Organization for Primary Research Papers

A primary research paper is based on data that you collected on your own – either through surveys, interviews, experiments, or other means. A secondary research paper is based on data that other people collected and that you merely quote – this includes library research, web-based research, and so on.

Primary research papers have a special kind of organization in most academic contexts. Rather than following the basic 5-paragraph essay format, they follow a different format, as described below:

Introduction. This may be only one paragraph, or it may be several paragraphs in a longer paper. A primary research introduction needs to do four things:

1. Get the reader’s attention. Usually this is done by explaining why this topic is significant. The writer wants to show that there is a problem (it may be a physical problem, a social problem, or simply a problem of lack of knowledge) and that it has significant effects.

2. Provide background knowledge. If the paper is written for a general audience, the background information should describe the topic and some important key words. If the paper is written for an audience of peers who already know about this topic, then the background information might summarize what other scholars have already had to say about this topic.

3. Explain the research question that motivated you to do the primary research. The research question is usually stated as a noun clause, or embedded question, inside a statement sentence. It is not usually written as a direct question.

4. Make a claim about this research question. You could do this in two ways: 1. Summarize the results here in the introduction. 2. Don’t summarize, but restate why the results are important. You could say that they are “controversial” or “surprising” “complicated” or that they “should change the way we think about this topic.” Your claim should motivate your readers to keep reading.

3. and 4. are usually written together in the same sentence, and serve as the “thesis” statement for the primary research paper. Here are two examples. The noun clauses which indicate the research question are written in italics:

Example A. “In an effort to find out what motivates successful business owners, I surveyed ten local businessmen and women and discovered that nine out of ten attributed their success to the influence of powerful role models in their lives.” [includes summary of results]

Example B. “The results suggest that what motivates successful business owners is not money at all; in fact, these findings may transform our perceptions of these hardworking individuals.”
**Methods.** This section may be one paragraph or several, but for this assignment you only need to write one. A methods paragraph describes what the researcher/writer did to get her data. In a science experiment, the methods section will describe the process of the experiment, usually using the passive voice. In a survey, the methods section will describe the following items:

- where and how the researcher collected the data (on campus, over email, through Skype, etc.)
- how many people were surveyed
- a description of the participants.

Of course, it’s impossible to describe everything about the people you surveyed, but you should indicate the details that are relevant to your research. Some of the most commonly reported personal details are listed below:

- Gender
- Age
- Nationality
- Occupation (“student” is an occupation!)
- Years spent in occupation (for students, this would mean their “year”)
- Major (for students)

The personal data are usually reported as a percentage, not a list. For example, if you interviewed 5 people and you wanted to indicate their occupation, you wouldn’t say “One survey respondent was a female dentist, one was a male teacher, two were male students, and one was a female student.” Instead, you might say, “20% of the survey respondents were dentists, another 20% were teachers, and the remaining 60% were still in school. 60% of the respondents were male and 40% were female.”

**Results.** This is the section where you actually get to report your data! It is usually the longest section of your paper – usually one paragraph for each survey question. Here are four principles to guide your results section:

1. It’s a good idea to write one paragraph in your results section for each survey question. The first sentence in each paragraph should summarize the survey question. It’s generally better to write the question as a noun clause, not as a direct question.

2. Next, report the answers for that question as a percentage. If you are comparing two groups, you should report a separate percentage for each group. You may want to illustrate some of the answers by including a quote or paraphrase of one of the answers. Some writers choose to use charts and graphs to illustrate their data.

3. You need to explain the data in your own words. Whenever you use a quote or a statistic, you need to have *at least* one sentence of your own after it to explain what it means (maybe more than one!). Otherwise, your reader will get lost.

4. You should not include your own opinion here in the results section. That will come later. Here, just be as objective as you can.
**Discussion.** This is the section where you get to bring it all together and share your opinion about what you’ve learned! In fact, this is the ONLY section where you really get to share your opinion. Here are seven things that writers often do in their discussion sections:

1. Summarize the results
2. Highlight the most interesting results
3. Try provide reasons that explain the most interesting results
4. Compare your results to ideas from others or research from others (especially if you mentioned it in your introduction)
5. Mention some limitations or problems with your study
6. Suggest ideas for future research on the same topic
7. Emphasize the importance of the study

**Appendix.** This is where you attach your survey questions. They should be left blank in the appendix.

**References.** If you mentioned any other sources in your introduction or your discussion section, you should write an APA reference for them and list it here.