

HOW TO WRITE A RESEARCH PAPER

Research Paper Defined

A research paper is a written discussion based on an analytical thesis supported by a collection of ideas and information. This information is gathered from materials that others have written. You will present in the research paper the information you have found from many different sources. Your personal creativity will be shown by the significance of the thesis you develop, the organization of your materials, and your presentation of the paper.

A research paper is **a way of presenting ideas and facts you have found through the reading of various materials**. This information is presented in an organized way and covers a limited topic. Presenting the words, ideas, or opinions of someone else as one's own is **plagiarism**. When quoting directly from a source, repeat the source exactly, including punctuation. Be sure to give credit to the source by citing it in the text of your paper. A research paper is usually composed of approximately 10% quotations, 70% paraphrasing, and 10% your own words.

Selecting a Topic

Unless your instructor assigns your topic, select several possible topics and determine the amount of information available on each. You may be limited in your topic choice by the resources available that support a single idea. The best research paper is one that is based on many sources. To find material for your paper, make use of all the reference materials in the library. These reference materials include indexes, such as the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature.

After considering several topics or literary works, determining the material available, and deciding on the length of your paper, narrow your choice to a specific subject of your broad topic.

1. Examples of nonliterary topics:

The changing role of the president in relation to the Congress over the past fifty years: how John Kennedy handled the Cuban missile crisis

The effect of Eisenhower's appointments to the Supreme Court

Both these subjects come from narrowing the broad topic of "The Presidency."

2. Examples of literary topics:

How Fitzgerald shows the failure of the American Dream in The Great Gatsby

Water imagery in T. S. Elliot's The Wasteland

Voltaire's use of satire in Candide

Similar characters and theme in three of Katherine Anne Porter's short stories.

Forming a Thesis Statement

After selecting your topic, form a thesis statement, which is the controlling idea and blueprint for your paper. The purpose of your paper is to persuade the reader that your thesis is a valid one. See handout entitled "THE THESIS STATEMENT" or "PATTERNS FOR THESES ON A LITERARY WORK," depending upon whether the paper is literary or non-literary in nature.

1. Example of a *nonliterary* thesis statement: **Throughout the history of the Bell System, the United States government has made decisions that have greatly damaged the company's operation and growth.**
2. Examples of *literary* thesis statements: **In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald reveals the failure of the American Dream through characterizations of George and Myrtle, Tom and Daisy, and Gatsby himself.**
or
In An Enemy of the People and Pillars of Society, Ibsen uses setting, plot, and characterization to develop the theme of hypocrisy.

For a *non-literary* paper, first start learning all you can about your chosen subject.

For a *literary* paper, **first read the novel, play, or poem** (primary source). Then read what the various critics (secondary sources) have to say about this particular work.

Taking Notes

If you take notes carefully as you read various materials on your topic, you can easily organize your materials later. Once you have taken notes from a source, you should not have to consult these materials again. Your notes, **which are written in your**

own words (except for quotations), should contain a brief summary of the information and an identification of the source.

Here are some helpful hints for taking notes: *

1. Write your notes on index cards
2. Write only on the front of the card.
3. Put only one source and one subject on a card.
4. Create a bibliography card for each source with the information you will need to create a works-cited page: subject, author's name, title, volume, page, edition, and so forth.
5. Write your information on the topic (if you have quoted, check for accuracy).
6. Be accurate but as brief as possible. You do not have to write in complete sentences as long as you can understand what you have written later. Abbreviations may also be used.
7. Quotations should be copied correctly and enclosed in quotation marks. Note the page number(s) from which the quote was taken.
8. It is unnecessary to write down facts you already know. Write only new information.
9. If you must continue your notes on another card, list the source at the top in an abbreviated form.

Writing the Research Paper

When you have finished taking notes, you are ready to begin writing. This process begins with an outline and ends with your final paper. Here are the steps to follow:

1. Sort your note cards into groups according to subjects. Be certain that cards on the same subject are together.
2. Make an outline using the subjects on the note cards. This will serve as a guide for writing your paper.
3. Arrange your notes in the same order as your outline.
4. Using your note cards, write the first draft of your paper, putting the information into your own words. Use quotations sparingly.
5. Once you have written your draft, you will need to reread it, make corrections, and read it again.

