



Navigating the Pitfalls in Research: Avoiding Common Errors While Writing a Paper

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Abstract

As a concept and a practice, research is extremely nuanced and requires scientific understanding and precision. However, it is possible that miniscule mistakes made, may reduce the credibility of the research paper. This article meticulously examines common errors in research, with the aim of creating awareness amongst researchers. Its objective is to assist in the avoidance of these pitfalls, ultimately enhancing the polish of research papers. Moreover, practical strategies for rectifying these errors are provided, along with a discussion on the potential repercussions associated with each mistake. This article delves into all integral aspects of a research paper and highlights prevalent errors associated with the same. It covers topics from scratch such as, choosing an appropriate research topic, establishing the balance between the acknowledgement of objectivity in quantitative research and subjectivity in qualitative research. Additionally, it addressed trivial but prominent errors such as formatting, grammatical errors, and citation accuracy. Furthermore, the article also explores key considerations in data collection, interpretation and results. Lastly, keeping in line with recent developments, the article elucidates guidelines on navigating the use of artificial intelligence while writing a research paper.

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Research is an important skill in academics. Knowing how to write a research paper and honing research skills is important for academicians as well as students. Writing an error-free research paper demands patience as well as good technical and language skills. Learning such skills requires practice and good scientific understanding, and rightfully so because these skills do not naturally occur to most people. The probability of making errors progressively reduces with practice and experience when it comes to writing research papers

as it does for everything else. However, taking into account the nuances of writing a perfect research paper, a lot of individuals, not only novices but also experienced researchers make minuscule errors. These occur because some aspects of writing a research paper are often too trivial making it more likely for errors in these areas to go unnoticed. Therefore, it is always a good idea to go over common mistakes that can easily be avoided while writing a research paper. This article aims to discuss these common errors in detail and also elaborates on the consequences of making these errors. Additionally, this paper will provide insights on improving the overall quality of one's research paper. This article is not limited to just novices and beginners but would also be very useful for everyone in the field of research, even experienced researchers.

Possible Errors While Choosing the Research Question

The first step of formulating a research study is forming a research question. The purpose of the research question is to give the researcher a clear direction for research. Therefore, it is important for the research question to be specific enough which does not lead the researcher into a rabbit hole of redundant research. The research question before impacting the readers of the paper impacts the researcher itself. If the research question is too vague or too broad it becomes more likely that the process of formulating the research will go in circles and result in a lot of redundancy. This in turn would cause the value of the entire research study to drop, reducing the credibility of the research paper to the readers as well. This in fact is the most common error that researchers make while deciding on a research question. To avoid this from happening, the research question should be framed such that it is well-defined and clearly specified towards the beginning so that it can also be stated in the same way in the article. It is important to understand the difference between the broad topic of the research and the research question. The question should be researchable, rather than a statement. To make the research question researchable, it is important to

operationally define variables according to the nature of the study and the context it is set in. This way the research question itself will demonstrate the value added by this particular research study to the field.

Considering all the points discussed above, an instance of a vague and a broad research question would be: *"Are video games harmful for kids?"* Instead, a more specific question could be *"Impact of playing video games on productivity levels among children"*. If the age range of children needs to be specified then it could also be something like: *"Impact of playing video games on test performances among teenagers"*.

Possible Errors While Writing the Research Paper

A very common error while writing a research paper is swaying away from objectivity. It is crucial for researchers writing quantitative papers to stick to presenting objective facts. Bringing in their personal opinions, beliefs, feelings and values about information from a cited source, or about the research topic itself, or about the results of the current study is NEVER a good idea. This often happens while writing the introduction, it is important to remember that the introduction provides the background information of the research topic and roots it in the context the study is set in, there is absolutely no need for the researcher to provide personal opinions about why this topic was better than others. The source for this background information is newspaper articles, magazines or prevalence statistics which present objective facts about the occurrence of the phenomena being studied in the society.

The rationale of the study which is often included towards the end of the literature review is another place where this error is very common. The rationale behind a research study is based on the review of literature and the introduction combined. The point conveyed by the introduction is that this topic is relevant in the current time whereas the

review of literature presents previous evidence and the gaps in the same. These two elements combine drawn based on the previous literature. Therefore, even though the term rationale can give a wrong idea about what needs to be included, it is not ideal to state personal reasons for choosing the topic here. The purpose of a quantitative research paper is to provide empirical evidence based on objective facts and draw inferences about the hypothesis. As for qualitative research papers, the element of subjectivity cannot be overlooked. Therefore, acknowledging all personal beliefs, biases, values, and judgements that might have influenced the data analysis in the reflexivity section in detail is a must (Silveira et al., 2022).

