

How to Write a Research Paper

Why are research papers important?

For a lot of people, they probably aren't very important at all. But for people who care deeply about language, and about using language effectively—to convince, describe, argue, defend, entertain or inspire—the techniques and methods of research writing are essential tools. Knowing how to express thoughts, opinions and perspectives formally is critical for anyone who wants to communicate on an advanced level. Whether it's your intention to succeed in the academic, professional or business world, this familiarity with the finer points of research, planning and presentation will serve you very often and very well.

What's the point of research papers?

The point of research papers is to:

- have a student gather and digest a great deal of information about an interesting topic, then
 - formally present what she sees as the most important information to her readers.
-

How do I go about writing a research paper?

If you're able to select your own topic:

1. Begin thinking about what interests you instinctively (examples: literature, films, music).
2. Narrow down what you're interested in to a single area or field (example: literature > American literature > the American South > Twentieth Century).
3. Once you've narrowed down the search, begin delving into that area. (In our example, research on "Twentieth Century Literature in the American South" could fill many books, not just one paper, so it's important to narrow our focus further.) Begin researching so you can decide what aspect you want to examine in detail.
4. Once you've narrowed your search further (example: Flannery O'Connor's early short stories), begin collecting as much information as you can handle about that topic. Be sure to find a topic that you will actively enjoy learning about.
5. Start exploring all the information you've collected.
6. Begin thinking about what information you'll present in your paper and how you'll present it.
7. Start writing.

Use the following rough structure when presenting what you've learned:

- Start with a paragraph-long **introduction** that explains what you're writing about, why it's important and how you're going to present it.
- Then comes the **body** of your paper. Here you present—in a logical, easy-to-follow format—the information you believe is most important.
- Finish with a **conclusion** that sums up what you've written.

Never seen a research paper before? Take a look at some papers I wrote at <http://kebnkajse.tripod.com/research.html>.

Remember:

- **Be very clear about why you're writing the paper.** Why is this topic important? How are you going to give the reader important information?
- Only include information that directly supports your overall goal in writing the paper. When writing (and when reviewing what you've written), **ask yourself the following very important questions:**
 - Why is what I'm saying here important?
 - How is this part of the paper helping me to communicate information (my point, my understanding) effectively?

It's a good idea to read through a very wide range of information when doing your research—the more the better. (I usually read at least 30-40 sources when writing my own papers in school.)

Use the following standard **formatting:**

- 12-point font size
- 2.5 cm margins on all sides of every page
- all text double-spaced
- start with a title page and end with a bibliography, both on their own page

On your **title page**, include . . .

- a descriptive, specific title for your paper (not "William Faulkner" or "Gun Control"; good examples are "Something New Under the Sun: Understanding the Solar Neutrino Problem," and "The Development of Political Relations between the United States and North Korea Since 1970.")
- your name
- the course/module name and number
- the date when you finish your paper

Using and Presenting Information

The core of any research paper is the outside information that you gather, review, crystallize and present. You'll be working a great deal with other people's wording and ideas.

READ THIS VERY CAREFULLY!

- **Unless you state otherwise, the reader of your paper must assume that you are the original author of all the wording and ideas in your paper (except for common knowledge).**
- **Whenever you use someone else's wording or ideas, you must give them credit immediately afterward.**
- **If you use their exact wording, you must put their words in quotation marks (inverted commas) followed by a citation.**
- **If you're adapting and rephrasing their ideas in your own words, a citation alone will do.**
- Except for direct quotes longer than one sentence, **every clause or sentence which contains information from an outside source must be followed by a citation.** You cannot adapt multiple sentences of information from someone else and only give a single citation at the end.
- **It must be crystal clear at all times what information you took from someone else and what information you yourself created.**

The only things in your paper you don't have to cite are:

- common knowledge (things that everyone can be expected to know or get out of a dictionary), and
- the thoughts that come out of your own head.

If you have extensive knowledge in a field you're writing about, a good rule of thumb is to cite any information you didn't specifically know before beginning your research.

Using anyone else's wording or ideas without giving them proper credit is called plagiarism. Plagiarism is academic theft and cannot be condoned under any circumstances. Even if you plagiarize by accident, you will be held responsible--just as "possession of stolen goods" is a crime regardless of how the goods came into someone's possession.

How do I cite the sources I used in my paper?

Usually, giving credit to someone else in a school research paper involves using a **parenthetical citation**. Below are a few examples of how to do this in a simplified version of Modern Language Association style.

- Brecht's original idea for the *Threepenny Film* gradually grew into the considerably more complex *Threepenny Novel* (Esslin 108).

Here I'm citing page 108 of Esslin's book; I offer complete information about the book in the **bibliography** at the end of the paper.

- Benjamin recognizes this in his article on the novel's evolution, "Eight Years" (187).

Here I don't need to say I'm citing Benjamin in the parentheses, because I've used his name in the sentence itself.

- Hutter insists that within Kraftwerk: "We are like any other workers. We make a product which we call industrial people's music. If you buy a car, you don't need to know anything about the people who built it to enjoy driving it" (Smith WWW).

This is a good way to cite information you find on a webpage, since there aren't any page numbers on the web. "Smith" here is the name of the author of the page. If you couldn't find an author, you could use a distinctive, short version of the title of the article: For example, ("Campaign" WWW) could refer to an online article called "Campaigns Play Spin Game Before Tuesday's Debate."

- **If the quoted passage is longer than three lines of text, turn the quote into a blockquote.** Here, the entire quoted passage is set off from the rest of the text with line breaks; no quotation marks are used; and all lines are indented. Example:

Hayman speaks to the novel's central motivation and purpose, noting that:

Insistently, the novel defines the businessman as the criminal who is never brought to justice. [. . .] As in *Saint Johanna*, Brecht was at pains to demonstrate the workings of economic processes, and the novel gave him space for a stage-by-stage exposé of how business is done. [. . .]. (182)

Indeed, the *Threepenny Novel* is a crime novel in multiple ways. One could argue compellingly that the basic crime of most characters is voluntary submission to that pursuit of monetary gain which ineluctably attends life under the capitalist system.

How do I make the bibliography?

Some examples of bibliographic entries:

- For a **book or album**:

Campbell, Joseph. *Myths to Live By*. New York: Viking, 1972.

Here we have the author's name, the title (italicized or underlined), the city the book was published in, the publishing company and printing date.

- For an **article, song, poem, short story, or essay**:

From a book:

Hasty, Will. "Introduction." *A Companion to Wolfram's Parzival*. Columbia: Camden House, 1999.

Author's name, article name, book title, etc. Notice that you indent the *second* line of the entry (if it's long enough), not the first line.

From a magazine:

Golden, Frederic. "Beyond the Double Helix." *Time Europe*. 3 March 2003: 47.

Author's name, article name, magazine name, date, page number.

- For a **webpage**:

Herman, Ken and Scott Shepard. "Campaigns Play Spin Game Before Tuesday's Debate." http://www.accessatlanta.com/partners/ajc/epaper/editions/today/news_936d8d12137bd09f10b1.html. October 25, 2000.

Authors' names, webpage or article title, web address, and the date you read the page.

Finally:

- **Do not italicize quotations** (unless they were italicized in the source).
- **Introduce and explain all quotes**. No quote can stand alone.
- Avoid using an image simply for decoration. If you do use an image, cite the source.
- If you want to include large passages of someone else's work, this is usually best done in an **appendix** which follows the body of your text. Appendices are also generally the best place to include any images.

Enjoy! And let me know if I can help you in any way.