, word choice, and writing devices (e.g., having “however” in the middle of a sentence; alliteration; asking a question within your writing—all of these can be powerful, but can be distracting if overused).

26. Punctuation generally goes within the quotations (outside in UK).

27. Avoid “not” in describing something—the word is inherently weak, as it only describes what something is not, rather than what it is.
   “The shirt was not dry.” ➔ “The shirt was damp.”
   “We did not anticipate finding” ➔ “We were surprised to find”
   “Jacob did not pay any attention to Cody.” ➔ “Jacob ignored Cody.”

   Most other words that mean “not” are stronger anyway, such as never.
   “I did not learn how to swim.” ➔ “I never learned how to swim.”

28. Be deliberate. What is the purpose of this paragraph…this sentence…this word?

29. Don’t be shy, share with others. Their feedback is important—don’t dismiss it, but don’t feel the need to make every change either. Look for patterns, if multiple people say the same thing, you probably should make edits.

30. Don’t be repetitive and redundant.

31. Use paragraphs.

32. Use headings.
   Use subheadings.
33. What you want to say is important; how you want to say it is more important.

34. Have fun. Put words together that aren’t usually together. Avoid trite writing. Be different.

35. Above all else, don’t make your reader work. The more your reader has to work, the less likely he or she will continue reading. If someone has to read a sentence two or three times to know what it’s saying, then they’re having to work. If they have to look up words to know what they mean, then they’re having to work. If they have to read through run-on sentences that should be split up into smaller sentences, then they’re having to work. Awkward sentences mean work. Poor grammar means work. Typos and spelling errors mean work.

Citing

36. Don’t plagiarize, but don’t become a prisoner of citations. If every sentence is followed by a citation, it’s hard to see your unique contribution.

37. Avoid overreliance on any one particular cite. And generally you wouldn’t cite one source by itself and then cite the same source by itself in the next sentence.

38. Keep string cites to a maximum of three works. Go beyond that only if you’re trying to show just how many works make a particular point.

39. Use both classic and current cites. Classic to show you know the breadth and length of an idea, current to show you know its existing form.

40. Avoid citing in introduction and conclusion sentences. If you’re citing in the first sentence, and especially in the first sentence of a paper, it should be a prominent citation.

41. e.g. means “for example” (used to provide examples of something). i.e. means “that is” (used to clarify something with a different word or phrase). cf. means “compare” (used to identify a contrasting or alternative work; good to show awareness of different findings/approaches).

42. Don’t use etc.
43. It would be better to write “McKenzie and colleagues (2018) analyzed…” than “McKenzie et al. (2018) analyzed…” You wouldn’t say et al. in conversation.

44. Cites generally go in alphabetical order within parentheses.

45. Anything you cite should be in your reference list. Anything in your reference list should be cited in your text. Do a check before submitting or sharing anything.

46. Try and use words besides “found”—Telep (2018) analyzed, documented, commented, stated, wrote, recognized, acknowledged, determined, supported, contradicted, and so on.

47. Know the style that you’re required to use, which may mean different rules than above.

**Introductions**
(Around pages 1-3)

48. Make the first sentence of your paper the most important sentence that you write.

49. Write, rewrite, agonize over the first sentence.

50. Introductions should be short. Generally 5 paragraphs or less. No reader wants to have to get to page 10 to find out what the paper is about (Don’t make the reader work).

51. The first paragraph introduces the reader to the broad issue at hand, the second paragraph identifies a specific problem or limitation with the current knowledge on that issue, and the third paragraph identifies how you’ll address that problem in the current paper.

52. Somewhere should be statements that nail home why this problem is important (i.e., why should we care about your paper?). This shouldn’t simply be because no one has researched this issue before.

53. There is no need for you to lay out an explicit path for your paper (e.g., “In this paper I will…Next…”).
54. Most importantly, make people want to read the rest of your paper. You’re telling a story, make them want to know the end. Good titles get to good abstracts that get to good introductions that get to good literature reviews.

**Literature Reviews**  
(Around pages 4–12)

55. The format may vary from work to work. You may need an in-depth discussion of a progression of theory. Or a review of existing evaluations on a particular program or policy. But the purpose should remain the same: you’re telling a story, and you want the reader to continue reading to see how the story ends.

56. Don’t merely present existing literature in a sequential fashion (e.g., “One study found…Another study found…”). Your job is to synthesize and make sense of the literature.

