

# The Research Essay

---

A research essay requires that you go beyond your own knowledge and experience to consult a variety of sources about a particular topic. These sources are then acknowledged (documented) within the essay using a recognized documentation format such as MLA or APA style.

There is a distinction between a research essay and a research report. A research report is expository (informative, no opinion) that presents current, objective information from a variety of sources about a topic. In contrast, a research essay is a considered, defended opinion based on having read widely about the topic. The topic sheet should make it clear if you are writing an argument or not.

Many writers find this kind of writing challenging because researching a topic can be a fragmenting process. The vast array of possible sources and the good student's inclination to seek more and more sources can be paralyzing. As a result, even good students and writers can struggle with this type of assignment.

When you research a topic, you're not simply looking for material to "back you up." You may find sources which disagree with one another and with which you disagree. Generally, include a variety of sources not just as support but as starting or opposing points. The quantity and quality of research reveal how widely you have read about your topic and how well-informed your opinion is.

Unfortunately, this variety of material also makes composition difficult as you attempt to make a variety of views, ideas coherent in an essay. In fact, the "essay" in "research essay" is as important as the "research": it must be focussed and well organized. The facts with which you develop your subject may all come from your sources, but you are integrating and making sense of them. Rather than passively recording, you are actively seeking connections and testing your hunches.

So, in order to avoid procrastinating about the actual writing of the essay, be disciplined and systematic in researching, but stop researching at least one week or even two before the assignment is due. By stopping the research a week or two before the paper is due, you allow yourself to focus on the quality of the essay itself. All the usual features of a good essay still apply in a research essay: an engaging introduction; a thoughtful, precise thesis statement; developed, convincing and concrete body paragraphs; and a thought-provoking conclusion which justifies the essay. Because you are generally given more time to write a research essay than you are for other essays, the quality of the essay itself should be higher than in previous assignments.

Finally, because of the variety of sources used and the level of polish and precision expected in composition, a research essay is time-consuming to plan and keep coherent. Most students underestimate the amount of time such a paper takes and how that time should be allocated. You are much more likely to write a stronger paper in 30 hours over three weeks than you are in 40 hours over 5 days. A research essay benefits greatly from looking at it with “fresh eyes” over a longer period of time. So, in effect, you will probably need less time to write the assignment if you don’t procrastinate.

A research essay is probably the most complex assignment you are given in a university course because of the variety of skills it evaluates. In addition to your writing skills, you will be evaluated on your ability to find and use sources, organize a fairly long paper, manage time, make decisions and judgements, and attend to detail. You may feel exasperated, challenged, annoyed during the process, but ultimately writing a research essay is extremely satisfying and rewarding and can allow you to achieve a real depth of understanding about a topic.

The following is not a complete schedule for writing a research essay, but it does include some important considerations and tips which may prevent some common problems. One week per stage is ideal for shorter essays (1500 to 2500 words) at the first and second year level.

## **Stage ONE: Preparation, Planning, Starting Research**

Identify the main requirements of the assignment. Are you required to narrow the topic? How many sources must you use? What kinds of sources should they be (e.g. do they all have to be academic sources)? How many BODY paragraphs will you have to write? Many students find the task of writing a research essay overwhelming until they work out how many body paragraphs they will have to write. Once you’ve broken the assignment down to these basics, you should have a clearer sense of what to research and how to use your research.

Begin with a working thesis if you can, a direct response to the topic question. This thesis will change after research and considerable thought, but establishing a focus early is vital. If a statement seems impossible now, construct the question that the thesis will answer as precisely as possible. Keep this working thesis on an index card or separate sheet of paper to review throughout the writing of the assignment.

Start the research process with the most general sources, standard reference books such as specialized dictionaries and encyclopaedias; then, collect more specialized sources because you may need to arrange interlibrary loans or make other such requests.

