

SECTION 4: COMPLETING THE MPA RESEARCH PAPER

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Research Paper Expectations

The research paper reports on the research you conducted; presenting the summarized data, describing your analysis, presenting your findings, reporting the conclusions you have drawn from your study, and comparing your results to theories from the literature review. There are no specific requirements about the length of the research paper. However, approximately 15 pages per credit hour is the normal guideline.

You have already written the first sections of the research paper. With some revisions, the material presented in the prospectus becomes the beginning pages of the research paper. For example, the theoretical framework and substantive literature review might be expanded to include more literature you discovered as you engaged in your research. You should change the research design section to detail what you actually did, rather than what you planned to do.

Provided below is a suggested outline of the sections of the research paper and their content. The actual flow of your paper might vary somewhat from this outline, but all of the content described below should be included somewhere in the research paper document.



Student Sound Off: "Just give the approved prospectus document file a new name and use this to start your research paper. This gave me 13 pages of my final 47 page paper." Jessie, Miramar, CA

Structure of the Research Paper

The research paper consists of five main parts:

- 1) an executive summary;
- 2) the approved prospectus document that has been updated,
- 3) the presentation of your data, analysis and findings,
- 4) the conclusions drawn from your research and compared to the literature,
- 5) the reference list, and
- 6) Appendix items, if applicable.

Executive Summary

The executive summary is a one-page summary of your research paper. A reader should be able to read the executive summary and know your topic, your research questions or hypotheses, the research design and findings and recommendations from your data analysis.

Incorporating Materials from the Prospectus Document

This section starts with the previous materials you wrote in the prospectus that introduce the research topic and discuss why it is relevant to the study of public administration and public policy. Next, you update your theoretical and substantive literature reviews to include new materials uncovered during your research and to eliminate materials that no longer apply. You also should update the research design from the prospectus to reflect the data you gathered.

Revise the section to describe how you conducted your analysis. You may also need to add some information on any threats to the validity of your findings such as researcher bias, low participation rates, and changes to the program or policy while you were conducting your study. Describe what steps you took to minimize and provide an estimate of how your results might change if the threat was eliminated.



Student Sound Off: "I used the outline I put at the end of the prospectus to organize the material for my results and findings section." Terry, Las Vegas

Presentation of the Research Data and Analysis

You have done a lot of hard work gathering the data and conducting the research, in this section of the research paper you take credit for this hard work and present your original empirical results. This section of your research paper is comprised of all new information. In it, you present a summary of the data you gathered, explain the results from your analysis, and answer your research questions or accept or reject your hypotheses. It is often effective to include tables, graphs and figures that visually display your findings.

If you have gathered data from individuals through open-ended surveys or interviews, you should present the aggregated results for all participants, but also should include notable quotes from individuals that can provide supporting evidence for your conclusions. It is also important to indicate where there are differences of opinion among the participants and convey the magnitude of agreement and disagreement found between all participants.

If you analyzed quantitative data from agency records or other existing data sources, review the descriptive statistics for your variables and present the bivariate and/or multivariate statistical results. Along with the numerical results, you should interpret what the statistics mean and draw conclusions to accept or reject the hypotheses you tested.



Student Sound Off: "I had a lot of trouble getting people to respond to my survey. I contacted my faculty advisor and we worked out an alternate plan so I could finish my paper." Lorri - Tulsa, OK

Special considerations for a policy analysis research paper

For a policy analysis paper, your analysis should also include a discussion of the consequences, both intended and unintended of each alternative (who would be affected, what costs might be incurred and by whom, what benefits might be realized). This is followed by a comparison and evaluation of each alternative. In this stage of the analysis, you apply your evaluative criteria in a systematic fashion to each of your alternatives. This allows you to compare each alternative within the context of all criteria that you identified as important.

Your analysis of the policy alternatives should end with a summary of the findings using your evaluation criteria followed by a discussion of the recommended alternative and some concerns that would have to be addressed if this alternative was implemented.

