RESEARCH PAPER

*A research paper communicates the results of research: the systematic inquiry into a subject to create new knowledge and/or to use existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, and understandings. It presents a question about a complex world, and the author’s process to answer the question in a logical manner.*

There are many different ways to organize an effective research paper, depending on the analytical framework that the author uses to investigate the question. Students should talk with their Project Advisor (PA) about the organization that makes the most sense for their individual Strategic Research Requirement (SRR). Below is a guide that will be useful for most research papers that students will complete at the USAWC.

**Introduction**

The introduction should allow the reader to quickly understand what the research project is about, and why that topic is important enough for the reader to understand the results of this research. Research is fundamentally different from an editorial or opinion essay (in which the author states a preconceived thesis and then argues that their thesis is correct). In research, the author poses a question to which (prior to conducting the research) they did not know the answer, then presents the evidence that led them to a particular thesis. As such, the introduction should be the last part of the paper that the author writes: after they have completed their analysis and developed recommendations on the basis of their research.

The introduction should include a hook that grabs the audience’s attention and makes them want to continue reading. A reader should understand why the topic is important enough for someone to commit the effort of research to it. The introduction must clearly state the question that the researcher is attempting to answer with this project. It should also describe the answer that the researcher came to as a result of their analysis. Typically, the introduction ends with a roadmap of how the author has organized the rest of the paper.

**Background**

The background section frames the problem or puzzle that the author is addressing. It gives an intelligent reader who may have no previous experience with this issue enough information to understand the context. It describes why the issue is puzzling or challenging, and how events have transpired in the past that impact the present day. Usually, the background also describes the work that other subject matter experts have done that relates to the puzzle, and why that prior work is not adequate to answer the specific research question that is the subject of this project.

**Analytical Framework (or “Methodology”)**

This section explains how the author will attempt to answer the research question. Since research is, by definition, a systematic inquiry, this section explains what system the author has chosen to use and why. At the USAWC, many projects use an Operational Design framework to study a problem. Many others compare different case studies, in which they select three to four criteria by which they assess each case (e.g., different strategies or choices by strategic leaders) and then compare the results of each case against those criteria.

In many research projects, the researcher begins with a hypothesis (educated guess) about what the answer to their research question will be, and then tests that hypothesis against the available evidence. Often the most convincing answers come from a framework where the author attempts to rigorously prove that their hypothesis is wrong; after which, if all the evidence still points to the hypothesis being true, then there is strong reason to believe that it must be so. This section explains the author’s hypothesis and the ways they will try to disprove it.

**Evidence**

After explaining the analytical framework in the previous section, the evidence section adds the information to the framework. If the author is comparing different case studies against specific criteria, in this section they will explain the cases and how each one “scores” for the different criteria. In a simple example, a project that sought to understand whether the attack is stronger than the defense might include a series of battles and assess whether the attacker or defender most often wins. The evidence section would include a brief description of each battle and a clear statement of which side won and lost.

**Analysis**

The analysis section is where the author interprets the results of the evidence. When one filters the best available evidence through the analytical framework, what does it tell the researcher? What is the answer to the research question? Most often, the evidence could point in more than one direction; in this section the author should help readers to understand which direction is the most convincing and why.

**Recommendations and Risk**

Given the answer that the analysis provides to the research question, what should someone do based on the answer to the question? Who should do it? What should strategic leaders definitely not do now that they know the answer to the research question. What are the risks of implementing your proposed recommendation(s)? Are there ways to mitigate those risks? Conversely, what are the risks of doing the wrong thing, or nothing at all?

**Conclusion**

The conclusion should briefly summarize the argument that the author has made, and then suggest ways that others can provide even more new knowledge about this important topic. What else would be useful to understand about the issue? It describes new questions that may have arisen as a result of this project, or that might arise in the future given new developments in the world. This is the section that future USAWC students will look to in order to develop their own research questions.