*Another useful handout:*            820.1            *The Writing Process: Getting Started*

## Stage TWO: Researching, Outlining, Starting Drafts

Take careful notes while researching because plagiarism can result from shoddy workmanship not just intention. You need to know when your notes are direct quotations and from where the ideas originate: use quotation marks in your notes even for single words at this stage. You may decide later if the word is basic (e.g. “computer”) and does not warrant quotation marks or if the word is a judgment word (e.g. “tremendous”) and does require quotation marks. Some students use different colours of ink when taking notes (one colour for quotation, another for paraphrase, etc.). Basically, create a system that works for you, but become more aware of note-taking than you probably have been in the past.

Keep the big picture in mind by creating a basic outline on a separate sheet of paper: identify the purpose of each body paragraph in a list. Is your research material fitting in? Should you adjust your research or the outline? Resist the urge to write the introduction to the essay until you have your body paragraphs mapped out fairly well, but continue to review and revise your working thesis.

<i>Other useful handouts:</i>	820.9.3.2	<i>What is Plagiarism?</i>
	820.6	<i>Thesis Statements;</i>
	820.7.1	<i>Topic Outline</i>
	820.7.2	<i>Sentence Outline</i>

## Stage THREE: Drafting, Revising, the Works Cited list

During this week go back and forth between the drafting and outlining stages. Outlines can be used both to create new material and paragraphs as well as evaluate the paragraphs you have written. Try to keep paragraphs on separate pages as you prepare them: doing so allows you to examine both the paragraph as a well-constructed whole and its place in a sequence. At several points during the writing of the assignment, re-evaluate the order of paragraphs. Is the organizing principle clear, logical? Are the paragraphs in an order which makes your argument particularly convincing?

By the end of the week, have your Works Cited list prepared and printed out, ready to include with your research essay. A works cited list is difficult to produce under pressure, at the last minute. Having the list prepared well in advance also forces you to deal with what you have and focus on the ESSAY not just the research.

ALERT: A week before the paper is due, you will probably feel that you need to change your topic and start again. DON'T. The feeling will pass.

<i>Other useful handouts:</i>	820.9.2	<i>Incorporating Source Material</i>
	820.9.3	<i>Documenting Sources</i>
	820.9.5x	<i>MLA style;</i>
	820.9.4	<i>APA style</i>
	820.9.8	<i>Online Sources MLA and APA</i>

## Stage FOUR: Revising, Introduction and Conclusion, Editing, Proofreading

By the beginning of this last week, you want an entire rough draft (or close to it) to work with. Read the draft several times ensuring that source material has been adequately framed and accurately documented with parenthetical references. Can a reader tell when the source ENTERS your text, especially when the material is paraphrased or summarized and thus not identified with quotation marks? Clear framing of source material not only credits your sources and shows you've read widely on the subject, it also makes it more apparent which ideas are yours.

To evaluate your essay, list the purpose from each body paragraph in order, from memory if you can. Does the order make sense? Do you need to add anything? Read the opening and closing of each paragraph. Can you see the directions of the paper, the development of thought? Do these openings and closings frame and contain the material within each paragraph?

Read the introduction and conclusion paragraphs together. Do they work well together to frame the essay? Does the reader really need to read the whole essay in order for the conclusion to make sense? If not, should the conclusion material be part of or even replace the introduction instead? Conclusions are difficult to write until the entire paper is completed. Make sure that the conclusion is a clear progression from the introduction.

Proofread carefully several times, looking for a different type of error on each reading. NEVER rely on spell check or grammar check programs: both are very limited in what they can find. Remember that a wrong word error or a plural/singular error is seldom found by a computer program, and both of these errors are far more serious than a simple misspelling like "mispelling" which computer programs usually can find easily.

<i>Other useful handouts:</i>	<i>820.8</i>	<i>Introduction</i>
	<i>820.10</i>	<i>Conclusion</i>
	<i>820.11</i>	<i>Revising</i>
	<i>820.12</i>	<i>Editing</i>
	<i>820.13</i>	<i>Proofreading.</i>