
Writing Up Your Oral History Project

Criminology 321 / Fall 2010

The basic process we're following in the term research project is a very generic one: you (a) decide on a research question; (b) gather information to address the question; (c) make some conclusions on the basis of what you've found; and (d) take a step back to examine the strengths and weaknesses of what you've done.

Your final report will be much like a journal article, and should follow that basic format. The one slightly different twist is to remind you that you're doing this project as part of a *methods* course, so remember that our interest is less in the findings *per se* than in the methodological issues you encountered, how they were addressed, the research choices you made and why, and a rationale for why you came to the conclusions you did.

As outlined in the course syllabus, your final paper will be no more than 6000 words (about 20 pages of double-spaced, size 12-font; the 20 pages excludes tables, figures and appendices). Only 20 pages will be read, so please do not exceed the maximum or start playing with font sizes and such. The message such ploys convey is that you are submitting a first draft and have not spent time editing and revising your work into a polished final product and must therefore play with margins and fonts to cover what you neglected to do yourself.

Your paper should include the following sections:

1. A **Title Page**, with a **title** that conveys the subject matter in 15 words or less. Do not call it anything like "Crim 321 Project" (this gives no information about content), or "An Oral History" (not specific enough). A title like "From Baghra to Burnaby: One Immigrant's Tale " is much better; right away, the reader has more of an idea what it's about. Your name, student number, tutorial group number and/or time, and the name of your professor and TA also should appear somewhere on this page. [This page does not count as one of your 20.]
2. An **Abstract**. This first page after your title page will summarize your project – its central focus, your research question, basic results, and main conclusion(s) – in 100-175 words. It should be a logical summary that reflects the flow of your paper. If your abstract is not concise, easy to read, and does not "tell a story," then your paper probably isn't very well done or organized either. [*A Hint: Most people write the abstract last, after the paper has been written, so that it ends up being a précis of what you've already done.*] [This page does not count as one of your 20.]

At this point the main body of your paper will begin and the page total and word count begins as well.

Because qualitative research is a very diverse category with practitioners from many different disciplinary and epistemological traditions, there is no one model of paper that is universal in the same way that psychologists can point to the APA publication manual. One of Howie Becker's dicta is the "every paper must find its own form." Nonetheless, students want to know – and appropriately so – what the expectations for a paper are, and so we've prepared the

specifications below as a set of “typical case” guidelines. If you find the guidelines really do not fit your paper, you should talk to your TA about whether she agrees and see what suggestions she might have to help you out. And even if you decide on a somewhat different form – amalgamating your methods and results sections, for example, rather than leaving them separate – you should know that the kinds of information we identify for inclusion below are indeed things we will be looking for in your report.

That said, let’s begin: Normally you would put the title and your name at the top again, leave a space or two, and then get into the following:

- 3. Introduction (2-3 pages).** Your introduction does exactly that – it introduces us to your research project: what it is, what some relevant literature says on the topic, what your guiding research question(s) or objective(s) was/were when you commenced your project, and how that evolved over time (if it did). If you tell your story well enough, by the time we get to the end of your introduction, it should be obvious why we should be interested in your research – both because of its intrinsic value to you as well as some larger picture/context/issue that your case study connects with. You should give enough of the literature to contextualize your project, but, for this exercise, it needn’t be an exhaustive literature review. A basic reference list might include something like 6-10 content-related scholarly entries (articles, books – Wikipedia doesn’t count); we will expect a minimum of 6. As is the case with the title, be quite specific about the research question you decided to address in your research, as the marking of the paper will be influenced highly by how well your research decisions served to actually answer that question or address that objective. For a 20-page paper, your intro will probably be 2-3 pages long.
- 4. Methods (2-4 pages).** This section will include a description of how you went about doing your oral history and identifying a research question (your **procedures**), some of the research decisions you had to make, and why it made sense to you to make the decisions you did. This would include mention of any preliminary work you did to identify and perhaps prepare your research participant(s), as well as whatever steps you took to sharpen your research question(s) and/or that shaped your research question(s). Also to be included would be a description of your data sources – who was/were your main participant(s) and how/why did you decide on that/those person(s)? How much time did you spend interviewing? Was it all one session or did you do multiple sessions with the same person? Where did you complete them? And were there any special reasons for choosing that setting? Were there any other people that you decided to interview? Did you gather information (e.g., archival sources; photographs, newspaper stories) from any other data sources? Why were they appropriate? What did they add? Were there any important ethical issues that arose? In the process, you might refer to some of the methodological literature if it is relevant – perhaps a chapter from the text, or one of our web readings, or some lecture material.

