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Academic Support Center

College of the Redwoods

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HOW TO WRITE A RESEARCH PAPER

What It Is

One of the most common college writing assignments is the research paper. For students who have never written one before, this may seem a daunting assignment. However, with proper planning, the task is not that difficult.

A research paper is not a report, that is, a simple recitation of facts and information from a comprehensive source such as an encyclopedia. Instead, it is <u>a compilation of information from multiple sources used to support a specific point about the topic.</u> Unlike a report, a research paper is based, at least in part, on the writer's own ideas. How much of the paper comes from source materials depends on the writer's familiarity with the topic. At one extreme, the ideas may be primarily the writer's with only a few supporting facts or statements form outside sources. At the other end of the continuum, all the information in the paper may come from outside sources, leaving only the purpose, organization, and wording to the writer's discretion.

Again unlike a report, all source material used in the paper, whether paraphrased or quoted, must be documented both within the body of the text and at the end on the paper on a works cited, reference, or bibliography page. The purpose of the documentation is two-fold; it is both ethical and scholarly. To avoid plagiarism, the writer must give credit for ideas and wording not his or her own. In addition, the writer must provide enough information so that the reader can locate the original documents if interested in further exploration of the topic.

There is no set length for a research paper although those required in college survey courses generally range from 6-15 typed, doubled -spaced pages, not including the title page, outline, appendixes, and works cited page. (Sample papers and specifications on format are included in all of the research guides listed on the last page as well as in the LAC's Research Guide binder.)

Getting Started

As soon as the instructor assigns the paper, start thinking about the possible topics. Usually the instructor will give some guidelines as to topic but the student always has some leeway as to what aspect of the topic to write about. Choose a topic that you have some interest in. Once you have chosen a topic, decide what aspect of that topic you want to focus on. For example, if your instructor has assigned a research paper on a current issue in education, you might decide to write about problems in how public schools are funded. This topic could then be narrowed to the crisis in funding of higher education in California. Stay flexible at this point. If your choice is too broad, you won't be able to adequately cover it; if it is too narrow, you won't have much to say about it; if the topic is too esoteric, you may have trouble finding sources of information. Thus the scope of your topic is controlled both by the length of the paper and by the availability of information.

Once you have chosen and focused your topic, think about what point you may wish to make about it. For the time being, you may want to think about what point as a hypothesis to be proved or disproved or a question about the topic that you will attempt to answer as you do your research. In your paper this question or point will be written as the thesis statement. In our example, if the topic is new to you, your starting question might be "What caused the crisis in funding?" However, if you are familiar with the subject, you may already have an opinion you wish to support. In that case you might start with a hypothesis such as "the crisis in funding stems not so much from a lagging economy as from a change in philosophy regarding access to public education.

Think, too, about what categories of information you may need to make your point. Although at this point you will have only a tentative idea about the direction your paper will take, these categories will serve as a scratch outline and will guide your research. A paper based on the hypothesis given above might require information on the following topics:

* a brief history of public education in the United States

* the philosophy behind public funding of education

* a description of California's system of education

* an explanation of the current crisis in funding

* the change in funding over the last ten years

* an analysis of the possible causes of change (both economic and social)

* predictions for the future

Although the point you wish to make may change as you do your research, having some point or question in mind when you start will make the research much easier.

Choosing Sources

Now that you know what type of information you will be looking for, you need to locate sufficient sources. The research guides list numerous reference works with which to start. Also consult the computerized catalog and the specialized indexes in your library A little thought about where to look for different types of information will save you time. For a quick overview of the topic, use an encyclopedia; for statistics, use a statistical abstract; for very current information, use periodicals; for information about agencies, use pamphlets. If you have difficulty in locating the information you need, consult your librarian.

Once you have located possible materials, be selective. Not every book or article you find will be useful. Use table of contents and indexes to locate key words pertaining to your topic. Quickly scan the pages to see if the material is relevant to your hypothesis. Keep only those sources that clearly pertain and that are readable and understandable by you. Locate more sources than are required. The idea is to have more material than you need so that you discard some, keeping only the best. Keep in mind that the material should be relevant, up-to-date, authoritative, and come from a variety of sources.

