

How to Write a Research Paper

A research paper is basically an essay which uses (and cites) outside sources to illustrate points or bolster arguments.

Many students dread the prospect of writing a research paper. It can be a challenging task, but it's a task that all college students should be able to manage. Manage being the key word—for a research paper is to a large extent an exercise in time management.

Writing a research paper is time-consuming, so it's crucial to plan ahead and give yourself enough time. To make the process easier, we can break it down into the following steps:

1. Picking a topic
2. Deciding on a thesis (if required)
3. Researching the topic
4. Evaluating sources
5. Taking notes
6. Citing sources
7. Creating a Works Cited page (bibliography)
8. Reviewing and revising your paper

While you need to have some idea of what your finished paper will look like, you might find the task more manageable if you approach it one step at a time.

Note: Although forms of documentation exist to cover writing in a wide variety of disciplines, this handout focuses on that established by the Modern Language Association, often abbreviated as the MLA. The MLA form is the preferred style for writing in the humanities.

1. Picking a topic

Your instructor will usually give you some guidelines on the topic, but even with this direction it may be difficult to figure out what to write about. So, a list of things to keep in mind when selecting a topic:

- a. How long, in terms of pages or words, will your paper be? Keep in mind that the average typed, double-spaced page is about 250 words long. You should pick a topic that you can adequately deal with in your paper. In other words, if you're assigned a 5-page paper, you'll need to have enough to say to fill 5 pages, or 1,250 words. On the other hand, if dealing adequately with the topic would require 10 or 20 pages, then you will have to pick another topic (or get permission from your instructor to write a longer paper).
- b. How much time do you have to do the paper? Allow enough time to make at least two or three trips to the library to do the research. Then add enough time to read and digest the information you've collected. After that you'll need time to write and revise your paper. Writing a research paper is nearly as great an exercise in time management as it is in writing. You'll find this out the hard way if you don't budget your time.
- c. Does the topic interest you? You're going to be spending a fair amount of time with it, so you should be interested in what you're writing about. In addition, most people write better when they write about things that interest them.
- d. What types of research facilities are available? Even if you have access to a library, you still need to evaluate the materials available in its collection. If your library does not have the information you need, check to see if you can order books through interlibrary loan. This is a service that allows you to order books from other libraries within a network.

You will have to take two types of notes during your research: bibliographic and informational. You will later draw on the bibliographic notes when composing the Works Cited page at the end of your paper. You will use the informational notes when you want to cite a work in your paper. This section will discuss two ways of doing this.

Most textbooks recommend keeping bibliographic and informational notes on 3x5 note cards. If you use this method, record the relevant bibliographic information for each work on a separate card. For instance, in the case of a book, you would write down the author's name, book title, city of publication, publisher, and date published: Krakauer, Jon. *Into Thin Air*. New York: Anchor, 1998.

For the informational cards, every time you come across a passage you think you may want to use, record it on a separate card. Record it as either a direct quote, a paraphrase, or summary. Also make sure that you record the author's name, book or article title, and the page number(s) of the passage on each card.

Another way to keep track of this information is to make a list of all of the books and articles you're considering for use in your paper. Devote a separate section of your notebook to this. Whenever you actually use one of these works in your paper, put a check mark next to the listing. Include in your Works Cited page only the works with a check mark next to them.

Whenever you start reading a new book or article for your paper, write down the author's name and the title of the work at the top of a fresh page in your notebook. When you come upon a passage you may want to use, write down the page number where the passage is found. Then write down the passage. If the passage is too long to record completely, make a note about its substance. When you are ready to write your paper draw on these passages in your notes for your citations.

The important thing is to record this information. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how you do it. Just make sure you can follow what you've written.

6. Citing sources

We cite sources for two main reasons, one, to give credit where it's due and two, so that anyone reading our work will be able to locate the material we have used.

Failure to properly cite material you use is known as plagiarism. Plagiarism is intellectual theft. If you plagiarize an author you may receive a failing grade on your paper or in your course. You may even be expelled from school. *Plagiarism is a serious offense.*

What to cite: There are three types of information you must cite: a direct quotation, a paraphrase, and a summary (see http://www.cayuga-cc.edu/library/Library/citing_info.php for examples).

Direct quotation: a word-for-word reproduction of a passage (portion of text)

Paraphrase: in your own words, the ideas of a passage, in the order they appear in the original source

Summary: in your own words, the main idea or gist of a passage, in no particular order

Note: The form of citation discussed below is known as "in-text" citation. The MLA system has, for the most part, abandoned footnotes and endnotes.

How to cite

To cite a direct quote that is more than four lines long:

- a. Skip 2 lines.

- b. Indent 10 spaces.
- c. Double-space the cited passage.
- d. Omit quotation marks.
- e. Put a period at the end of the quoted passage.

Then, if you used the author's name when introducing the passage—

Just to the right of the period, put the page number(s) of the quoted passage in parentheses.