A copy of any **research instruments** you utilized (any thematic coding scheme you developed, list of questions or themes you had for your interviews) should be included in an Appendix. You should explain your methods well enough so that the tie between your research question and your methods is clear, i.e., you are describing what plan you had to address your research question and why it was appropriate. For a 20-

page paper of this sort (i.e., for a methods course), your methods section will probably be 2-4 pages long excluding any research instruments (which will be in an Appendix).

5. **Results (5-7 pages).** The first thing to do here is describe your research setting and focal participant(s) using whatever descriptive data you feel will give the reader a good sense of who your participant(s) were. This is also the place to present any reliability/validity information/data that you have gathered or noticed (e.g., any special procedures you followed and/or observations you might have about why you are convinced – if you are – about the validity of your information, or what you did to help do that).

Because this is a qualitative course and much of your data will be in the form of observational field notes and possibly interview tapes and transcripts, you may want to quote from your field notes, or report a particularly interesting occurrence or perhaps include one or more quotes from your research participant(s). Feel free to include these, but be selective – don't try and include all your data; pick descriptions and/or quotes that help you illustrate analytical points – but make sure over the course of the paper as a whole that you quote a variety of incidents (i.e., so that you are not describing the same event again and again).

Use narrative, table(s) or graph(s) as appropriate – and try and *summarize* information into as few of these as possible. Remember, space is important, so try and make your presentation as simple and compact as possible. Use any graphs/tables/figures to help your reader make sense of the data, but only present them if they are an important part of making a point you want to make, not because you have the data and thought you might as well graph it. Avoid redundancy; if the information is in a table or graph, don't then describe all the information again in the body of the paper. *Either* present it in the narrative *or* in a table, but not both, *unless* you are presenting a lot of data in a table, and are only using the narrative to isolate highlights.

For a paper of this sort, your results section is likely to be 5-7 pages long, depending on the complexity of your analysis, excluding any figures and tables.

6. **Conclusions (1-3 pages).** Begin with a statement that summarizes your main findings in relation to your research question (e.g., "I set out to do a complete life history of my grandfather but was captivated by his departure from Poland when the Nazis invaded and the path that took him to Canada at the end of the Second World War.") From there you summarize your main conclusions and, in the process, reconnect with the literature in order to place your paper/research back into the broader context that you outlined in the introduction. Consistencies or inconsistencies with findings in the literature should be noted.

This part of your paper should be relatively short and to the point, i.e., perhaps 1 to 3 pages.

7. **Discussion and Suggestions for Further Research (6-8 pages).** Once your basic conclusions have been stated, now is your chance to take a step back and examine the strengths and limitations of what you've done. In what ways is your project/analysis a good one in giving you an answer to your question? What did you do right? But also, what are some of the limitations that should be taken into account?

Included here should be a consideration of any rival plausible explanations of the results you observed; what other interpretations could be made of your data, and/or what other inferences could be drawn. And why was yours the most plausible explanation that could be offered?

With a realistic assessment of the strengths and limitations of your research behind you, many papers would then go on to discuss the implications of their research for knowledge, policy, future research – whichever was relevant/appropriate for your particular research.

Finally, if you had to do it all over again, knowing what you know now, what could you do better, i.e., what lessons did you learn that would allow you to create a better piece of research? Also, if you were now going to start on another research project in this same general area, where would you go next? Any good piece of research will raise as many questions as it answers; what are some that arose from your research?

The discussion is likely to be the longest section of your paper; out of 20 pages it will probably occupy 6-8.