Locating and selecting good source materials can be a time consuming process. However, time spent now will save you much frustration later on.

Reading and Note-Taking

Skim the material quickly, noting the most relevant sections. Then re-read those sections carefully, taking notes as you go. Most people use 3x5 index cards for their notes, using a separate card for each idea. (If your word processor has file and sort capabilities, you may want to enter your data directly into your computer.) Keep the notes as brief as possible, using phrases, key words, and abbreviations. Do not copy out long passages. When you do choose to use the author's exact words, copy word-for-word, using ellipses marks (three dots) to indicate deleted words. Surround the passage with quotation marks. Be sure to put the source and page number on each note card (see sample notecard, page 5). Put a heading on each card so that you can tell at a glance what the card is about. Continue in this way through all your source material. In addition to the note cards, make a separate bibliography card for each book, article, or other source hat you use. Include all relevant information: author's name, title of book or publication, title of article, editor's name, place of publication, publisher, and date of publication. (See the research guides for more complete directions.)

As you read, keep thinking about the question or hypothesis you started with. Your purpose may change as you learn more about the topic. Keep refining our thesis and outline as you go along.

Organizing the Material

Once most of your reading is completed, start to organize your note cards. Put all the cards with the same headings together. The headings should match the outline you did earlier and you should nave a stack of cards for each heading in the outline. If they don't match, revise the outline and/or seek out more source materials for the headings that lack information. Consider if all the information on the note cards supports the point you want to make about the topic. If necessary, revise your thesis statement until it matches the material. Now organize the note cards within each section, deleting or combining duplications. Put all the cards in the order you wish to use them and number each card. You are now ready to start writing.

Drafting and Revising

Much of the paper can now be written directly from the note cards. Turn the information on each card back into sentences, adding transitions to link the ideas. Put the card number in parentheses at the end of each passage. Don't worry about writing smooth, grammatically correct sentences at this time. The idea is just to get the ideas down into rough paragraphs.

If any section is skimpy, decide if you omit that section or if you need to do more research to flesh it out. Add, delete, and revise until you are reasonably satisfied. Pay particular attention to quotations. Short quotations should be smoothly integrated into the text. Check for accuracy and set off with quotation marks. Long quotes (known as block quotes) should be indented ten spaces.

Documenting

Using the bibliography cards, write the Works Cited or References page. Items will appear in alphabetical order, usually by the author's last name. Different disciplines require different styles of documentation. Your instructor may specify which style to use. In general, Modern Language Association (MLA) is used for humanities, American Psychological Association (APA) for social studies, Council of Biology Editors (CBE) for natural and applied sciences, and Note & Bibliography for history. The formats for MLA, APA, and CBE styles are slightly different but all contain author, title, publisher, place of publication, and date of publication. Check any of the research guides or style manuals listed on the last page for specific directions.

Once the Works Cited page is complete, you are ready to add the in-text documentation. Match each number in the text with the corresponding note card and the source as listed on the works cited page. Replace the number with the author's last name and with the page number for MLA or with publication date for APA. The parenthetical information must match the first word of the corresponding entry on the Works Cited page.

Notecard Sample

History   <u>Educ. in Am.</u>

"By the nineteenth century, education was
considered a public, rather than private, function."

P. 212

W

Farmer, Philip. Education in America. Boston: New World Press, 1986

Temporary Documentation in Text

Not until "the nineteenth century, [was} education…considered a public, rather than private, function (6).

Documentation in Manuscript

Not until "the nineteenth century, [was] education…considered a public, rather than private, function (Farmer 212).

Proofreading

When the paper (including the title page and works cited page) is complete, read through it several more times, making any necessary correction. Print a final copy.

Additional Information on Writing Research Papers

For additional information on writing research papers, consult any of the following guides. Copies of these or similar guides are usually available for student use in the Academic Support Center and the Writing Center.

Clines, Raymond and Elizabeth Cobb. *Research Writing Simplified,* 3rd. ed. New York: Addison 2000.

Gibaldi, Joseph. *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5th ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1999.

Hacker, Diane. *The Bedford Handbook*, 5th ed. Boston: St. Martin's, 1998.