Another error is forgetting to format the entire paper in the required format. Formatting of research papers can be done in various different styles like MLA, APA, Chicago, CMS, Turabian etc. Usually, research studies in Social Sciences are formatted according to the APA (American Psychological Association) guidelines. The sequence of various components in a paper, punctuation style, font type and size, referencing style and the overall format of the research paper need to adhere to the format. Minute elements like the format of the headers, footnotes, page number, font size and style, margins, alignment etc. are all specified as per requirements of each format. Many researchers often fail to ensure that the format of the entire paper is according to the guidelines and not just the reference list at the end. Not following the required academic format not only shows unprofessionalism but also reduces the value the research paper will receive from its audience. Therefore, no matter how experienced a researcher is, it is important to carefully acquaint oneself with the format in which the research paper is being written right from the beginning of the writing process.

Common Grammatical errors

Grammatical errors are common in any literary work, especially when the author is not very fluent in the language of the research paper. Simple grammatical errors rarely lead to the rejection of a

and form the reason why the current study was formulated. This is followed by the hypotheses paper. That being said, grammar and spelling errors affect the readability of the paper. Such errors may distract or confuse the reader and alter the meaning of the text. Errors with punctuation need to be avoided. Other errors which change the meaning of the sentence and can be potentially harmful include: confusing *it's* and *its*; 'quite' and 'quiet' or 'of' and 'off'. These errors are very frequent while writing but can easily be avoided by simply proofreading the research paper at the end of the writing process (Editage, 2015).

Another common error is writing the research paper in the first or second person. Statements like "*I asked the participants to stand*", and "*I gave the questionnaire to the participants*" cannot be used while writing research articles. Ideally, research articles are written in the third person. However, passive voice is also acceptable. For instance, it would be better to write "*The experimenter gave the questionnaire to all the participants.*" or "*The participants were provided with the questionnaires.*" instead of the previous statements. Very often, there is also some confusion with the tense while writing a research paper. What has already happened (results of previous studies, procedure of the study, process of data collection and data analysis) needs to be written in past tense. General facts or atemporal information are written in the present tense.

Use of Unprofessional Language and Exaggeration

Accidental use of unprofessional language is quite common considering the stark difference between academically acceptable language and conversational language. The authors must not write in informal, conversational or colloquial tones. Beginning sentences with "well", using words like "stuff" or phrases like "a bit" should not be used. The use of absolute or superlative adjectives and exaggeration is not ideal. For instance, usage of words like "always", "very"

"super" might stem from the writer's personal opinion or influence the reader's opinions.

It is often common for writers to presume certain facts as 'obvious' and fail to mention specific details. For instance, "*The participants were left alone for sometime*" lacks an important detail: the amount of time they were left alone for. This detail needs to be specified. Novice researchers often forget that even though they are very well acquainted with their own study, the readers are not, and therefore explaining all the minute and relevant details is important.

Statistical Errors

While statistical errors cannot be categorised as errors in 'writing' a research paper, they greatly impact the findings of the research study. Errors while choosing a sample size, interpreting data or even choosing the statistical tool can cause confounded and therefore inaccurate results.

Usually, after data analysis is completed, the statistical significance of the findings is derived from the standardised tables. If the findings are insignificant, the null hypothesis needs to be accepted as the alternate hypothesis is not supported. If they are significant, the null hypothesis can successfully be rejected as the alternate hypothesis is supported. If a true null hypothesis is rejected, it is called a Type-1 error. This error often occurs due to an unrepresentative sample. Similarly, if a false null hypothesis is accepted by the researchers it is called a Type-2 error. This often takes place due to unreasonably high probability values. Social sciences generally stick to $p < 0.05$ as the minimum required probability value for the results to be significant (Milton & Pop, 2010).

The statistical tool needs to be chosen based on whether the study is quantitative or qualitative, as well as if the data is parametric or non-parametric. Using parametric statistics for non-parametric data will yield incorrect results and deem the study invalid. The data is parametric when the sample size

is adequately large and the phenomenon being measured is normally distributed across the sample.

To avoid statistical errors related to data interpretation it is important to thoroughly acquaint oneself with the statistical tool being used. The most common error in this area is accidentally concluding a causal relationship when a strong correlation is found between two variables. Here, it is important to remember that correlation simply states that a relationship between the two exists. It does not imply that one variable is causing the other. Causal relationships can only be derived through experiments.

