

Guidelines for the Graduation Research Paper (GRP)
Approved by MPA Faculty May 2007

The Graduation Research Paper (GRP) is the capstone project for the MPA degree. This paper has an applied focus on a problem relevant to the practice or study of public administration.

We suggest using one of the four following formats as approaches to your paper.

Format 1: A “Traditional” Original Research Paper

This format is the one that you were taught in Research Design class. A student writing this paper would ask a specific research question, design a study and gather original data (or secondary data), and analyze the data in order to answer the question. Your research question should focus on a topic area of importance in public administration. An example of this approach would be a paper focused on examining attitudes toward the Americans with Disabilities Act in Alabama using survey data.

Suggested Outline

I. Introduction

This section gives an overview of the main themes in the paper and gives a brief preview of what the essay will cover. This section also clearly states the research question(s) that the paper will address. As a general rule, you should write your introduction LAST.

II. Literature Review

This section provides an organized exposition of the ideas and scholarly sources that the student used to develop his/her own ideas for the paper. The literature review should provide a summary of what scholarly work has been done on the student’s area of research and also should demonstrate *how* the student’s work compliments or fits into this existing body of knowledge.

III. Data and Methods

In this section, the student writes a description of the data that she gathered for the project along with a description of the methodology used to analyze the data and sampling procedure.

NOTE: Remember, if you will be using any data from interviews with human subjects or observations of human subjects in your analysis, you must first get IRB approval.

IV. Empirical Findings

This section is the heart of a tradition research paper. Here you will report the findings from your data analysis. In this part of the paper, you need to draw clear connections between your original research question and the empirical findings. What is the result? How do these empirical findings answer your question?

In this section you also should address any conflicting evidence or limitations in your study. While students think that this weakens their work, it actually strengthens it. By humbly acknowledging the limitations of your work, the reader gets a “truer” picture of your research.

V. Conclusion

This section should summarize your paper and its major findings. You should also speculate about the directions future research ought to take in light of your findings. ****IMPORTANT:** Your conclusion should also devote some significant space to a discussion of the implications of your work for decision makers or decision making in the topic area. For example if you paper found that there is a relationship between civic engagement and economic development what implications does that have for decision makers interested in promoting economic development? What implications does it have for policy designed to enhance civic engagement? What are the broader implications for the field of public administration?

Format 2: An Applied Organizational Case Study

Students that wish to use their coursework knowledge and apply it to a real organizational context would use this format. An example of this approach might be an application of Mintzberg’s model of organizational structure to a public agency.

Suggested Outline

I. Introduction

This section gives an overview of the main themes in the paper and gives a brief preview of what the essay will cover. This section also clearly states the research question(s) that the paper will address. As a general rule, you should write your introduction LAST.

II. Literature Review

This section provides an organized exposition of the ideas and scholarly sources that the student used to develop his/her own ideas for the paper. The literature review should provide a summary of what scholarly work has been done on the student’s area of research and also should demonstrate *how* the student’s work compliments or fits into this existing body of knowledge.

III. Description of Organizational Context

In this section, the student writes a detailed description of the organization that is the object of the analysis. This section should describe the organization broadly and then delve into the specific dimensions of the organization that are the focus of the student's research.

NOTE: A student may choose to use some formal data gathering method, such as semi-structured interviews, in order to gain better understanding of an organization. Remember, if you will be using any data from interviews with human subjects or observation of human or organizational behavior in your analysis, you must first get IRB approval.

IV. Application of Theory to Organization

This section of the essay should contain the meat of your argument. Here you should draw linkages between the theoretical discussion in your literature review and this specific organization. Does this organization help us to understand how some theory operates? Does it show that there are important caveats to a theory?

You must develop a structured and logical argument in this section. Usually in essay of this type, a student chooses between 3-5 "major points" that they wish to support. A common tool used for presenting ideas about an organization in the public administration literature is to call them "lessons learned."

V. Conclusion

This section should summarize your paper and its major findings. You should also speculate about the directions future research ought to take in light of your findings. ****IMPORTANT:** Your conclusion should also devote some significant space to a discussion of the implications of your work for decision makers or decision making in the topic area. For example if you paper found that there is a significant issue in an organization, what do you recommend in terms of steps needed to address the issue? Are there broader implications that can be gleaned by managers and decision makers in other organizations? Are there broader implications for the field of public administration?

Format 3: An Applied Program Evaluation or Policy Analysis

This paper format is best for students that wish to analyze a particular program or policy. While it has some similarities to the other formats, there are some important differences as well. Students that choose this format to do a program evaluation should have already taken the Program Evaluation course. For students doing a policy analysis, the Public Policy course should already be completed. An example topic for this format might be,

“Are AIDS Services Organizations in Alabama as effective as those in other Southern states?”

Suggested Outline

I. Introduction

This section gives an overview of the main themes in the paper and gives a brief preview of what the essay will cover. This section also clearly states the research question(s) that the paper will address. As a general rule, you should write your introduction LAST.

