

How to Write a Research Article for the *American Archivist*¹

As journal of record for the Society of American Archivists, the *American Archivist* provides a forum for discussion of trends and issues in archival theory and practice both in the United States and abroad. [Click here](#) for the editorial policy.

An article for publication in the *American Archivist* is an original work that presents new knowledge. This new knowledge can be conceptualized in many ways but it is important that it builds upon already existing knowledge, adds to the discipline, and makes a convincing case for its own acceptance.

The *American Archivist* publishes research articles, case studies, perspectives, and professional resources. It also encourages articles with an international perspective.

- **Research Articles** are analytical and critical expositions based on original investigation or on a systematic review of the literature. A wide variety of subjects are encouraged.
- **Case Studies** are analytical reports of projects or activities that take place in a specific setting and offer the basis for emulation or comparison in other settings.
- **Perspectives** are commentaries, reflective or opinion pieces, addressing issues or practices that concern archivists and their constituents.
- **Professional Resources** can be annotated bibliographies, other items designed for practical use within the profession, or essays that review the developments (as opposed to the literature) in specified areas in a way that describes particular initiatives and places them in the context of broader trends.

¹ The following material is adapted from: S Nicholson, "Writing your First Scholarly Article: A Guide for Budding Authors in Librarianship," *Information Technology and Libraries* 25 (2006), 108-111, available at <http://bibliomining.com/nicholson/firstarticle.htm>; Ruth Scodel and Marilyn B. Skinner, "Publishing the Scholarly Article in Classical Studies: A Guide for New Members of the Profession," available at <http://www.apaclassics.org/Publications/publish.html>; and Department of History and Political Science Ashland University, "Guidelines for Writing Scholarly Papers," available at <http://personal.ashland.edu/~jmoser1/papers.html>. All websites accessed 23 August 2007.

Content

An old and well-tested formula for sermon-writing states:

Tell them what you want to tell them
Tell them what you have to tell them
Tell them what you've told them

This formula can also be applied to professional papers; in the first section, clearly set out your thesis or research question; in the second section, explain your research or thesis in as much detail as you can, supporting it with previously published research or studies; in the conclusion, sum up what you have been talking about.

Topic

A research article should deal with one, and only one, fairly narrow issue, presenting your arguments and conclusions as succinctly as possible. Keep your thesis firmly in mind and avoid digressions. While your research must be original in that it is trying to present new knowledge, at the same time, it is building on the work and ideas of others. Your research may take many different forms. It may be a historical examination of a particular topic, it may be a quantitative study, or it may be a case study that supports your thesis. Whatever form the research takes, the paper must make a convincing case for your argument.

Structure

Abstract

All articles should be accompanied by a 100-word abstract.

Introductory Material

This first section of the paper should clearly set out the question that the paper addresses, how you plan to address it, and why it is worth addressing in the first place. This section should include:

- A general introductory paragraph
- A thesis statement or a summary of your main point that concisely states what you are trying to demonstrate and how you plan to demonstrate it.
- Background Information: Providing as much context for the study as possible is important for the reader. You may know everything about this topic but it may be new to your audience. Background information may include history, definitions, methodology and any other information that the reader needs to know in order to understand your topic and your approach.

Literature Review

Scholarship is an iterative process. Research and studies that you publish are one brick in an ever-rising wall. Your brick will be placed upon the research of others and other researchers will then use your brick as a part of their base. Related literature provides context for your study and often demonstrates how a particular topic has developed within the discipline. You may also wish to replicate studies initiated by others. For these and other reasons it is essential to begin any research article with a review of the related literature. If you do not explicitly discuss how your scholarship relates to the scholarship of others, only those familiar with the literature will be able to understand how your work fits in with others. It is also easier for others to build upon your work if they have a better idea of the professional landscape into which your work fits.

Methodology

Depending on the type of paper you are writing, you may want a section that describes your methodology or how you gathered or analyzed your data.

Main body of the paper

This is the meat of the paper. Depending on the type of paper you are writing it could be the case study, the quantitative findings, the qualitative history, or the actual points of discussion.

One way to develop the body of the article is to develop an outline of headings and sub-headings. Beginning with an outline forces you to think through your entire article and can help you identify any holes in your presentation. Once you have the outline completed, you can then fill in the outline by adding text to the headings and subheadings.

Conclusion

Depending on the nature of the paper, the conclusion could be a summary of findings or draw conclusions from the materials you have presented. The conclusion should flow logically from the rest of the essay, but it should be more than simply a restatement of what you have done. It might summarize the main points and could also suggest further research and investigation or a call to action.

Things to Avoid²

Contractions: Words like “didn’t,” “couldn’t,” and “wouldn’t” should not appear in professional writing. Use the full words instead.

Passive Voice: “Washington chopped down the cherry tree” is clearer and more concise than “The cherry tree was chopped down by George Washington.” The former is simple and straightforward; the latter is wordy and clumsy. Passive voice often blurs responsibility and accountability and is frequently found in bureaucratic writing for these reasons. Occasionally you will have no choice but to use passive—for instance, when the subject of the sentence is unknown—but in most cases you should use the active voice.

² This section is adapted “Guidelines for Writing Scholarly Papers.”

First or Second Person: In professional writing, the author is assumed to have “distance” from his or her subject. In general, you should write as an outside observer, not a participant, and you should treat the reader in the same way. Pronouns such as *I* or *we* may be suitable for reporting research results or case studies. The pronoun *you* is usually inappropriate.

Incomplete Sentences: Every sentence must have a subject and a verb, unless it is part of a direct quote. There are no other exceptions to this rule.

Imprecise Language: Use words that express your point exactly. For example, if you write, “Theodore Roosevelt was a good president,” the reader will probably be left wondering what you mean. You might mean he was effective, strong, or morally upright.

Excessive Wordiness: Do not use more words than you absolutely need to make your point. For instance, do not write “Queen Elizabeth was a woman who knew how to rule” when “Queen Elizabeth knew how to rule” will work just as well. Do not write “time period,” when either “time” or “period” will suffice. Do not write “due to the fact that,” when a simple “because” will do, or “in order to make your point” when “to make your point” will suffice. Sentences often begin, “There is something that acts.” Shorten and clarify by stating, “Something acts.”

Excessive Quotation: Often writers who have yet to develop their own “voice” have a tendency to use a lot of direct quotes from other authors. This is tedious for the reader, and likely to leave him wondering whether you have anything original to say. Wherever possible, paraphrase the work of other authors instead of quoting them directly.

Style

The *American Archivist* will debut a new graphic design in spring 2011, which will make the switch from footnotes to end notes. End notes should conform to standard bibliographic style found in the latest edition of [Chicago Manual of Style](#). Our copyeditor is very helpful with citation style. For websites, please use the following form to note the date when it was accessed: *accessed day month year*.

Proofreading

The first draft is never the last. Review what you have written again and again, until you are completely satisfied with the result. Ask yourself some hard questions: Is my introductory paragraph sufficiently enticing to the reader? Are all of my statements (and particularly my thesis statement) clear and easily understood? Have I given the reader enough background to understand my argument? Do all of my points of discussion back up what I said in the thesis statement? Does my concluding paragraph follow logically from the rest of the essay? Before finally submitting the paper it is often helpful to have someone else read and critique it for you.