Structural Errors to Avoid in Each Component of a Research Paper

Title page

Titles in research papers are meant to be specific and short, not going more than 10-12 words. Very lengthy, detailed and fancy titles should be avoided. Being the first thing a reader is going to read in the article, titles are supposed to create a good first impression on the reader by conveying the main research idea, therefore they should be clear and concise. Elements like acronyms or slang vocabulary that diminish the clarity of the title are to be strictly avoided.

Abstract

The abstract is supposed to summarise the complete research in a few words. Very lengthy abstracts are therefore not advisable. An ideal abstract is generally between 200-300 words. Alongside the title of the paper, the abstract serves as a sample of the entire research paper informing the readers about its extent and content. Very often readers or other researchers choose to read the abstract to decide if the research paper will be a valuable read for them. This is why it is important to stick to crucial details like the research question, hypotheses, important details about the participants, methods used and a summary of the findings of the study

Introduction and Literature Review

The Introduction and Literature Reviews discuss what the study is about and talk about any previous research work done on the topic. The point of these sections is to connect the current study with the previous research in the area whilst justifying the value this study will add to the area. The most common mistake individuals make while writing these sections is getting carried away by the mere amount of information available to write about. Summarising multiple studies and stating why they are a part of the review of literature for this particular study is an important skill. Being mindful about what needs to be included from which study is important to avoid getting overwhelmed and adversely affecting the writing process (Ecarnot, 2015).

Methods

The methods chapter can often be a tricky section to write, this is because a lot of technical and scientific knowledge is required to write this part. Errors in this section are particularly harmful because they affect the replicability of the research study. The most common general error researchers make is not providing adequate amounts of detail to justify the method chosen and the position taken. The methods chapter includes details about the entire process of the research study. What most people miss is the justification for each of the elements described in the methods section.

A section called “review of method” is ideally an important part of the methods section. This includes justifying all the choices made right from the target demographic to the tools used. This includes a review of all the details, taking into consideration the methods used by other researchers in the area. This shows the readers that the researcher has taken into consideration the methods used by other researchers in the area and chosen the best possible method for the current study. If the method is similar to the previous methods used in the area, it is important to state the reason why the researcher chose to take a path similar to other researchers. If

it is different it is also important to justify why the previously used methods were not appropriate for the current study. This justification also includes the psychometric properties of the tools, if any adaptations are made in pre-existing tools, the reason for the adaptation and other minute details about the tools used to measure the variables being studied. This gives readers a full picture by throwing light on the entire thought process of the researcher while formulating the method of the research of the study. Also, another common error especially made by novice researchers is not taking ethical considerations seriously. Explicitly stating the ethical considerations are very important. This error often results from the assumption that ethical considerations like nonmaleficence for participants, acquiring informed consent, confidentiality etc., are obvious and therefore do not need to be explicitly stated. This assumption is very harmful to the research paper. Explicitly stating every minute ethical considerations taken care of is important to keep up the credibility of the research study in the eyes of the readers (Scientific Writing with Karen L. McKee, 2022).

Results

The most common error when it comes to reporting the results of the study is starting to make sense of the results in this section itself. Data interpretation and information and the practical implication of the findings are strictly limited to the discussion section. The results are to be stated directly and clearly in this section, nothing more and nothing less (Scientific Writing with Karen L. McKee, 2022). From an ethics of research perspective, manipulation or fabrication of the data is unethical and unprofessional. Falsification and inaccurate representation of data can have severe consequences. If the reviewers detect data manipulation, action can be taken against the authors. Even if the manipulation goes undetected, it can have harmful real-life consequences. For instance, data manipulation while testing medicines, vaccines, automobiles or appliances can lead to fatal situations.

Discussion and Conclusion

The discussion section, as mentioned above, *interprets* the collected data. An error that is often involved here is stating personal opinions in the name of interpretation. Data interpretation as far as possible needs to steer clear from the researcher's subjectivity for quantitative studies. For qualitative studies, subjectivity cannot be kept out of the picture but is thoroughly acknowledged in the limitations section of the paper (Kearney, 2017).

Novice researchers often believe that a research study is valid only if the hypothesis is supported, but this belief is inaccurate. It is entirely acceptable for the study's results to deviate from the initially proposed hypothesis. However, a common mistake stemming from this misconception is the attempt to "cover-up" the fact that the hypothesis was supported. Along the same lines, it is also not a good idea to conceal the flaws, limitations and drawbacks of the research study. Giving its limitations as much weight as its strengths is a characteristic feature of a good research paper. Therefore, it is important for researchers to understand that no research study is perfect or that findings are absolute. There are always opportunities to improve, this is why future recommendations are also an important part of the discussion section. Hiding the flaws only drops the scientific value of the research study and implies a lack of accountability on the part of the researcher. A limitation that might not be that significant, might receive a lot of attention and cause potential trouble to the researcher and the research paper when it has purposefully NOT been included in the research paper (Kearney, 2017).

