This table of contents is an essential part of writing a long academic paper, especially theoretical papers. It is usually not present in shorter research articles, since most empirical papers have a similar structure. A well-laid-out table of contents allows readers to easily navigate your paper and find the information they need. Making a table of contents used to be a very long and complicated process, but the vast majority of word-processing programs, such as Microsoft Word and Open Office, do all of the hard work for you.

Whilst going into the exact details of how to make a table of contents in the program lies outside the scope of this article, the Help section included with the word-processing programs gives a useful series of tutorials and trouble-shooting guides. That said, there are a few easy tips that you can adopt to make the whole process a little easier.

### The Importance of Headings

In the word-processing programs, there is the option of automatically creating headings and subheadings, using heading 1, heading 2, heading 3 etc. on the formatting bar. You should make sure that you get into the habit of doing this as you write the paper, instead of manually changing the font size or using the bold format. Once you have done this, you can click a button, and the program will do everything for you, laying out the table of contents formatting automatically, based upon all of the headings and subheadings.

In Word, to insert a table of contents, first ensure that the cursor is where you want the table of contents to appear. Once you are happy with this, click ‘Insert’ on the drop-down menu, scroll down to ‘Reference,’ and then across to ‘Index and Tables.’ Click on the ‘Table of Contents’ tab and you are ready to click OK and go. OpenOffice is a very similar process but, after clicking ‘Insert,’ you follow ‘Indexes and Tables’ and ‘Indexes and Tables’ again.

The table of contents should appear after the 
[1](https://explorable.com/apa-title-page) and after the 
[2](https://explorable.com/writing-an-abstract) and 
[3](https://explorable.com/writing-a-research-paper) keywords, if you use them. As with all academic papers, there may be slight variations from department to department and even from supervisor to supervisor. Check the preferred table of contents format before you start writing the paper, because changing things retrospectively can be a little more time-consuming.