

STEPS IN THE PROCESS OF WRITING A RESEARCH ESSAY

Adapted from Patrick Sebranek et al., *Writers, Inc.*, Burlington, WI: Write Source Educational Publishing House, 1990. Rev. 2013.1a, ©SKHS

WHAT IS A RESEARCH ESSAY? A research essay is **not** a report. A report is merely a summary of pre-existing information. A research essay is an original *synthesis* which draws upon multiple sources of information to present the writer's individual insight into the essay's topic. A report states facts; a research essay develops a thesis through the use of conscientiously documented sources of information.

PREWRITING

- 1. SELECT A TOPIC.** If you have a choice, by all means choose a topic you're genuinely interested in learning more about. There's no better incentive for doing real, substantive research than your own innate curiosity.
- 2. DO SOME PRELIMINARY RESEARCH.** Check the library or the Internet for material on the subject and select a number of articles and books to read. You might want to begin your initial reading with a general reference source, such as an encyclopedia. Check the list of "*related articles*" and "*see also*" references located at the end of most reference articles, or the links in websites.
- 3. LIMIT YOUR SUBJECT.** After you have done some investigating, develop a preliminary focus or thesis statement that makes clear what you plan to cover in your research essay. Make sure that you have enough current sources of information to adequately develop your focus. Don't be surprised if your thesis changes as your research develops.

SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION

- 4. PREPARE A PRELIMINARY BIBLIOGRAPHY.** Using the school library's catalogue and database collection, the public library, the Internet, and other reference sources, compile a list of materials available on your subject. Your teacher may require you to record this information on index cards. In that case, place this information on 3- by 5-inch bibliography cards and arrange them in alphabetical order by the author's last name. If the name of the author is not known, alphabetize by the first word in the title (except *a*, *an*, or *the*). Number each card in the upper right-hand corner; in the upper left-hand corner, place the call number of each book or the URL (Internet address) of each website.
- 5. BEGIN TAKING NOTES.** It's very tempting to simply accumulate printouts of Internet pages or photocopies of texts when you start researching, with the intention of sifting through them later in search of useful information. In the long run, though, this is a wasteful and usually inefficient procedure. Instead, start right away mentally processing the information you find: as you read the material listed in your preliminary bibliography, take notes on ideas and jot down quotations that you feel might be useful in your research. Place this information on note cards, following the guidelines below:
 - Use cards of the same size and style (4- by 6-inch cards are recommended, or you may use the graphic-organizer note cards your teacher provides for you).
 - Place one main idea or quotation on each card. Be sure to list the number or the URL of the page on which you found the material as well as the bibliography card number of the source. (Place the card number in the upper right-hand corner.)
 - Use abbreviations and phrases instead of full sentences.
 - Place all *verbatim* (word-for-word) notes in quotation marks. Make sure you copy quotations *precisely*.
 - Use ellipses (. . .) where necessary to condense quotations. Place any information that you add to these quotations in brackets [like this].
 - Place a descriptive heading (sometimes called a "slug") at the top of each card. The heading should be a word or phrase that highlights the main idea of each note. These headings should correspond to *sub-topics* within your essay.

Note Taking: A Closer Look

There are three ways in which you can take notes:

1. You can **summarize**. Summarize (in your own words) as you take notes unless there is good reason to retrace the thinking of a source or to quote a source directly. When you summarize, you narrow or reduce what you have read to a few important points.
2. You can **paraphrase**. Paraphrasing is restating in your own words what you have read. Paraphrase a source when you want to retrace the thinking of that source step-by-step. Put quotation marks around key words or phrases you borrow directly from the source.
3. You can **quote** directly. Use a source's exact words when they include essential information, when the source's language is unique or distinctive, and when the source is considered an expert on the subject. Put this information in quotation marks. Be sure you weave the quotation into the text of your paper smoothly and grammatically.