*If you are using a computer rather than index cards for taking notes or compiling a bibliography, this method can be adapted easily. However, you should separate each fact for easy cutting, pasting, and reorganizing.

Citing a Source

1. *Paraphrasing* is rephrasing an authority's words. Ideas taken from other sources and put in your own words must also be cited to give credit to the sources.
2. *Quoting* is rewriting, word-for-word, someone else's words. You must pay close attention to the original wording, spelling, and punctuation, and follow them exactly.

Short quotations, consisting of only one or two sentences, should be included in the text of your paper, set off by quotation marks.

Examples (nonliterary):

It is the abortion restrictions imposed in the sixties by Bucharest's leader that **"helped topple Ceausescu's regime 23 years later"** (Jones 36).

or

According to Joseph M. Colucci, head of fuels and lubricants at General Motors Research Laboratories, unleaded premium gasoline has become a **"marketing phenomenon, causing people to buy higher octane gasoline for their cars than they really need"** (8).

Example (literary):

The young waiter rudely suggests that the old man has no **"regard for those who must work"** (Kahan 66).

Use block quotations for quotations with four or more printed lines. The entire quote should be indented ten spaces from left margin. Note: the period is placed immediately after the quote for blocked quotes.

Example (nonliterary):

The Navy has conducted research on dolphins in an effort to gain more knowledge:

Scientists and engineers have found that the dolphin has a yielding skin. This skin gives slightly when the dolphin swims fast, without making its prey aware that it is coming. A similar skin has been adapted for use by atomic submarines. (Weller 203)

Example (literary):

The young man's morning ritual clearly exhibits his infatuation with the young lady:

Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlor watching her door. The blind was pulled down within an inch of the sash so that I could not be seen. When she came out on the doorstep my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my eye and, when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her. This happened morning after morning. I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood. (Joyce 4)

Note: When indenting an entire paragraph that begins with an indention itself, such as the one above, indent an extra three spaces in the first line.

Writing a Works Cited Page

The **Works Cited** page, located at the end of the research paper, contains a correct listing of all sources from which you quoted or paraphrased. **ONLY SOURCES ACTUALLY USED IN A PAPER ARE TO BE CITED.** Each entry on this page must contain all of the information needed for identification and library research. Entries on this page are listed in alphabetical order by the author's last name (or the title of the source if no author is given).

For detailed instructions on how to construct your Works Cited page and how to use citations in the essay, refer to the style instructions specified by your instructor--either MLA or APA--or refer to the research guidebook designated by your instructor (i.e. Writing Research Papers by James D. Lester or Hodges' Harbrace Handbook 13th ed., 1998).

Putting It All Together

Your completed paper should be **TYPED** and **DOUBLE-SPACED**; **top, bottom, left, and right margins should be one inch**, and the paper should be compiled in the following order:

1. Title Page

The title page, if required by your instructor, should follow your instructor's guidelines. A title page is not numbered.

2. Final Outline

If required by your instructor and containing more than one page, a final outline should be numbered with small Roman numerals in the upper-right-hand corner of each page. It is placed between the title page (if one is required) and the research paper.

3. Page One

If there is no title page, include your name, instructor's name, course title, and date at the upper-left corner of paper. Next, center the title of the paper just above the first line of the research paper. The first page of the paper is not numbered but counts as page number one. (Note: Some research guidebooks specify that all pages be numbered, including the first one. Consult your instructor concerning the style you are to follow.)

If there is a title page, your name, class, instructor, and paper title appear on the title page. The actual first page of the research paper begins with the research paper itself.

4. The Remaining Pages

Place both your last name and page number on each page of the paper, beginning on page two and ending with the Works Cited page.

5. Works Cited Page

Your **Works Cited** page is the last page of your paper.