8. **References.** In the body of the report itself, you will have included references to sources whenever you refer back to earlier research, or whenever you cite an idea or finding that is not your own. You would do this by saying things like, "Ratel (2003) found that...", or "These factors have already been considered by other researchers in the area (e.g., Carleton, 2005; Zamboni, 1999)." Whenever you actually quote a source, you should also give the page number on which the quote can be found; for example, "When writing about her work, Hildebrand (2007) said 'We should always consider the context in which the information was produced' (p.283)." Only those sources that you actually cite in the body of the manuscript should appear in the reference list at the end, which will be in alphabetical order. See any publication manual or the references in any journal article, to determine the appropriate format for the various kinds of sources you have (e.g., books, articles in books, journal articles, government reports, newspaper articles, web pages). You can use any major referencing style – APA, ASA and Canadian legal/historical styles are the most common in criminology – but once you've made your choice, stick with it and be consistent.
9. **Appendices.** This includes any supplementary material you wish to include that was not appropriate to put in the main body of the report, perhaps because it was too long and would have distracted from the flow of the paper, or because you want to put it in for information purposes (e.g., a list of your content coding themes or preliminary interview questions).

The Title Page, Abstract, Introduction, References, and Appendices all begin on new pages. The other sections (Methods, Results and Discussion) begin on the same page as the preceding section if there is space. All sections of the report are double-spaced except for the references, which are single-spaced.

Although it may sound like a lot, 20 double-spaced pages is not very long. You will in all likelihood find it very challenging to consider all that you need to consider in that space. Doing a good job of it requires that you reduce clutter and needless frills, have a good sense of what is important and what is not, and sticking only to what is important to telling your story. Although

the above structure will be appropriate for most papers, in some cases it may impose a structure that gets in the way of, rather than facilitates, the telling of your story. If that's the case with your research, then you should always feel free to adapt structures – the main objective is to tell your story in an effective way, not to fit some predetermined mold of what a paper has to look like.

A few last admonitions:

- When writing your paper in the paper-writing frenzy of the last two weeks of class, always keep an updated back-up copy on disk, and keep occasional hard copies. "I accidentally deleted my file," or "My hard drive froze" are not excuses that will gain you a sympathetic ear. It happens to someone every year; make sure you're not this year's victim of the Computer Gods.
- Use double spacing throughout the paper (except for references), and leave enough of a margin for comments (at least 1.25 inches all around);
- Use 12-size font (preferably Times New Roman, Arial or Calibri);
- Staple your paper together so that pages do not get lost;
- Number all your pages and use a header that reflects paper content;
- If you want to do well, do *not* hand in a first draft. Expect to do at least two drafts [a characteristic of effective writers is that they are compulsive about getting it "right"]. Get a friend to read it in exchange for you reading theirs. There's nothing like a new set of eyes looking at your paper to help you find things that are redundant, not explained clearly enough, or omitted, that will make your paper a better paper.
- And last, when you hand in your paper, feel free to use any sort of folder you want if you're someone who likes to make it look pretty, but please do *not* use those ones with the plastic spines and plastic cover sheets. When you get a stack of 50 or more papers to mark, the plastic is too slippery and they end up falling all over the place.

Delivery

No electronic submissions are allowed for the final paper. A hard copy of your paper is due by no later than 4:00 P.M. on the day of our last class – Monday, 06 December 2010 – and must be handed in directly to Rebecca Carleton (your TA), Dr. Palys (your professor), or the Criminology General Office, so that they can be dated. Late papers lose 10% per day. The weekend counts as one day. Do not stick a paper directly in anyone's mailbox or under an office door; if you do so, it will be dated on whatever day the person whose door you stick it under picks it up.

A Note Regarding Academic (Dis)honesty

Keep copies of all your field notes, interview tapes, and whatever else you produce that will verify you actually did the research. There have been instances in the past where students have fabricated research projects; those who were caught are no longer at SFU. If suspicions arise about your project, you will be asked to produce evidence verifying your work, and the onus will be on you to show that you did indeed do what you claim. Hang on to all your research materials until you have received a final grade in the course.