IMPORTANT: WHETHER YOU SUMMARIZE, PARAPHRASE, OR QUOTE FROM A SOURCE WHEN TAKING NOTES, YOU MUST STILL **CREDIT THE SOURCE** IF YOU USE THAT INFORMATION IN YOUR ESSAY

DESIGNING A PLAN

6. **WRITE YOUR WORKING OUTLINE.** Organize your note cards into a logical order and use them to construct a preliminary or working outline. Your descriptive headings may be used as main and subpoints in your outline.
7. **CONTINUE YOUR RESEARCH.** Look at the outline you developed for Step 6. Are there sections for which you have few (or even no) notes from research sources? Search for any additional information that is needed to support your thesis. Review your preliminary thesis statement and rework it if necessary.
8. **REVISE YOUR OUTLINE.** Revise your working outline as needed when you find new information or come up with new ideas.

WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT

9. **WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT: INTRODUCTION.** Begin with an introduction that establishes the purpose of your research — that is, your thesis. You might also work one or more of the following elements into your introduction:
 - information the reader needs to understand your research findings;
 - definitions of complex or specialized terms or concepts;
 - an opening anecdote or quotation;
 - additional background information.

Since this is your first draft, consider your introduction tentative at best; as you develop and revise each draft of the essay as a whole, you'll naturally find yourself re-wording your introduction. In fact, you may choose to skip the introduction entirely when writing your first draft.

10. **WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT: BODY.** The next step is to develop or prove your thesis in the **body** of the paper. You can develop this section in one of two ways: spontaneously or systematically.

WRITING SPONTANEOUSLY. You can put your outline and note cards aside and write as much as you can on your own. Refer to your note cards only when you need a quotation or specific facts. After you have completed the initial writing, you can then review your outline and note cards to see if you have missed or misplaced any important points.

WRITING SYSTEMATICALLY. You can instead approach the body in a more systematic fashion. Begin by laying out one section of note cards at a time (cards with the same heading) so that you can see all of them at one time.

- Write a general statement that covers the main idea of that section of cards; then determine which cards contain the best information to support this statement. Repeat this procedure for each section of note cards.
- Using the note cards in front of you, add supporting facts and details.
- Repeat this process until you have dealt with all the main topics in your outline, or until you have covered each section of note cards.

Steps in the Process of Writing a Research Essay — 3

Whichever method you use for writing your first draft, follow these guidelines:

- Make sure that you write your paper using your own words; use direct quotations only when the point being made is stated precisely as you want it to be.
- As you sort through your cards, examine each for possible use as a transition.
- Work to achieve a style that is semiformal. Do not use fragments, abbreviations, or substandard language. And do not try to impress your reader by using language that is too lofty.
- Aim for objectivity in your writing. This means you should focus on the discoveries you made during your research rather than on your feeling or attitudes toward them.

11. WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT: CONCLUSION. The final section or **conclusion** of your paper should leave the reader with a clear understanding of the significance of your research. This is usually done by reviewing the important points you have made and drawing a final conclusion(s). Avoid simply repeating most of your introduction. Try to write a conclusion that reflects the deeper understanding of your topic that both you and your reader should now have.

REVISING

12. REVISE YOUR FIRST DRAFT AT LEAST TWO TIMES. Revise at least once to clarify your thinking on the content of your paper, and to be sure that you have effectively covered and supported each of your main points. Then revise one more time to refine the style of your writing, making sure all of your sentences are clear and grammatical.

13. DOCUMENT YOUR SOURCES.

INCLUDE ALL NECESSARY PARENTHETICAL REFERENCES. Give credit for quoted materials and the general ideas of your sources. (See below, **“MLA Parenthetical References Format,”** for an explanation of the format required for this paper.)

PREPARE YOUR WORKS CITED PAGE. (See below, **“Works Cited.”**)

PREPARING THE FINAL PAPER

14. EDIT YOUR FINAL REVISION. Check for punctuation, capitalization, and grammar.

15. PREPARE YOUR FINAL COPY. Type or print your paper on good quality paper, using one side only. Leave a one-inch margin on all sides (except for page numbers). Double-space the entire paper. Use a standard, legible, 10-point font, and do not mix-and-match different fonts in the essay’s body paragraphs. A title page is *not* required for this paper, but be sure to place a heading (your name, course title, and date) in the upper right-hand corner of the first page, and give your paper a concise, interesting title (centered under the heading).

