

How to Write a Position Paper

The purpose of a position paper is to generate support on an issue. It describes a position on an issue and the rationale for that position. The position paper is based on facts that provide a solid foundation for your argument.¹ In the position paper you should:

- Use evidence to support your position, such as statistical evidence or dates and events.
- Validate your position with authoritative references or primary source quotations.
- Examine the strengths and weaknesses of your position.
- Evaluate possible solutions and suggest courses of action.

Choose an issue where there is a clear division of opinion and which is arguable with facts and inductive reasoning. You may choose an issue on which you have already formed an opinion. However, in writing about this issue you must examine your opinion of the issue critically.² Prior to writing your position paper, define and limit your issue carefully. Social issues are complex with multiple solutions. Narrow the topic of your position paper to something that is manageable. Research your issue thoroughly, consulting experts and obtaining primary documents. Consider feasibility, cost-effectiveness and political/social climate when evaluating possible solutions and courses of action.³ The following structure is typical of a position paper:

- An introduction
 - Identification of the issue
 - Statement of the position
- The body
 - Background information
 - Supporting evidence or facts
 - A discussion of both sides of the issue
- A conclusion
 - Suggested courses of action
 - Possible solutions

The **introduction** should clearly identify the issue and state the author's position. It should be written in a way that catches the reader's attention.

The **body** of the position paper may contain several paragraphs. Each paragraph should present an idea or main concept that clarifies a portion of the position statement and is supported by evidence or facts. Evidence can be primary source quotations, statistical data, interviews with experts, and indisputable dates or events. Evidence should lead, through inductive reasoning, to the main concept or idea presented in the paragraph. The body may begin with some background information and should incorporate a discussion of both sides of the issue.

The **conclusion** should summarize the main concepts and ideas and reinforce, without repeating, the introduction or body of the paper. It could include suggested courses of action and possible solutions.⁴

¹ Tucker, Kerry, & Derelian, Doris, Rouner, Donna. (1997). Building the case: Position papers, backgrounders, fact sheets, and biographical sketches. In *Public relations writing: An issue-driven behavioral approach* (pp.79-85). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

² Axelrod, Rise B., & Cooper, Charles R. (1993). R. Position paper (pp.446-451). In *Reading critically, writing well: A reader and guide*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

³ Hansen, Kristine. (1998). Public position papers and opinion pieces. In *A rhetoric for the social sciences: A guide to academic and professional communication* (pp. 301-306). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

⁴ Kashatus, William C. (2002). Present history: Position and local history research papers. In *Past, present and personal* (pp. 46-48). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.