

---

# COUNSELLING & PSYCHOTHERAPY RESEARCH

## WRITING A PAPER FOR PUBLICATION IN CPR

---

### **1. Think 'journey'**

A good research paper is like a journey of discovery: you've set out to find some answers to a question, and each section of the paper is a stage on the journey towards finding some answers:

- Introduction – why this question is of value
- Literature review – how other people have answered it
- Method – how you will try and answer it
- Results/Findings – what you have found out
- Discussion – what your findings mean, and how they relate to previous findings
- Conclusion - a summary of what you have discovered

### **2. Is it coherent?**

Each of these sections should be logically linked, so that, if all is as it should be, you should be able to 'reduce' your paper down to a single, coherent story of not more than a paragraph or so. Below is a fictional example:

This study is interested in looking at whether person-centred practitioners think that using chair-work can help their counselling practice [title]. This is an important question because a number of person-centred counsellors, such as Gendlin, are moving towards a more active and interventionist approach [introduction]. Greenberg has shown that the use of chair work within a primarily person-centred relationship can lead to positive post-session outcomes, but his work is primarily quantitative and does not provide a more holistic evaluation of this intervention [literature review]. For this reason, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with ten person-centred counsellors who have used chair-work, to find out how effective they thought these interventions were. I found these counsellors through placing a small notice in the newsletter of the British Person-Centred Association [method]. Respondents were generally positive in their assessment of this style of intervention, though a few concerns were raised. Ninety per cent said that, at some point, they had found chair-work interventions useful. The main reason for this was that it helped the client through a block (40%), helped the client to identify different aspects of themselves (32%), and brought some life back into the counselling environment (10%). On the other hand, 15% of the respondents said that, at some point, a chair-work based intervention had interfered with the therapeutic process. The main reason for this was that it made the client feel embarrassed, and in one case the client actually left counselling as a result [results]. It would seem, then, that Greenberg and others are right that chair work can be very useful as an adjunct to person-centred therapy, however there may be some contraindications of this approach [discussion]. It would seem, then, that person-centred practitioners generally feel that chair-work is of benefit, but there may be some contraindications [conclusion].

If you are struggling with your paper, have a go at summarising it in this way. If you find it almost impossible to do so, it may be that the coherence of your paper is wilting, and that you have just too many different strands of thought involved. This is one of the biggest problems that potential writers often face when writing papers for publication. Sometimes, by the time they get to their conclusion, what they write has virtually nothing to do with the question they set out for themselves at the beginning.

If you find that you have this problem, go back through your paper and ask yourself this question: 'Does what I'm writing here help me answer the question that I set myself'. Keep on checking it back with your title – is it really helping you address it, or is it just in there because you've worked so hard on it that you don't want to chuck it out. Remember that sometimes you will need to be brutal, and drop material that you really think is interesting, or that you spent ages working on.

### **Try the 'cafe test'**

*Imagine that you are sitting in a cafe chatting to someone and they ask you your research question. What would you say to them? You might want to actually try that with a friend and record your answer – because often that is the most succinct summary of your research and your findings that you'll give. Note if the answer that you give to that question is very different from the way that you have written your paper. Often, when people write up their work, they feel a need to 'prove themselves' by including lots of complex points; but, at the end of the day, you are simply asking yourself a question and trying to find an answer, and the kind of non-technical answer you would give in a casual situation may give you the best indication of what your write-up should look like. Also, note if you start diverging a lot from the question you have been asked. If you do this with a friend, really encourage them to try and challenge you to stick to the question – that can really help you to re-focus your thesis. If you need to change your question to a certain extent, that is fine, but it's essential that the question and answers match.*

### **3. Make the most of your own results**

Another way in which potential writers often undermine their work is by not making enough of their own results. This can happen through a lack of confidence, such that new researchers particularly don't really believe in what they have found out for themselves; or because they are so involved in the theoretical arguments presented in the literature review that they'd rather just go on discussing them in the paper. But your results are the crux of your study, they are what you have discovered, and what you are contributing to the world of knowledge. So you need to show here that you have found something of interest, and in discussing it you need to show how it moves current thinking forward.

### **4. Use supervision**

If you're feeling that things are going wrong and you're not quite sure what you're doing, it can be very tempting to avoid contacting your research supervisor if you have one, or a co-author or colleague. You don't want to bother them, you think you'll look incompetent, or you think that they will have had enough of you. Far better to just struggle on, submit what you end up with, and hope the journal's Editor won't notice all the confusion and flaws in your work.

Tempting... but potentially disastrous. Your supervisor, co-authors or colleagues may have a very good idea of what the journal is looking for. It is always important to read the Instructions for Authors carefully. It is not worth submitting a paper for consideration if you haven't followed what the journal is asking for in submissions. You run the risk of your paper being rejected before it is even reviewed.

### **5. Get support from fellow researchers**

It can be a somewhat lonesome process writing a research paper, so try to keep in contact with fellow researchers, practitioners and other colleagues, to provide each other with mutual support. Talk through your paper, ask colleagues to read sections of it, and invite constructive, critical feedback. Again, it may seem daunting – what if they don't like it – but far better that problems are raised at this stage than when you submit.