16. PROOFREAD YOUR PAPER FOR TYPING ERRORS. Check your final draft from beginning to end. You may write in minor corrections by hand if necessary, but your final draft should be as “error free” as possible.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY AS A RESEARCHER

If you are submitting a paper as your own research, then you have a responsibility to present your own findings. Too often, student researchers essentially piece together the ideas of others, documented or not, and call it a research paper. A research essay, like any other type of meaningful writing, should be a personal process of discovery, in which you thoughtfully study the information you gather and make it your own.

How do you make research your own? First, gain control over the information you plan on using in your research. If you don’t understand a particular resource, get help clarifying it or don’t use it. Consider points on which your sources agree and disagree on related issues, and decide which ones offer the best arguments and why. Then determine how these findings stand up to your own thinking.

Remember: Responsible and meaningful research develops when you...

- commit yourself to the subject of your research;
- give yourself enough time to develop it thoroughly;
- understand the information you’ve collected;
- study, question, discuss, and write about your research as it develops.

DOCUMENTING SOURCES

When you make your research your own, two things will naturally follow. First, your writing will sound like it comes from you, a student researcher committed to presenting his or her findings as clearly and sincerely as possible. Second, your writing will be honest because you won't lean on the ideas of others for the main support of your research. Your writing instead will reflect the results of your planning, searching, and studying.

You owe it to your sources, your readers, and yourself to give credit for the ideas you do borrow in your research, unless the ideas are common knowledge or widely accepted. Failure to do so results in **plagiarism**, the act of presenting someone else's ideas as your own. In essence, plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft carried out, intentionally or not, by researchers who fail to do their own mind work.

Plagiarism generally appears in one of the following ways: There is *word-for-word* plagiarism which occurs when a researcher repeats the exact words of a source without giving necessary credit. There is the *paraphrase* or restated form in which a researcher says basically the same thing as an original source with only a few words changed. And there is the *paraphrase* in which a researcher uses a source's key words or phrases as his own rather than placing them in quotation marks.

WHAT IS "COMMON KNOWLEDGE"?

In research you should cite everything you borrow unless that information is common knowledge. Sometimes, however, it is difficult to tell. Consider information common knowledge...

- if reliable authors refer to it without citing its source;
- if most people knowledgeable in the field accept it as a fact;
- if few experts would dispute it; and
- if it is reported in most introductory textbooks or basic reference books on the subject.

Note: But remember your audience. What is common knowledge among brain surgeons may not be common knowledge among most other people. You must decide what is "news" to your audience. If in doubt, cite the source.

USING QUOTED MATERIAL

A quotation can be anything from a single word to an entire paragraph. As a writer, you must keep quotations in perspective. Choose quotations carefully, keep them as brief as possible, and use them **only** when they are interesting, revealing, or necessary in the development of your text. A paper that is quote-heavy usually means that the writer has done little independent thinking.

When you use quotations, you must cite them **accurately**. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation should reflect the original work as much as possible. Any changes you make should be clear to your readers. Note the guidelines for quoted material which follow. In most cases, especially the first time you cite a source, you should include a **signal phrase** either before or after the quote, in which you clearly identify the source of the information.

SHORT QUOTATIONS

1. If a quotation runs four or fewer typed lines, weave it into the text of your paper. Put the quoted material within quotation marks. All words within the quotation marks should be precisely as they appear in the source.
2. You may use a colon to formally introduce a quotation.

LONG QUOTATIONS

3. Quotations of more than four typed lines should be set off from the rest of the text. Indent each line one inch and single-space the material, without using quotation marks.

PARTIAL QUOTATIONS

4. If you want to omit part of the original material, use an ellipsis (. . .) to signify the omission. An ellipsis is usually not needed at the beginning or end of a quotation. If an ellipsis occurs at the end of a sentence, add a fourth period with no space before the first one. *Note:* Anything you take out of a quotation should not alter the author's original meaning.