While writing the conclusion, it is important to stick to the main research question and objective of the research study. An error made by many is keeping the conclusion too general to the area rather than focusing on the specifics that the research paper deals with. Making sure the conclusion answers the questions raised at the beginning of the paper, and clearly summarises the major findings of the research study is important. This is because the readers mostly go through the abstract and

conclusion to determine if the research paper will be a valuable read for them.

References

The sources need to be properly cited according to the required academic formats (APA, MLA, Chicago etc.). Errors in citations can lead to serious consequences as a lack of proper citations is considered to be plagiarism. Errors with in-text citations are very common. The most common error is forgetting to include all the references mentioned in the in-text citations throughout the paper in the final reference list towards the end. Even if it is just one quote followed by an in-text citation it needs to be included in the reference list. An omission of one or more references is a very likely error when there is a very large number of references (Nandiyanto & Azizah, 2022).

Another common error is avoiding the citation altogether when major details like the author's name and/or date are unavailable. There are methods to cite sources despite missing information. For instance, according to the APA format, in the absence of a date "n.d." is mentioned; whereas in the absence of the author's name, the in-text citation should include a shortened title of the primary source and the reference at the end should include the complete title. There is a chance of making errors while mentioning two or more authors in the in-text citations. In the case of citing a source with two authors, without parentheses "and" has to be used, when writing within parentheses "&" has to be used. In the case of multiple authors (three or more), "et al." is used. Very often, individuals make the error of putting a full stop after 'et', this should be avoided (Common errors in psychology writing, n.d.).

One of the most common errors is self-plagiarism. Even if the researcher is citing their previous research, it needs to be cited as all the other references are. Self-plagiarism may not be considered as seriously as stealing others' work, but it still is unethical and reflects academic dishonesty.

A method to avoid possible errors related to the formatting of the references section of a research paper is to be thoroughly acquainted with the format of the research paper and follow it diligently for every source that has been used while writing the paper.

The sources used and cited in a research paper MUST be credible and reliable. It is often tempting to use easily accessible resources like Wikipedia, magazines or online articles on websites. However, even though these resources are good for a basic understanding of concepts, these resources are not considered valid references in academia. Only sources like research articles, textbooks etc., that are accurate, objective, peer-reviewed and evidence-based are considered valid in most cases. Apart from that, using outdated material should be avoided, instead up-to-date material should be used.

Novice researchers often make the mistake of considering facts or figures at face value. This is especially true when the information presented aligns with what the researcher hopes to find. In such cases, confirmation bias comes into play and the researcher is very likely to consider that piece of information as valid without doing any background checks. It is important to ensure that everything that is presented in a research paper has some scientific basis and is not just a random fact taken off face value.

Figures and Tables

The most common error made in terms of figures and tables is including too many tables and figures. It is important to understand that a larger number of tables and figures does not imply greater credibility of the research paper. Oftentimes, a common error made while creating the figures and tables is overly complicating the tables and figures. These elements of the research paper are to simplify the quantitative data by summarising it. Therefore, it is important to make sure the format given by the APA is followed and the tables and figures are spacious and presentable. This makes it easy for readers to

interpret them. Another minor error that is fairly common is labelling the tables and figures incorrectly. This leads to confusion for the readers because the written matter often references particular tables or figures. Mislabelling can therefore lead to misinterpretation of the results (Nandiyanto & Azizah, 2022).

Can Artificial Intelligence be Used for Academic Writing?

In the present times, Artificial Intelligence is being widely used for almost everything including content creation, modification and refinement. When looking at the use of AI in research a lot of questions come up. For instance, does the AI technology get author credits if it writes a particular part of the research paper? How much of it can be written using AI? Is the researcher supposed to reveal if any AI technology is used? Guidelines related to the use of AI answer all of these questions.

First and foremost, the extent of the use of AI should be based on how much work AI is capable of efficiently carrying out in the research process. AI can only work based on the data inputs given to it and work on already developed information, it is incapable of creating new ideas. Therefore, the use of AI as much as possible should only entail improving the language of the research paper. Checking for spelling errors, grammatical errors and carrying out proofreading can be a good way to make use of AI to increase effectiveness and efficiency. What it definitely cannot be used for is drawing conclusions or taking over the role of the researchers. An AI software cannot become the author of the research paper as many steps involved in the writing process are outside of its functionality (Ciaccio, 2022).

