

Series Foreword

Why are you reading this book? Perhaps you have recently been assigned to write a research paper in an undergraduate course. Maybe you are considering graduate school in one of the behavioral, health, or social science disciplines, such as psychology, public health, nursing, or medicine, and know that having a strong research background gives you a major advantage in getting accepted. Maybe you simply want to know how to conduct research in these areas. Or perhaps you are interested in actually conducting your own study. Regardless of the reason, you are probably wondering—how do I start?

Conducting research can be analogous to cooking a meal for several people. Doing so involves planning (e.g., developing a menu), having adequate resources (e.g., having the correct pots, pans, carving knives, plates), knowing what the correct ingredients are (e.g., what spices are needed), properly cooking the meal (e.g., grilling vs. baking, knowing how long it takes to cook), adequately presenting the food (e.g., making the meal look appetizing), and so forth. Conducting research also involves planning, proper execution, having adequate resources, and presenting one's project in a meaningful manner. Both activities also involve creativity, persistence, caring, and ethical behavior. But just like cooking a meal for several people, conducting research should follow one of my favorite pieces of advice—“remember that the devil is in the details.” If you want your dinner guests to find your meal tasty, you need to follow a recipe properly and measure the

ingredients accurately (e.g., too much or little of some of the ingredients can make the entrée taste awful). Similarly, conducting research without properly paying attention to details can lead to erroneous results.

Okay, but what about your question—“how do I start?” This American Psychological Association (APA) book series provides detailed but user-friendly guides for conducting research in the behavioral, health, and social sciences from start to finish. I cannot help but think of another food analogy here—that is, the series will focus on everything from “soup to nuts.” These short, practical books will guide the student/researcher through each stage of the process of developing, conducting, writing, and presenting a research project. Each book will focus on a single aspect of research, for example, choosing a research topic, following ethical guidelines when conducting research with humans, using appropriate statistical tools to analyze your data, and deciding which measures to use in your project. Each volume in this series will help you attend to the details of a specific activity. All volumes will help you complete important tasks and will include illustrative examples. Although the theory and conceptualization behind each activity is important to know, these books will especially focus on the “how to” of conducting research, so that you, the research student, can successfully carry out a meaningful research project.

This particular volume, by Scott Baldwin, focuses on writing a research paper. All of the earlier parts of the process—the careful planning, assembling of “ingredients,” preparing, and conducting the research—have led to this key part of scientific inquiry, presenting the findings to consumers of research. Thus, if you are ready to write your paper and need user-friendly guidelines, whether your paper involves a critical summary of a particular topic (e.g., effective treatments for anxiety) or a description of an actual research study you conducted, this book can be of immense aid.

So, the answer to the question “How do I start?” is simple: *Just turn the page and begin reading!*

Best of luck!

Arthur M. Nezu
Series Editor

Introduction

If you're reading this book, chances are you've been assigned a research paper in your psychology class, or maybe you're starting a senior thesis. My students have a wide range of responses to writing assignments, including excitement, dread, fear, curiosity, apathy, confidence, and the strong desire to drop the class. On the one hand, a research paper can let you dive deep into a topic you're interested in, which enhances your learning experience and enjoyment of a class. On the other hand, writing is hard work and sometimes even boring and tedious. The purpose of this book is to help you write your research paper—and to help you write it well. Specifically, this book will give you structure, advice, guidelines, and even some practice to help you write well, or at least better than before. In addition, I hope this book will help you tip the scales toward the writing assignment being a positive learning experience rather than drudgery.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0000045-001>

Writing Your Psychology Research Paper, by S. A. Baldwin

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My students tell me that writing research papers is hard for at least two reasons. First, a blank document is overwhelming—a 10-page paper feels unreachable, especially when the first page is coming along so slowly. Second, writing well—clear, coherent, and thoughtful prose—does not come naturally. Thus, they worry about both what they'll say that will fill 10 pages and how they'll say it. They worry about the grammar rules they've learned since grade school and whether they'll remember when to say *less* and when to say *fewer*. I understand, and I'm sympathetic, but I'm reluctant to stop assigning papers. Learning to write clearly is fundamental to a college education, and few come to college (or graduate school or even their jobs) as good writers. Writers get better by writing, by receiving feedback, and by writing more.

My wife and I dated during college. Autumn was 2 years ahead of me, an English major, and a great writer. I was worried about a one-page essay for a philosophy class because I had received a bad grade on my first essay. She offered to critique my draft and help me revise it. I handed her the paper and watched TV while she worked. She eviscerated it—no sentence was left untouched, and everything needed to be reworked. She helped straighten out my use of the passive voice, helped make the tone professional, and cleaned up my use of tenses. The revised paper was better, and so was the grade I received.