Or, if you did not use the author's name to introduce the quoted passage—

Put the author's last name followed by a space and then the page number(s) of the quoted passage. Skip 2 lines and resume your text.

For example:

Unsure whether there was oxygen waiting for him, Hall decided that the best course of action was to remain with Hansen and try to bring the nearly helpless client down without gas. But when they got to the top of the Hillary Step, Hall couldn't get Hansen down the 40-foot vertical drop, and their progress ground to a halt. "I can't get down," Hall reported over the radio, gasping audibly for breath. (295)

If the author's name had not been used to introduce the passage, the citation would look like this: (Krakauer 295)

To cite a direct quote less than two sentences long—

Place the passage in quotation marks.

If you used the author's name to introduce the passage—

Place the page number(s) of the quoted passage in parentheses.

If you did not use the author's name to introduce the passage—

Place the author's name, followed by a space, then the page number(s) of the quoted passage.

In either case, finish by placing a period after the closing parenthesis.

Citing a summary or paraphrase is similar to citing a direct quote. If you mention the author's name in the passage, cite the passage with only the page number(s) where the material is found. If you do not use the author's name, include it in the parenthetical citation along with the page reference.

How much to cite

Remember that a research paper is not merely a series of cited passages strung together by a few transition phrases. The vast majority of your paper should be what you think about the topic.

Only cite material to bolster your arguments or to illustrate points. ***Do not substitute cited passages for your own argument!***

Using ellipsis periods

Ellipsis periods are three spaced periods used to indicate the omission of a word, or words, from a quoted passage. Ellipses are used only with directly quoted passages. You must take care not to alter the meaning of a passage when you use ellipses. Consider the passage below, and the correct and incorrect use of ellipses when quoting the passage.

Original: This movie, the third in a series of three by the young director, is awful. Only an uncultured brute could call it a great work of art.

Incorrect: "This movie is ... a great work of art."

Correct: "This movie ... is awful."

What not to cite

Not everything you read and include in your paper needs to be cited. Information that is common knowledge need not be cited. For example, say you were writing a paper on Christmas. During that research you come across a passage that states Christmas is celebrated on the 25th of December. Later on, you mention in your paper that Christmas is celebrated on December 25th. In this case you would not have to cite the work you read it in because it is common knowledge when Christmas is celebrated. If, however, you wanted to tell your reader when the Church first decided to celebrate Christmas on December 25th, then you would have to cite that passage, because it is not common knowledge.

What is or is not common knowledge will vary from society to society, from academic discipline to academic discipline, and from age to age. If in doubt, cite the passage.

7. Creating a Works Cited page

The Works Cited page comes at the end of your paper. *It lists those works, and only those works, from which you actually cited information in your paper.* Do not include a work on this page if you only looked it over, but did not use information from it in your paper. The Works Cited page is the listing to which the in-text citations in your paper refer.

Begin your Works Cited page by typing Works Cited in the center of the page, one inch down from the top. Arrange the works in alphabetical order, according to the authors' last names. For complete instructions on creating a Works Cited page, check http://www.cayuga-cc.edu/library/Library/citing_info.php.

8. Reviewing and revising your paper

Very rare is the writer who can get it right, or even "good enough," on the first try. The vast majority of writers have to write more than one draft of their work. Writers who are concerned about their work, and how others perceive it, do not hand in their first drafts.

One of the big obstacles to properly revising a paper is stepping back from what you have written. When we write, especially when we write research papers, we become immersed in our writing. This immersion is necessary if we are going to do a good job, but it can also cloud our minds to the flaws or lapses in our work. Just because we know what we want to say, we assume that we have said it clearly and concisely. But we haven't always.

So, in order to properly revise your paper, you must try to evaluate it as if you were reading it for the first time.

Since you care about your writing, you may find useful some of the following tips on revising your paper.

- a. After completing your first draft, put it aside for a day or two. This will help clear your mind and give you a more objective point of view.
- b. Think about your paper from your reader's viewpoint. Is it well organized, clear, and logical? Does it say anything new or important?
- c. Type (or word process) your first draft. This too will distance you from your paper, giving you more objectivity when you revise. Printing it out really helps, because your work looks different when it is neatly printed on white paper.
- d. Read your paper aloud to yourself. This is another technique to distance yourself from your work. It allows you to hear the rhythms of the language in your paper. Ungrammatical, illogical, or awkward passages will tend to stand out in ways they wouldn't if you were merely reading it silently.
- e. Let someone else read your paper. A friend will bring a fresh perspective to your work.
- f. Make a topic sentence outline of your paper. Write down, in order, the topic sentence of each paragraph in your paper. This is a quick way to check the logical flow of your essay.
- g. Make sure every single word in your paper is there for a purpose. If it isn't, cut it or change it.
- h. Give yourself enough time to go through as many drafts of your paper as you need to get it right.

The title

Give your paper a title. The title should indicate, in a direct manner, the topic or thesis of your paper. Creative titles can work well, but if you're not sure whether your creative idea really works, go for a straightforward title. Keep in mind:

- a. Don't make the title too long.