Even when AI is used to simply proofread the research paper or rectify minor spelling and grammatical errors, it is important for the researcher to review it before the final submission. When used to simply gather resources or information about a particular topic, the researcher should make sure to

verify all the information and every resource listed by AI.

Even though AI softwares often assists authors, it should never be listed as a co-author in the list of authors involved in the writing of the research paper. AI is a supplementary tool and according to Elsevier's policy for authors, it can never be considered as an "author" as the term is only applicable to the responsibility taken by humans in the process of writing. When the researcher uses an AI tool for a purpose other than proofreading and rectifying grammatical and spelling errors, it is important to provide a disclosure statement acknowledging the use of AI in the final draft of the research paper. This disclosure statement includes the name of the tool used and clarifies that the author has, in fact, reviewed all material generated with the help of AI. This statement is to be included before the reference list towards the end of the research paper in a separate section called "Declaration of AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process" (The use of AI and Ai-Assisted Technologies in writing for Elsevier, n.d.).

While using AI-assisted technologies and softwares, the researcher must be aware of the fact that making use of Artificial Intelligence does not make the authors any less accountable for what is presented in a scientific paper. Therefore, it is important that the authors take full responsibility for the research paper and properly review and edit the article created with the help of AI before publishing it, to avoid the presentation of inappropriate, biased or inaccurate information in the research paper.

Consequences of Making Errors While Writing Academic Papers

Errors of any kind, made while writing a research paper will work at reducing the general value and the respect the research paper receives in the field it is set in. Specifically, errors like unstructured writing, poor grammar and unprofessional writing present the paper in a negative light to individuals coming across it. Organization of the paper is crucial to facilitate the process of interpreting the

paper for the readers. An unorganised paper with haphazard writing can single-handedly diminish the value of the paper to a great extent, regardless of how valuable the content of the paper is. Not only does this create a bad impression on the readers but not organising the paper in the way it is meant to be organised i.e., not including all components in the required order can also lead to rejection from publishing houses. This means the mere lack of organisation can lead to the paper not getting published or getting negative peer reviews if the format they ask for is not strictly followed.

Errors in formatting the citations can lead to plagiarism i.e., presenting other people's work or ideas as their own without giving them due credit and acknowledgement. Plagiarism sets a highly negative academic and professional image of the authors. Not only is it unethical, but it is also illegal and can lead to severe consequences, including academic failure and even debarring from institutions. Therefore, plagiarism could very well be followed by legal repercussions as well as a requirement of monetary compensation. A simple error in a reference could be interpreted as plagiarism and cost the author greatly. Therefore, it is important to not underestimate the importance of references and pay careful attention to the formatting of all references including in-text citations.

Conclusion

The research idea should be original and authentic along with a well-framed research question that communicates the topic as effectively as possible. Writing a research paper involves extensive reading and choosing credible sources. Effectively organising all the information is key to streamlining the writing process. It is a good practice to create an Excel sheet while reviewing the literature to list down every source being referred to along with the main idea presented by the source. Marking each of these sources as useful or not useful according to the specific research question helps sort out the several sources referred to in a short period of time and making a summary of the

main ideas from each source leads to ease at the time of writing the literature review. Creating outlines and multiple drafts progressively increasing in quality is often helpful. This sets the foundation for a well-structured, organised and high-value research paper. It is advisable to start writing the paper with the introduction and literature review to lay the foundation and move on to the methodology and results. Writing the abstract towards the end along with the conclusion is beneficial as both of these elements are essentially brief summaries of the entire paper. The paper should consist of a professional tonality and reflect the researcher's interest and knowledge about the research topic.

Writing the title and abstract can be particularly tricky as both of these are the impression setters of the paper, thus making them very important. The title needs to be kept concise and clear such that it communicates the topic of the research paper in just a few words effectively. Apart from that, the abstract need not contain any unnecessary details but should precisely summarise the important parts of the paper in brief.

Proofreading and feedback are helpful and often necessary to correct minor errors in a research paper. This helps the researcher avoid grammatical and spelling errors. Checking through the reference list and in-text citations multiple times before the final submission is important to ensure the appropriate inclusion of all the sources.

Finally, understanding that writing a research paper is not an easy process and requires a lot of patience and dedication is important. Based on this understanding, those who make themselves comfortable with asking for help from mentors or colleagues in the field often benefit from others' experiences and expertise. Acknowledging that research is a field that demands everlasting learning and therefore mistakes are bound to happen, will make it easier to accept one's mistakes and correct them moving forward.

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Declarations

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