After that semester, I wanted to get better at writing, so I enrolled in an advanced writing class with the best writer I could find—Daniel Graham, in my college's philosophy department. This was the hardest class I took as an undergraduate. Each essay, though short, required hours and hours of work. I wrote and rewrote. Dr. Graham was exacting and tough, and often my papers required extra revision beyond my initial drafts. That is how I got better. I learned how to craft an argument, how to get to the point, and how not to repeat myself. I learned to take the feedback as feedback, not as personal criticism.

My writing development didn't end with Dr. Graham's philosophy class. When I submitted the first draft of my master's thesis to my advisor, Will Shadish, I thought I had a solid draft and expected some feedback and edits, but nothing major. It turned out that nearly every paragraph needed work. I had sections that weren't connected to anything else. I was

redundant. I didn't do a good job explaining ideas. After the initial shock of all the changes I had in front of me, I sat down to make it better, and it got better. I got better. I still do a lot of rewriting. I still have redundancies and gaps in my logic. But I got better with practice, and you will too.

Part of becoming a better writer is appreciating the process of writing and recognizing that the process of drafting, organizing, rewriting, and editing is what produces better writing and better writers. My hobby is triathlon, which consists of races that include swimming, biking, and running. Some races are short: swim 0.5 mile, bike 13 miles, and run 3.1 miles. Some races are long: swim 1.2 miles, bike 56 miles, and run 13.1 miles. And some races are insane: swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles, and run 26.2 miles. You could show up to a short triathlon without doing much training and finish the race. It might not be pretty, but you could probably get through most of it. The longer races, however, require training, and lots of it. Just getting through a 2.4-mile swim in a lake or ocean requires a level of fitness and comfort in the open water that only training can provide. After you finish the swim, you still need enough energy to bike 112 miles and then run a marathon. If you want to finish a long triathlon, you have to train. If you want to get better at triathlon, regardless of the distance, you have to embrace training and even enjoy it. Training is how you improve, and races are where you get to see how much you've improved.

Writing is similar, except without the muscle cramps, spandex, and profuse sweating. When you get a small writing assignment, such as a reaction paper or a short-answer exam question, you can probably just show up and get through the assignment. It may not be the best writing you could produce, but it will likely get the job done. However, when you get a longer writing assignment, just showing up and hoping you'll get through it usually leads to a crappy paper. Longer papers require drafting, organizing, rewriting, and editing—these steps are training for writers. Getting better at writing of any length requires training. When I was a student, a 10-page paper made me anxious and was a complete slog. Now hardly a week goes by in which I don't write 10 pages. That transition didn't happen overnight; it's OK for writing to be hard and to take time. I finished second-to-last in my age group in my first triathlon. Since that time, I've embraced training, and last fall I was first in my age group at a local race.

Remember that practicing writing isn't only about getting through one paper. The practice is to make your paper better but also to make all of your writing better. I no longer just train for a single triathlon. To be sure, I work toward specific races and want to do well at them, but I train to be a better swimmer, cyclist, and runner. That's what makes training fun and challenging. Practice writing to become a better writer. You'll write better class papers, exam answers, and blog posts. If you go to graduate school, you'll be better prepared to write your thesis and dissertation. If you enter the workforce, you'll be better prepared to write progress reports and business plans. Most people aren't good writers—you'll stand out.

Even if you're more concerned with getting through the paper at hand than with improving your writing in general, you'll benefit from the ideas and direction in this book. To guide the discussion, I will assume that you've been assigned to write a typical psychology research paper. In this kind of paper, you focus on a single idea—for example, the biological basis of obsessive-compulsive disorder—and you review, evaluate, and synthesize the research on the topic. The examples in this book assume that your assignment requires you to review articles and books on your topic, but the examples can be generalized to papers for which you've collected data and must synthesize the new data with existing data. Furthermore, many of the topics can be generalized to other types of writing assignments, such as reaction papers. To help you adapt the material to other assignments, I have included exhibits that describe ways you can adjust the material in this book to different kinds of assignments.

This book is divided into three parts. Part I covers preparing to write. Chapter 1 covers how to develop an idea for your paper, and Chapter 2 covers how to search for background information and literature. Part II covers writing. Chapter 3 covers prewriting, including organizing your background information, developing a thesis or primary aim for your paper, and using outlines and mind maps. Chapter 4 covers how to structure a paper and how to start drafting. Chapter 5 covers revising your paper and provides tips for improving your writing. Chapter 6 covers creating a bibliography and avoiding plagiarism. I also review software options that ease the process of creating a bibliography. Part III includes

a single chapter on procrastination. Procrastination, more than any other behavior, stifles good writing. We need to talk about it.

This book is, by design, brief. I don't pretend to be exhaustive, nor do I cover all possible methods for writing a research paper. The methods I discuss in this book have worked for me and my students. If I try to write while skipping these methods—for example, if I try to write without a clear thesis in mind—then my writing suffers. I have observed the same problem with my students. Clear writing produces clear thinking, and clear writing comes from hard work. Let's get working.