

Writing a Research Paper



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Before You Begin

Writing a research paper is much like the task of a sculptor who takes a massive block of stone and chisels it into a work of art. As the writer gathers information and begins to chip away extraneous data, he begins to sculpt his large block of research into an artistic creation. By definition, a research paper deals with a limited topic and is based on information gathered from documents, books, periodicals, videos, Internet resources, and interviews with experts in a particular area of knowledge.

Donald Davidson defines a *research paper* as follows:

The research paper . . . is a long expository essay or article which represents the results of systematic inquiry into the facts.... The research paper is an answer to two questions: (1) What are the facts? (2) What do the facts mean? These two questions, when properly understood, fuse into one question: What is the truth? For facts rightly interpreted, are the truth.... The research paper demands of [the student], first, careful and diligent inquiry into the facts; second, accurate recording and reporting of the facts; third, inclusion of enough facts to make the discussion complete within its limits; fourth, honesty and clarity in interpretation of the facts.*

A research paper is basically an *in-depth expository essay* in which you investigate a specific issue or problem, analyze what the experts have to say on the topic, and then make an evaluation of your findings. The problem or issue you choose to focus on is usually related to a broader historical, political, social, literary, or scientific context. Your task is to write an expanded expository essay that informs or explains.

* Donald Davidson, *American Composition and Rhetoric* (Chicago: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), pp. 454–456.

Action Step:

Define the term research paper using your own words. Write the definition in your writer's journal or notebook, if you are keeping one.

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Your mind may be flooded with many questions: How do I start? What topic should I pick? Where am I going to find information to support my topic? How do I analyze the information I find? How am I going to arrange my material and write this paper? How should I cite my sources in the paper? These and other questions may seem overwhelming, but there is hope. If you have a plan, you will be able to conquer not only your fears or questions but your assignment, as well. The following steps will help you in reaching your objective:

1. **Select and limit your topic.**
2. Carry out your **initial library research**. Gather your resources and prepare a "Works Cited" page.
3. Determine what your **thesis statement, limiting ideas, and audience** are going to be.
4. Write out your **thesis statement and general outline**.
5. Do **detailed library research** by reading and taking notes. (If necessary, revise your initial thesis statement and outline.)
6. Prepare a **detailed outline** from your note cards.
7. Write your **first draft**.
8. Do **additional research** if necessary.
9. Edit and write your **second draft**.
10. **Type the paper**, including parenthetical notes.
11. Check spelling and **proofread** your work. (Have someone else proofread your paper, if at all possible.)
12. Produce the **final draft**.

When you research a topic and publish your findings, you will not necessarily follow the exact steps outlined above. Most likely, you will

not follow each step in sequence either; rather, you will move ahead and then return to a former step and then move forward again. Often a looping pattern develops, in which latter steps may be launched before certain previous steps, and former steps are revisited. The key is to be flexible as your research proceeds.

Since some papers do not require the same amount of attention, you must learn to prioritize your writing assignments—giving the most important ones the greatest effort. The length of your assigned papers will also determine which ones you tackle first. Beware though; a five-page project on some obscure topic may take as much time to write as a twenty-page paper on a more familiar one. In either case, you need to schedule your time to meet the deadline. If you miss the deadline, your grade will be affected accordingly.

Usually your instructor or the instructions for the course will give you a list of requirements for writing your paper:

- Choice of topics
- Length of the report
- Style of documentation to be used
- Requirements for doing a “Works Cited” page
- How the paper is to be presented
- Whether the topic has to be approved, an outline needs to be submitted, or note cards are required to be handed in
- If there is any penalty for submitting a late paper

Consequently, *you must plan ahead.*

Action Step:

Write the course requirements for writing your research paper in your journal or notebook.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

It is important to say something about plagiarism and documentation. These are related issues in that the former has to do with honesty in presenting your findings, and the latter has to do with how to honestly give credit to those you have cited. Plagiarism is the act of taking the ideas of someone else and passing them off as your own. Even if you paraphrase or summarize the words of an author, you have to cite your source to avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism is a serious offense, which most educators and institutions have recognized. Few, however, speak about why it is truly wrong.

