

How to write a good academic paper

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1 Outline

Before you start writing the actual paper, you should prepare an outline of max. 2 pages, which contains the following:

- the title of the paper;
- the main argument of the paper (*what* are you going to argue? *how* are you going to argue it [using which sources? which empirical evidence?])
- the titles of the sections and, for each section, a few lines summarizing their content;
- an excerpt of the bibliography that you are going to use.

This outline should be sent to the professor in advance (ideally, *at least* one month before the deadline). Once you get feedback, prepare your final outline and start working from that.

2 Structure of the paper

2.1 Title, abstract, keywords

The paper must have a **title**, with your name below it.

Then there must be an **abstract** (max. 150 words) which is a single paragraph that informs about the topic, the approach used to study it, and the main conclusions reached.

After the abstract, list 3-to-5 **keywords**, separated by a comma, which identify the paper's topic and focus (e.g. "international trade, South-East Asia, child labour" or "monetary policy, EU, USA, financial crisis").

2.2 Main text

The main text of the paper should consist of:

1. an introduction
2. a theoretical section
3. an empirical section

4. a conclusion

Sections can have subsections, if needed, but not too many.

The length of each section as a percentage of the paper's total length should (approximately) be 15-25-50-10.

2.2.1 Introduction

The **introduction** must tell the reader:

- what is the topic of the paper;
- why the topic is relevant;
- what is the research question that the paper aims at answering;
- what is the main contribution that the paper makes.

2.2.2 Theoretical section

The **theoretical section** must contain a review of the main literature concerning the phenomenon you want to analyse. It can be useful to start from the literature used in the course, but it is advisable to go beyond that. [Google Scholar](#) or [Elicit](#) are useful tools to build and expand your literature section. From the contributions you review, it should be possible to derive some *hypotheses*, or at least expectations, about the phenomenon you want to analyse.

2.2.3 Empirical section(s)

The **empirical section** is the heart of the paper, the one containing your most original contribution. All the information you have collected on the phenomenon must go in this section. The information must be organized according to some criterion (thematic or temporal). All the information you give must be based on sources, data sets, or other types of personal collection (which must be duly cited, see below). While you present the empirical evidence, you must refer to what has emerged in the literature section: does the evidence match what existing theories predict?

The empirical analysis can be *qualitative*, *quantitative*, or use both approaches. Qualitative analysis implies collecting information and interpreting it (in the most rigorous way). Quantitative analysis entails collecting data and analysing it. It is advisable to try to use both approaches. The quantitative analysis need not be sophisticated. Showing some descriptive tables or (better) graphs is enough.

2.2.4 Conclusion

In the **conclusion**, you must:

- briefly summarize the content of the paper (focusing on its “takehome message”)
- tell the reader what are the theoretical and empirical implications;
 1. the theoretical implications are e.g. what we have learnt about existing theories that may explain the phenomenon you analysed, whether existing theories explain (or fail to explain) the phenomenon, and if we may need new theories (or refinements to existing ones);

2. the empirical implications are e.g. how the research you carried out informs the political debate about the phenomenon you analysed, what policymakers could learn from the conclusions of the paper.

3 Referencing and plagiarism

Every statement that is made in the paper should be based either on other authors' work (articles, book, reports, data sets, etc.) or on data or information that you have personally collected. Avoid writing long parts of text without references either to the literature or to information you have collected.

I recommend using an [author-year citation style](#). The [APA](#) style, often used in political science, is an example.

If you want to use a different citation style (e.g. providing citations in footnotes rather than in the main text using the author-year format), this is fine, as long as the same citation style is used consistently in the whole paper.

Sources should be cited *both* in the body text *and* in the bibliography at the end of the paper.

Avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism is not just copying text written from others and presenting it as yours, but also taking ideas, examples, interpretations from other sources and not acknowledging it. For a clear explanation of what constitutes plagiarism, see [here](#).

Consider that significant (i.e. more than a few words) reliance on artificial intelligence models (like ChatGPT) is equivalent to plagiarism.

Anti-plagiarism and AI writing detection software will be used to check all papers.

4 Figures and tables

Figures and tables must be numbered (1, 2, etc.). Every figure or table must have a caption (describing its content). Every figure or table must be mentioned in the main text (e.g. "As shown in Figure 2, [...]"). If a figure or table is not original (taken "as it is" from another source), the original source must be cited.

5 Writing style

The writing style should be simple, clear, and direct. Avoid long and complex sentences. If a sentence spans several lines, consider breaking it into shorter ones. Use adjectives sparingly and appropriately, avoiding overstatements, clichés, and stereotypes. Refrain from making bold statements, such as 'this phenomenon has been without doubt a tragedy' or 'the analysis proves that this theory is wrong.' It is important not to assume that the reader is an expert on the topic. Maintain some distance from it and make claims that align with the available evidence. See [this guide](#) for a collection of good practices of academic writing.