II. Description of Program or Policy

This section should include a rich and detailed description of the program or policy that you are going to study. There should be a programmatic history, a description of the major components of the program and a discussion of the evaluation problem that you plan to address.

III. Literature Review

This section provides an organized exposition of the ideas and scholarly sources that the student used to develop his/her own ideas for the paper. The literature review should provide a summary of what scholarly work has been done on the student's area of research and also should demonstrate *how* the student's work compliments or fits into this existing body of knowledge. For this particular format, the literature review needs to include a discussion of the program evaluation/policy analysis literature from which the student is drawing his/her approach. In addition, the lit review should include any scholarly work that has already analyzed this particular program or policy.

IV. Data and Methods

Here you will describe your data and methods that you will use to evaluate this program. You must pay particular attention to justifying the validity of your evaluation measure. Why is this good measure to evaluate this program?

V. Empirical Findings

This is the heart of your analysis. In this section you need to present your empirical findings in such a way that they shed light on your evaluation question.

In this section you also should address any conflicting evidence or limitations in your study. While students think that this weakens their work, it actually strengthens it. By humbly acknowledging the limitations of your work, the reader gets a “truer” picture of your research.

VI. Conclusion

This section should summarize your paper and its major findings. You should also speculate about the directions future research ought to take in light of your findings. ****IMPORTANT:** Your conclusion should also devote some significant space to a discussion of the implications of your work for decision makers or decision making in the topic area. For example if you paper found that a particular program was effective or ineffective, what is your diagnosis? What can decision makers learn from your analysis? Are there some findings that have broader applicability to the field of public administration?

Format 4: A “Traditional” Theoretical Scholarly Essay

Students that choose this format will be writing an essay that advances knowledge about a theory in public administration. In many ways, this format is the most difficult one for which to suggest a specific structure, but there are clearly some core elements that any theoretical piece should have. An example of a theoretical essay topic might be, “Do private sector principles have a place in public management?”

I. Introduction

This section gives an overview of the main themes in the paper and gives a brief preview of what the essay will cover. This section also clearly states the question(s) that the paper will address. As a general rule, you should write your introduction LAST.

II. Literature Review/Argument

This section provides an organized exposition of the ideas and scholarly sources that the student used to develop his/her own ideas for the paper. The literature review is really not a separate section in such a paper, but is an extended discussion of what is “missing” or lacking in the current theoretical approach. This is absolutely critical in establishing that your work is making a contribution.

In a theory-based essay, you will not be relying on data to make your point; you need to develop an intriguing, cohesive and well written set of arguments to demonstrate your contribution to public administration theory.

Generally, in essays of this type, the student will pick 3-5 major points to make in their argument. But you may have only one “big” point. This is okay too, but you need to make sure that your discussion is organized. Here too you must be careful to note the limitations of your own theory.

III. Conclusion

This section should summarize your paper and its major findings. In a theoretical piece, you also must really emphasize how this change in ideas may affect the field of public administration.

****IMPORTANT:** Your conclusion should also devote some significant space to a discussion of the implications of your work for decision makers or decision making in the topic area. For example what implications does your theory have for decision making in public policy or for public managers?

How will the faculty evaluate my paper?

On the following page is a rubric that we will use to evaluate your GRP. You should carefully read over the rubric as these are the criteria that we will be using to evaluate your work. We realize that with a general rubric like this, that not every paper will have all of the elements contained therein. Nevertheless, you should keep this rubric in mind as you write your paper, making sure it contains the elements that pertain to your paper

GRADUATE RESEARCH PAPER CHECKLIST

Student Name _____ MPA Faculty Initials _____

MPA Specialization _____ Semester/Year _____

Graduate Research Paper Checklist

Scoring Key: Yes—3 Partially—2 No—1 N/A

1. The introduction informs the reader why the research work was initiated and how it connects to pertinent theories in public administration and policy.	3 2 1 N/A
2. All statements of fact apply to the core areas of public administration and are referenced.	3 2 1 N/A
3. Themes or thesis of research/scholarly work is clearly identifiable and ties to one of the core areas of public administration.	3 2 1 N/A
4. The research work or statement follows logically from the introduction.	3 2 1 N/A
5. The methods/primary sources are clearly described.	3 2 1 N/A
6. The argument ties together the introduction, thesis, reasons, and evidence in a logical argument.	3 2 1 N/A
7. Counter-evidence from other areas or schools of thoughts in public administration are addressed in the discussion.	3 2 1 N/A
8. Limitations of research/scholarly work are addressed in the discussion.	3 2 1 N/A
9. The conclusions follow logically from the reasons and evidence.	3 2 1 N/A
10. Recommendations for future research/scholarly work follow logically from the conclusions.	3 2 1 N/A
11. All writing is clear, concise, and grammatically correct.	3 2 1 N/A
12. The research work shows the student has the skill and decision making knowledge to apply the core areas of public administration in a real public or nonprofit management context	3 2 1 N/A