57. Think in paragraphs: what’s the role of this paragraph? And the next? All the way to the final paragraph.

58. Start broad and end specific.

59. By the end of the literature review, the reader should have an understanding of the state of knowledge in the area as well as to the limitations of that knowledge, which your work will address.

60. Present relevant detail from studies, but be concise. Critical studies can get their own paragraph of description.

61. It’s generally a good idea to leave all methodological language and terms to the methods section (even words like *variable*). Exceptions to this are when you’re writing a paper on methods or when the method is critical to understanding a particular study’s findings.

62. Reread the writing and citing parts of this document (use headings and subheadings!)

63. Know the structure that you’re required to use for your outlet, which may mean different rules than above. For example, some psychology journals and most health journals require a short review of the literature.
64. A “taken altogether” paragraph at the end is a good way to make sense of all that literature that you just covered.

**Current Focus**
(Around page 12)

65. This is a paragraph (or two) that brings your reader back to the issue at hand after they’ve read the existing literature. One or two sentences to remind of the broad area you’re working in and one or two sentences to identify the limitation or gap to be filled in that area. It restates your research question (and hypotheses, if desired) and reminds the reader of the importance of your work.

**Methods**
(Around pages 13-17)

66. This section is generally rather standard. It isn’t the time to make sense of anything or to experiment with different formats or writing.

67. A good way to organize your Methods section is with a subsection for Data and a subsection for Plan of Analysis.

68. Data describes your sample: who; how many; when; where; how it was obtained; response rates; any information specific to your data that is necessary for the reader to understand.

69. Data also describes your variables. A good way to organize these is to have subheadings for Key Dependent Variable(s), Key Independent Variable(s), and Control Variables.

70. Within these variable subheadings, you will describe how each was measured. This may include providing examples of specific items from a survey or interview, providing factor loadings, eigenvalues, and scale alphas, providing the response set of answers (e.g., 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree; 0 = male, 1 = female), and/or what they mean (e.g., lower scores indicate lower self-control), providing citations to works that may have developed or used these measures, or describing how interaction terms were calculated.

71. Descriptives (and descriptive tables) generally go in the Methods section and should not be considered results, unless they answer your research question(s).
It’s probably easiest to provide descriptive statistics right after you describe how something was measured (e.g., “Mental health scores range from 1 to 5 with 5 representing the most serious mental health diagnosis. The average mental health score in this sample was 2.06 (SD = 0.95”).

72. Plan of Analysis describes the approach that you’ll take to answer your research question(s). You’ll identify your modeling strategy and why it’s appropriate given the statistical assumptions that you’re making. Explain what the approach does, if necessary. This is generally 1-2 paragraphs, but can be longer if your methods are complicated or require significant justification.

73. Don’t make the reader work through the Plan of Analysis either: tie each research question with the specific process that will answer it; maintain a sequential order. Let the reader know what you’re going to do (“First,…Second,…Third,…”).

74. Use footnotes sparingly (throughout the whole manuscript). Often, footnotes (and especially methods footnotes) are included during the review process to respond to a reviewer or editor concern. They are a good way to anticipate concerns (e.g., “A common approach to the study of recidivism is to use propensity score matching. We decided against this approach in the current work for the following reasons…” “Additional analyses using a binary indicator of our critical independent variable did not substantively alter our findings.”). That said, many readers ignore footnotes, and so if it’s critical, put it in the text.

75. Qualitative studies still have rigorous methods; prepare to describe your approach in detail with citations to the methodological strategy you employed.

Results
(Around pages 18-21)

76. Again, very standard writing: here are the answers based on the analyses. Don’t make sense of the findings at this point. You generally don’t need to be referencing much within this section.

77. Focus on your research questions and your critical independent variables; findings of control variables can be interesting, but shouldn’t receive significant attention.
78. Break up the results in a meaningful way, often by research question as guided by your Plan of Analysis.

79. A Supplemental Analyses subsection may include alternative specifications of your modeling (robustness checks) or additional analyses necessitated by your main analyses that can speak to your research question(s). This doesn’t mean run additional analyses that you find interesting, particularly as a way to find something significant if you failed to do so in the main analyses.

80. The best results sections provide findings in a digestible form. The typical “a 1 unit increase in x produces a .32 increase in y” may not mean much. Visuals like plots, predictive values, odds-ratios, and other intuitive presentations of results go a long way.