Findings and Recommendations

Many students include a separate section in their paper that presents macro-level findings drawn from their research. These findings are more general and pertain to a larger population of organizations or individuals than the specific research questions and hypotheses presented in earlier sections of the paper. For example, if you were studying low-income housing policies or programs in Norman, Oklahoma, the data and analysis section presents the analysis and makes conclusions specific to Norman only. In the findings and recommendations section, you may generalize the findings from your research to low-income housing programs in general across the United States, in other countries, or at some point in the future.

In some research papers, the student will make recommendations for the specific organization or individuals they studied to implement. If you choose to do this, be sure to connect the findings from your data analysis to the suggestions you have for future courses of action. You should also identify implementation challenges likely to occur and suggest how to overcome them.



Student Sound Off: "I had trouble writing up my findings, then I realized I must start by answering my research questions. Next I compared my results to what the authors in my literature suggested showing where there were differences in practice." Sarah - Enid, OK

Conclusions and Comparison to Theoretical Literature Framework

In the last narrative section of the research paper, you compare your "real-world" findings to the theories in your literature review. It is very effective to describe where your research conforms to what other scholars have predicted as well as to make note of areas where theory has little application to practice. You may also wish to identify how the theories you used for your analytical framework can be amended or improved upon based on your experience.

In this section, you should not present new information such as data from your research or evidence to support your conclusions. It is acceptable, however, to reflect on your research experience. If you do this, be sure to place this in a paragraph separate from those presenting overarching conclusions and literature comparisons.

OU Honor Statement

At the end of the narrative section, include the OU Honor Statement:

"On my honor, I affirm that I have neither given nor received inappropriate aid in the completion of this exercise." {Student Name}

Reference List

Modify the list from the prospectus document to be a complete and accurate listing of all sources used in your project and paper.

Appendix Items

Include any support documentation that is referenced and described in the body of the document.

Submitting Your Research Paper

The length of the research paper will vary depending on the complexity of the topic and the level of detail you use to report the results of your analysis. Generally, the research paper will be 45-60 pages for a three credit hour enrollment in PSC 5950. Make sure that you carefully edit the document before you submit it to your faculty advisor.

It is best to send the research paper to your faculty advisor by email, including a courtesy copy to the MPA Program Administrator (dsnider@ou.edu). If you mail your research paper to the MPA Program Office, we suggest you use certified, express, or alternate mail services that provide a return receipt.

You can submit your research paper as soon as it is completed. However, if you received an Incomplete on PSC 5950 after you completed the prospectus, you have up to one academic year to change the grade to a Satisfactory before having to re-enroll in PSC 5950. For example, if you enrolled in PSC 5950 and your prospectus was approved in the Fall 2009 semester, but your research paper was not completed and approved by the end of that semester; you would have received a grade of Incomplete on PSC 5950 for Fall 2009. Your research paper must be approved and your PSC 5950 grade changed to a Satisfactory before the end of the Fall semester in December 2010.

Your faculty advisor will review the research paper within 14 days and provide you with feedback. Like the prospectus process, the first draft of the research paper normally requires revision. After revision, send the research paper back to your faculty advisor for further review. Continue revising and resubmitting the research paper to your faculty advisor until approved.



Student Sound Off: "I wish I had not waited so long to gather my data. It was hard to stay motivated. I should have started the minute I got the email from my faculty advisor saying that my prospectus was approved. Then I wouldn't have needed an extension." Wes, Dallas

Directions from the Director

Want to finish the last degree requirements quickly? Here's a few suggestions you can use to avoid problems other students have encountered at this stage of the MPA studies. Of course, I'm just a phone call or email away if you run into a snag.

Aimee Franklin, Director of Programs in Public Administration

- Don't lose your momentum. Even though you no longer attend classes, you should schedule those same times to work on your paper. Find a quiet spot away from the family and pretend like you are in class.
- The executive summary is a 1-page condensed version of your paper designed to get someone interested enough to read more of the remaining 45+ pages.
- Carefully re-read your approved prospectus to get clues about how to do your analysis and what results to report.
- Answer your research question or draw conclusions about the hypotheses you tested by presenting clear evidence from your data.
- A picture is worth a 1000 words, but be sure to tell the reader what they are seeing and guide their interpretation of your evidence.
- Most paper revisions require the student to compare their findings to theories in the literature review.
- A year goes by quickly when you are back in your daily routine and not going to classes. When submitting the research paper, Sooner is always better!