ADDING TO QUOTATIONS

5. Use brackets [like this] to signify any explanatory material you add within a quotation, or any language you add to or alter in the original to weave it grammatically into your text.

MLA PARENTHETICAL REFERENCE FORMAT

The *Modern Languages Association Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* suggests giving credit in the text rather than in footnotes or endnotes. This can be done by inserting the appropriate information (usually author and page number) in parentheses after the words or ideas borrowed from another source. Place parenthetical references where a pause would naturally occur, to avoid disrupting the flow of your writing (usually at the end of a sentence).

Keep three points in mind when documenting sources: First, your references *must* clearly refer to sources listed in the “Works Cited” section of your paper. Second, use a *signal phrase* to identify the source of your information the first time you cite it (and for citations to the same source in later pages of your essay). Third, indicate as precisely as you can the location of the cited references with page numbers, volume numbers, acts, chapters, etc. Fourth, make your references as minimal as possible while still being precise.

ONE AUTHOR: CITING A COMPLETE WORK: No parenthetical reference is needed if you identify the author and work in a signal phrase in your text. Give the author’s last name as a reference if it is not mentioned in the text. If you are quoting from an Internet site or other electronic source, identify it as such.

With Author in Text

In No Need for Hunger, Robert Spitzer recommends that the U.S. government develop a new foreign policy to help Third World countries overcome poverty and hunger.

In “Strange Alliance” on the website Salon.com, Eric Boehlert suggests that Murdoch published one of Nader’s books in order to undermine liberal support for the Kerry presidential campaign.

Without Author in Text

No Need for Hunger recommends that the U.S. government develop a new foreign policy to help Third World countries overcome poverty and hunger (Spitzer).

Salon.com suggests that Murdoch published one of Nader’s books in order to undermine liberal support for the Kerry presidential campaign (Boehlert, “Strange Alliance”).

ONE AUTHOR: CITING PART OF A WORK: Cite the necessary page numbers in your reference if you borrow from a particular passage in a work. Leave a space between the author’s last name and the page reference. No punctuation is needed.

With Author in Text, Print Publication

Mathews reports that President Reagan cut the housing budget from \$30 billion in 1981 to \$7.3 billion in 1987 (58).

With Author in Text, Electronic Publication

On the website Voices from the Gap, Toni McNaron, a professor of English and Women’s Studies at the University of Minnesota, commends Alice Walker for preserving “her sense of rootedness in the South [and] her sense of indebtedness to her mother for showing her what the life of an artist entailed.”

Without Author in Text

President Reagan cut the housing budget from \$30 billion in 1981 to \$7.3 billion in 1987 (Mathews 58).

Walker’s writing shows “her sense of rootedness in the South” (McNaron).

TWO OR THREE AUTHORS: Give the last names of every author in the reference, in the order that they appear in the Works Cited section.

Students learned more than a full year’s Spanish in ten days using the complete supermemory method (Ostrander and Schroeder 51).

MORE THAN THREE AUTHORS: Give the first author’s last name, followed by “et al.” (*and others*) with no punctuation in between.

According to Guerin et al., Huck Finn reflects “those same nightmarish shadows that even in our own time threaten to obscure the American Dream” (149).

Steps in the Process of Writing a Research Essay — 6

CORPORATE (GROUP) AUTHOR: If the corporate name is long, include it in the text to avoid disrupting the flow of your writing. Use a shortened form of the name in the text and in references—e.g., *Task Force* for *Task Force on Education for Economic Growth*—after stating the full title at least once.

The thesis of the Task Force's report is that economic success depends on our ability to improve large scale education and training as quickly as possible (14).

NO AUTHOR: Give the title or a shortened version of the title as it is listed in the Works Cited section. No page numbers are needed for single-page articles or non-print sources.

The *World Almanac* states that 513,000 refugees from Ethiopia, Uganda, Chad, and Zaire are living in Sudan (608).

More companies today are using data mining to unlock hidden value in their data. The data mining program "Clementine," described at the SPSS website, helps organizations predict market share and detect possible fraud.

TWO OR MORE WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR: Give the author's last name (unless it appears in the text), the title or a shortened version, and the page reference.