As Christians, we should uphold the highest standards. Ultimately, we do not answer to man but to God. The eighth commandment specifically declares that we should not steal; in essence, plagiarism is a type of larceny. It is the stealing of another's ideas and presenting them as your own. In other words, you are lying about the source of your information and deceiving your readers into believing that the ideas you present are your own. When you plagiarize, you sin first against God and second against others—thus breaking the two greatest commandments (Mark 12:30–31).

We dare not fall into the trap of plagiarism, but should always give credit where credit is due, which brings us to the second issue—documentation. Whether you are making a direct quotation, paraphrasing, or simply reiterating someone else's thoughts, you must cite the source of that information. The question arises, though, "Should I use footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical notes?" Obviously, your course requirements should be followed explicitly; however, the standard that is now widely accepted is parenthetical documentation.

What is *parenthetical documentation*? It is the means of citing a source of information in the body of a paper, as opposed to placing notes at the bottom of the page (footnotes) or at the end of the paper (endnotes). For example, if citing Ron Fry's delightful book *Improve Your Writing*,* simply put his last name followed by the appropriate page numbers of the citation in parentheses: (Fry 82–90). If the reader wants to know more about the source, he can turn to the "Works Cited" page at the end of the text for full bibliographical information on Fry's book.

* Ron Fry, *Improve Your Writing*, part of Ron Fry's How to Study Program (Independence, KY: Cengage Learning PTR, Sixth Edition, 2011).

Parenthetical documentation will be covered in detail later, but it has been introduced here for two reasons: (1) if you are having someone else type your paper, you need to find a typist who knows this style of documentation, and you should make plans to do so now; and (2) when you begin to write your paper, you should immediately begin to document your paper accordingly.

The Modern Language Association (MLA) style is more or less the standard for documenting research papers at most undergraduate institutions today. The MLA style uses parenthetical notes for documentation and “Works Cited” pages for bibliographical information. If you have any questions regarding this style, be sure to consult a research manual that teaches the MLA style of documentation.*

PLAN AHEAD

The following *eight-week plan* will help you map out what you have to do and when you have to do it. Fill in the blanks with target dates.

Weeks One and Two

- Contact a typist by _____. (Do not wait until the last minute, or you may not find someone available. Be sure that your typist knows the MLA style sheet.)
- Select your general topic by _____.
- Complete your initial research by _____.
- Prepare a functional “Works Cited” page by _____.

Weeks Three and Four

- Finalize a workable topic by _____.
- Write your thesis statement by _____.
- Develop your general outline by _____.
- Gather the majority of your research material by _____.

* The standard for this style is based on the *MLA Handbook*, Eighth Edition (2016), which is shorter than the previous edition and has been redesigned for easy use. Other useful manuals are mentioned in the Preface.

Weeks Five and Six

- Finish gathering your research material by _____.
- Compose your final outline by _____.
- Write your first draft by _____.
- Lay aside your work for a couple of days.
- Reread your first draft, making any notes on the draft in regard to additions or deletions, by _____.
- Write your second draft by _____.
- Lay your paper aside for another two days.
- Read your second draft out loud, or have a relative or friend do so for you by _____.
- Make any final changes. Check sentences for clarity, transitions for effectiveness, mechanics, and spelling by _____.

Weeks Seven and Eight

- Compose the final draft by _____.
- Proofread by _____.
- Type the final draft by _____. (Be sure your typist has plenty of time to type your paper, including the “Works Cited” page, and knows the required style.)
- Proofread by _____. (Do not depend on your typist to do this for you—you will be sorry.)
- Type the “Works Cited” page by _____.
- Submit your paper by _____.

These steps may be adapted as you see fit. Typing the paper yourself will also save time. Remember that writing a good paper takes time, so plan ahead. Get out your calendar, and fill in the dates for each step of the process. As a rule of thumb, plan to spend half of your time on *research* and the other half on *writing*.