81. Tables should be able to stand alone by themselves, with all relevant information contained within them. Some readers and reviewers will go straight to the tables. The title should describe the model (not just “Results from Model One” instead “OLS Regression Model Predicting Self-Reported Offending by Gender”). Include model fit statistics, sample size, and some representation of statistical significance and at what level. Be clear, don’t be sloppy. Don’t make the reader work. If comparisons across models are critical (as in how a model changes upon inclusion of some variable or when comparing models across samples), try to get them all in the same table.

82. A final paragraph could make sense of the pattern of findings across models and/or research questions. Your Discussion section shouldn’t merely be a restatement of your results, and so here is the opportunity to summarize the findings of the models and the answers to your research question(s).

**Discussions**
(Around pages 21–25)

83. This section is probably where you have the most leeway to be unique and make contributions.

84. Most discussion sections are way too long. By the end of the paper, the reader wants you to concisely make sense of your findings.
85. Don’t merely restate your results.

86. It’s good to start with a general broad paragraph that brings the reader back to the issue. The reader has been in the weeds in methods and results for the last several pages. Bring them back to the issue at hand: what is it? Why is it important? What did you do? I often end this paragraph by saying, “Based on our analyses, X conclusions can be reached.” Then each paragraph thereafter discusses those conclusions.

87. An easy conclusion is what your work means for theory/the academy. Another easy conclusion is what your work means for policy/practice. Conclusions can be answers to your research questions, but they should be broader than that so you’re not just restating results; perhaps an implication is the pattern of results across your research questions. There’s no standard format for this and it may vary depending on the focus of your paper.

88. Generally you shouldn’t be introducing new literature in this section; it should have gone upfront in your literature review, unless your results produced some unforeseen result that is now being situated within additional literature.

89. Unless your outlet requires otherwise, a “Discussion” section without any additional subheadings is fine. Discussion, conclusions, implications…they’re all close enough to mean the same thing.

90. Situate your findings within the larger knowledgebase. Be careful of saying your work is consistent with or confirmed the findings of other works. Then what’s new?

91. Limitations should be addressed. They should be couched within a frame of “Our work has made important contributions, but there’s more work to be done.” Otherwise, you just poke holes in your own work and if you do it really well, then your limitations may overcome your contributions.

92. Don’t end your paper on limitations.

93. The final paragraph is some of the freest writing you get to do. What do you want to say about this broad area, your contribution, and what’s next? Your
final sentence is important. Write it, rewrite it, agonize over it. What do you want to leave with the reader?

Titles

94. Spend time on them.

95. You might want to wait until the paper is done. But sometimes it helps you think about the paper.

96. Avoid quoting somebody—leave that for book chapter titles. And it’s kind of lazy.

97. Don’t use parentheses. My worst title ever that I’ve since scrubbed from my vita because it’s so awful: Friends Don’t (Not) Let Friends Abuse Women? An Empirical Investigation of the Feminist, Male Peer-Support Model of Sexual Assault.

98. Crafty titles are good, cutesy titles are not.


99. Think of keywords you may want in there. The digital age means search terms are important.

100. Say it out loud. If you can’t say it easily, get rid of it. If you have to explain anything after saying it, get rid of it.

101. Readers should have a good idea of what the paper is about by just looking at the title. A descriptive title gets them to the abstract. A descriptive abstract gets them to the paper. Vague, confusing, or misleading titles gets them nowhere.

102. Try and keep it relatively short. When I need to trim down page count, I’ll delete references that take up an inexcusable amount of lines. See above: say it out loud.
103. Generally, journals and books in the social sciences allow a catchy or broad before-colon and then the after-colon is specific or what your study is actually about. Look at the two good title examples above. Ideally, your before-colon is descriptive, as sometimes that’s all that will come up in a search, or you avoid the colon altogether. But, this usual format is expected…

Abstracts

104. They’re not fun to write, but they’re important.

105. Broad sentence on the area that you’re working in; sentence or two on why your specific work is important; sentence on your research question (and hypotheses, if desired); sentence on your data (including sample size, if relevant), sentence on your methods (including specific modeling approach, if relevant), sentence or two on your findings; sentence or two on what it means.

106. I will often write this last and copy and paste specific sentences from the text to create the abstract. It maintains consistency, and in my mind the abstract is quite literally a summary of the work that follows.

107. There’s a nontrivial amount of readers that will only read your abstract and decide whether to cite or apply your work. Don’t forget that.

108. If you can, leave “implications for theory and policy will be discussed” to conference abstracts in which you haven’t yet done the analyses. You should state the specific implications for theory and/or policy based on your results.

109. Know the structure that you’re required to use for your outlet, which may mean different rules than above.

Further Reading

Sources that influenced the above ideas and additional reading.