The average person will have taken more than 2,600 quizzes, tests, and exams if he or she finishes college (Von Oech, *Whack* 21).

LITERARY WORKS: To cite classic prose works, list more than the page reference if the work is available in several editions. Give the page reference first, and then add a chapter, section, or book number in abbreviated form after a semicolon.

In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Alan Paton presents Steven Kumalo as "a man who lives in a world not made for him, whose own world is slipping away" (14; ch. 3).

Cite classic verse plays and poems by divisions (act, scene, canto, book, part) and lines. Use periods to separate the various parts. If you are citing lines only, use the words "line" or "lines" in your first reference and numbers only in additional references.

It is hard to feel affection for someone who makes such a demonic request as Lady Macbeth's: "Come, you spirits/that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,/And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top full/of direst cruelty" (I.v.41-4).

INDIRECT SOURCE: If you cite an indirect source—someone's remarks published secondhand—give the abbreviation *qtd. in* (quoted in) before the indirect source in your reference.

Paton improved the conditions in Diepkloof by "removing all the more obvious aids to detention. The dormitories are open at night: the great barred gate is gone" (*qtd. in* Callan xviii).

SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

Hacker, Diana and Barbara Fister. *Research and Documentation Online*, 5th Edition. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/>

Capital Community College (Hartford, CT) *Guide to Writing and Grammar*:

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>

Citation Machine:

<http://www.citationmachine.net/>

Ely Library, Westfield State College, Westfield, MA:

<http://www.lib.wsc.ma.edu/citation.htm>

OWL (Online Writing Lab), Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/>

Rockwood (MO) School District *Research Paper Guide*:

<http://www.rockwood.k12.mo.us/marquette/departments/Language%20Arts%20Downloads/Research%20Paper%20Guidelines.pdf>

WORKS CITED

The Works Cited section is a bibliography that lists all the sources you have cited in your text (and *only* those you've cited). It is found at the end of your research paper. Begin your list on a new page (the next page after the text).

1. Center the title *Works Cited* one inch from the top of the page. Double-space before the first entry.
2. Begin each entry flush with the left margin. If the entry runs more than one line, indent additional lines 1/2-inch.
3. Double-space each entry; also double-space between entries.
4. List each entry alphabetically by the author's last name. If there is no author, use the first word of the title (disregard A, An, The).
5. Do not number entries.

THE FORM FOR AN ENTRY.

An entry generally has three main divisions: author, title, and publication information.

FORMAT TO USE FOR BOOKS: Author's last name, author's first name. Title of book. City of publication: Publisher's name, Year of publication.

Spitzer, Robert R. No Need for Hunger. Danville, Illinois: Interstate, 1981.

FORMAT TO USE FOR PERIODICAL ARTICLES: Author's last name, author's first name. "Title of article." Name of periodical Date of publication (in DD MMM YYYY format): page numbers of article.

Mathews, Tom. "What Can Be Done?" Print. Newsweek 21 Mar. 1988: 57-58.

FORMAT TO USE FOR INTERNET SITES: Author's last name, author's first name (if given). Title of website. Parent site, institutional affiliation, etc. (if available). Date created (if given); date last modified (if given); date visited. <URL> (website address). Be sure to include the words "updated" and "visited" if you include those dates.

McNaron, Toni. "Alice Walker: Biography - Criticism." Web. Voices from the Gap: Women Artists and Writers of Color. University of Minnesota. 8 July 1996; revised 20 Sep. 2004; visited 20 Mar. 2005. <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/walker_alice.html#bio>.

Note: If a website contains a database version of a printed source, your bibliography entry should include all the information for a traditional print-media source *as well as* internet site information (parent site or institution; date created, date modified, date visited; URL; etc.)

Wilford, John Noble. "Fossils Found in Spain Seen as Last Link to Great Apes." Web. New York Times 19 Nov. 2004; visited 20 Mar. 2005. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/19/science/19ape.html>>.

WORKS CITED ENTRIES: BOOKS

ONE AUTHOR

Spitzer, Robert R. No Need for Hunger. Print. Danville, Illinois: Interstate, 1981.