## 6. Finally, some common things to watch out for:

### General

- Use headings and subheadings in each of the sections to keep a clear structure to the paper.
- Make sure you use APA format for your referencing. online and in the Instructions for Authors for the key features of this format, and also look through your paper to ensure that your formatting is consistent. In particular:
  - Give page numbers for any direct quotes (preceded by 'p.', not colons)
  - Don't give initials for authors (except where two or more have similar surnames and dates)
  - Use double spaced lines
  - Don't italicise quotes, but do indent long quotes
- Avoid colloquial/informal phrases, for instance: 'It is no surprise that...' 'The results were OK, but...'
- Make sure that you have read through some papers in *CPR*, and check the formatting and style of your paper against it. Content, style and formatting should match as closely as possible.

### Abstract

- In your *Abstract*, don't overview what you are going to say (e.g., 'The discussion looks at key limitations of the research...') but state clearly what your main findings/points are (e.g., 'Key limitations of the study were the small sample size, the lack of adequate randomisation...')
- Don't put references in the abstract.
- Structure your abstract using appropriate sub-headings drawn from your paper, e.g. *background, aims, method, results/findings, discussion, conclusions, implications for practice.*

### Literature review

- Make sure that your literature review is focused *specifically* on the question that you are asking: providing an a priori review of what we know *so far*.
- Make sure you explicitly state somewhere, either at the end of the literature review or in your design, what the main aims/objectives of your study are, and, if relevant, your hypothesis/hypotheses.

### Method (not methodology)

- In your *Methods* section, use the standard sections for a research report unless there is a good reason not to. Basic sections, in approximately this order, tend to be:
  - Design (a brief, fairly technical statement of the overall approach used). You can also say something here about your underlying epistemological assumptions.
  - Participants
  - Procedures
  - Instruments/Measures
  - Data analysis
- In the participant section, DO give sufficient details about participants: for instance, gender, age (mean and range), ethnicity, and any other details that are essential to making sense of the findings (e.g., therapists' theoretical orientation). If you don't have enough data to comment on one of these areas, be transparent about that.
- To demonstrate an in-depth understanding of your methodology, it is important to have a few paragraphs somewhere in the methods about the underlying epistemological assumptions on which your research is based.
- Say something reflexive about where *you* are coming from as a researcher: this should be less of a biography, and more something which points out to the reader what your potential biases might be.

### *Qualitative analysis*

- It is generally a good idea to give a table of the overall structure of your analysis and themes/subthemes at the start of your results section. However, if you give a table, you must ensure that the wording of the themes/subthemes on the table match, *exactly*, the headings/subheadings in your narrative account of the results.
- In a narrative account of qualitative data, it's generally a good idea to use subheadings to break the analysis up, and to make it clear to the reader where they are in the account. For sub-themes/sub-sub-themes, you can also think about italicising the title (making sure it matches what is in the table) to help orientate the reader.
- Make sure that integrate/summarise, in your own words, what participants are saying as much as possible, and don't just give a series of quotes. It's fine to give quotes to illustrate certain points or just to give examples of what respondents are saying, but this shouldn't be a substitute for giving a thorough and comprehensive review of the data yourself.

### *Quantitative analysis*

- Rather than just presenting stats and leaving it to the reader to interpret it, make sure you explicitly state what your findings mean (e.g., 'Chi-squared tests indicate that men were significantly more likely than women to...'). In particular, be clear about which group was higher/lower than which.
- In describing your findings, use precise language. Is it 'significant'/'non-significant'?, refer to the specific effect size and stats: not 'This seems to indicate that men were a bit more empathic than women' but 'Men were significantly more empathic than women ( $F = \dots$ ).
- Remember that, if you are using inferential tests, something is either significant or not. You can generally just about get away with talking about a 'trend' if the p value is between .1 and .05, but be very cautious; and make sure you don't spend a lot of time interpreting or discussing non-significant findings.
- Remember that, with the vast majority of statistical tests, you cannot *prove* the null hypothesis, so be sure to avoid phrases like: 'This indicates that men and women had equivalent levels of empathy,' rather 'the difference in levels of empathy between men and women was non-significant.'
- Although graphs can look pretty (especially with lots of colours!), tables are often a more precise means of presenting data, and generally mean that you can present much more data at once.
- It's rarely a good idea to just cut-and-paste SPSS tables – better to re-enter the data as a Word table so that you can get the formatting of the table appropriate to the journal.

### **Discussion**

- As with all other parts of your paper, make sure that your discussion is actually discussing the question that you set out to ask.
- Include something about the limitations of the study.
- What did you learn from it?

### **Then be patient**

If your paper is sent out for review, this process can take several weeks, and at busy times a couple of months. It won't help hassling the Editor for feedback. Have confidence that as soon as the Editor has received reviews for your paper or some additional feedback to offer, it will be sent to you.

### **And Finally...**

If your paper is accepted for publication, be proud of your achievement and of the contribution you are making to our understanding of counselling and psychotherapy research. If it is not accepted, don't be too downhearted. This happens to even the most experienced researchers. You will learn something from the process, and will have at least two peer reviews to help develop your writing in the future. All will not be lost.

Reproduced and amended courtesy of the University of Strathclyde