TWO OR THREE AUTHORS

Ostrander, Sheila, and Lynn Schroeder. Superlearning. Print. New York: Delacorte, 1979.

MORE THAN THREE AUTHORS

Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature. Print. New York: Harper, 1966.

A SINGLE WORK FROM AN ANTHOLOGY (SUCH AS AN ESSAY FROM A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS BY VARIOUS AUTHORS)

Morris, William. "The Haystack in the Floods." Nineteenth Century British Minor Poets. Print. Ed. Richard Wilbur and W.H. Auden. New York: Dell, 1965.

TWO OR MORE BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Von Oech, Roger. A Kick in the Seat of the Pants. Print. New York: Perennial-Harper, 1986.

---. A Whack on the Side of the Head. Print. New York: Warner, 1983.

A CORPORATE (GROUP) AUTHOR

Task Force on Education for Economic Growth. Action for Excellence. Print. Washington: Education Commission of the States, 1983.

NO AUTHOR

The World Almanac and Book of Facts. Print. New York: Newspaper Enterprise Assoc., 1986.

ONE VOLUME OF A MULTIVOLUME WORK

Ziegler, Alan. The Writing Workshop. Vol. 2. Print. New York: Teachers and Writers, 1984.

AN ARTICLE IN A REFERENCE BOOK (DICTIONARY, ENCYCLOPEDIA, ETC.)

"Ethnocentrism." Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1983.

Note: It is not necessary to give full publication information for familiar reference works (encyclopedias and dictionaries). If an article is initialed, check in the index of authors (in the opening section of each volume) for the author's full name, and list the article under the author's name.

WORKS CITED ENTRIES: PERIODICALS

SIGNED ARTICLE IN A MAGAZINE

Sole-Smith, Virginia. Print. "The High Price of Beauty." The Nation 8 Oct. 2007: 21-23.

UNSIGNED ARTICLE IN A MAGAZINE

"Then There's Rent Control." Print. The New Republic 11 Apr. 1988: 22.

SIGNED NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Lee, Jessica. Print. "Bush Plans 'to Build on' Budget." USA Today 10 Jan. 1989: 4A.

UNSIGNED NEWSPAPER ARTICLE.

"Some Better Ways to Curb Teen Drinking." Print. Milwaukee Journal 17 June 1979, sec 2: 15.

WORKS CITED ENTRIES: OTHER PRINT AND NON-PRINT SOURCES

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED MATERIAL OBTAINED FROM THE INTERNET: BOOKS

Strunk, William, Jr. "Elementary Rules of Usage." Web. The Elements of Style. Bartleby.com. Ithaca, NY: W.P. Humphrey, 1918. New York: Bartleby.com, 1999; visited 20 Mar. 2005. <<http://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk.html>>.

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED MATERIAL OBTAINED FROM THE INTERNET: PERIODICALS

Flannagan, Roy. "Reflections on Milton and Ariosto." Web. Early Modern Literary Studies 2.3 (1996). 22 Feb. 1997; visited 21 Mar. 1999. <<http://unixg.ubc.ca:7001/0/e-sources/emls/02-3/flanmilt.html>>.

PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL OBTAINED FROM THE INTERNET

Boehlert, Eric. "Strange Alliance." Web. Salon.com. 9 July 2004; visited 20 Sep. 2007. <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2004/07/09/nader_murdoch/index.html>.

McNaron, Toni. "Alice Walker: Biography – Criticism." Web. Voices from the Gap: Women Artists and Writers of Color. University of Minnesota. 8 July 1996; revised 20 Sep. 2004; visited 20 Mar. 2005. <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/walker_alice.html#bio>.

COMPUTER SOFTWARE

"Apartheid." Encarta Encyclopedia. CD-ROM. Redmond, Washington: Microsoft, Inc., 2000.

TELEVISION OR RADIO PROGRAMS

"Scandal of the Century." Video. The Fifth Estate. CBC Television. 23 Jan. 2002.

FILM, VIDEORECORDING, OR DVD

Macbeth. DVD. Dir. Roman Polanski. 1971. Columbia, 2002.