
A research essay is a piece of writing that provides information about a particular topic that you have researched; it is about a topic you are not familiar with. You can learn about the topic by reading the works of experts, i.e., by doing research. Then, you can communicate in writing what you have learned through the process of research writing.

Research writing consists of four fundamental elements:

- planning for research
- conducting research
- understanding and evaluating that research
- writing a properly documented paper

The first three elements will be discussed below.

Planning for Your Research

Preparing Yourself for the Research Process

Writing a research paper is a lot like writing any other academic paper. The major difference is each stage in research writing takes longer. The process of collecting information and reading through those sources is more involved and demanding; it can take up to several weeks to find suitable sources! The revision of your research essay also takes longer because you have to include your documentation.

Schedule Your Time Wisely

Research writing takes time. The key to successfully completing a research essay is to plan ahead and wisely budget your time. If you are like most writers, you love to procrastinate or you pull all-nighters the night before it is due in attempt to finish the assignment. As soon as you get a research essay assignment, work out a time schedule to make sure you finish your paper on time. Stick to your schedule as closely as possible. If you find yourself moving slower than expected, keep revising your schedule as you work. Remember one important thing: the due date does not change!

Conducting Your Research

Where to Begin

In beginning to gather information for your research essay, you may want to consult books, encyclopedias and the Internet to get a basic overview of information for your topic. Books are an excellent place to start, and although they may not contain the latest research findings, they can help you understand the context of your topic.

A good general encyclopedia – one that has information on all kinds of topics – is another great place to begin your exploration. General encyclopedias do not provide in-depth material on most topics, but they can be very useful for finding factual information and giving you that broad overview that you need.

In addition to books and encyclopedias, you can use the Internet as an exploration tool. You may see many titles and descriptions of websites that sound interesting, but do not spend too much time reading at this stage. Your current goal is to explore your topic, so pick and choose materials that help you toward that goal. Remember to write down or bookmark some web addresses or print out a few of the best articles to use later on.

Research Questions

Once you have a broad overview of your topic, you have an idea of what information you are missing. Ask questions. Having specific “research questions” to answer is an important step in research writing and makes it easier for you to find the sources that will be most useful. These questions will also help you focus on what information you want your essay to contain and how to organize that information. Have you ever heard of the “5 Ws + H”? The “5 Ws” stand for “What?” “Where?” “When?” “Why?” and “Who?”. The “H” stands for “How?”. Let the “5 Ws + H” guide you in developing your list of research questions.

One way to do this is to make a six-column chart , using the “5Ws+H” as headings. Try to write at least one question about your topic in each column, but do not worry if you have to leave one or more columns blank; the columns you fill in will depend on your topic. Once you have completed the chart and produced a list of research questions, it is time to seek answers to your questions. The library is a great place to find those answers.

The Library Catalogue

An important part of conducting research is identifying the specific sources to use when you begin taking notes for your essay. The best place to start is the library catalogue, which includes a list of all the books in the library. Consult your librarian if you are unsure of how to use the catalogue.

Journal Articles

In addition to books, journal articles can provide information for your research. One such article is the review article, which summarizes past research on a particular subject and describes the current state of knowledge on the area. It also contains useful references to other articles.

Understanding and Evaluating Your Research

Evaluation of Sources

In the research process, you will come across a wide assortment of resources. However, not all sources are created equal, and not everything you find on your topic will be suitable. The sources considered appropriate for a postsecondary essay are usually classified as “scholarly” literature.

Scholarly vs. Popular Sources

A scholarly journal is one that provides original research on a topic and is written by experts in a given field. Before a scholarly article is published, it must go through the “peer review” process in which it is evaluated by experts in the field in order to ensure that it meets acceptable research standards.

A popular article provides opinions and ideas not supported by original research. Most news magazines, such as Time Magazine, are considered to be popular rather than scholarly literature.

Primary vs. Secondary Research

When evaluating a source, it may be helpful to determine whether it is primary research or secondary research. Primary research presents research or findings that are a form of witness. This means you (the author of your research paper) have conducted original interviews with sources or conducted your own studies. Secondary research is research completed by someone else. It is material that has already been published or broadcasted. Examples include scholarly articles, encyclopedia entries, textbooks, and newspaper or magazine articles.

Authority

Authority has to do with the author of the source. Some helpful questions to ask are: Who is the author? Is the article written by an expert? What are the author's academic credentials? What else has this author written? Sometimes information about the author is listed within the article. Other times, you may need to do a bit of digging to get background information on the author. It may be helpful to do an Internet search.

Reliability

You want to know whether the source is reliable, which can be determined based on the book, magazine or journal the source appears in. A reliable source is one that appears in a reputable publication.

Timelines

You will also want to know when a source was published or last updated (for a website). Current information is more likely preferred, although in a number of fields, old works of research, dating back decades and even centuries, are still regarded as trustworthy.

Documentation

Finally, a source with a bibliography and footnotes indicates the author has checked with other sources, which validates the information the author is presenting.

Keep Track of Your Sources

You need to be very careful to avoid plagiarism. To plagiarize is to present another person's words or ideas as your own. Plagiarism is stealing. You can prevent plagiarism by knowing how to document correctly. To document is to provide references of or to acknowledge your sources.

When you write an essay that uses outside sources, you are not expected to document common knowledge or your own thinking about your topic. Common knowledge is information known by a large number of people. As a rule, document any information or fact you did not know before you began your research.

You also do not have to document your own thinking. Your own thinking is based on what you have learned as you build on what you already know about your topic. It includes your interpretation of new material as you read or observe it.

What you should document is everything that is not common knowledge or your own thinking. Document any material that you quote, paraphrase, or summarize. A quotation is any phrase or statement that is someone else's exact words. A paraphrase is a restatement of someone else's thought or idea in your own words and your own sentence structure. A summary is a shortened statement of the main points of someone else's thought or idea in your own words and your own sentence structure.

In referencing your sources, you will need to follow and become familiar with the documentation style your professor has instructed you to use in your research essay. Some examples of different documentation styles are APA (American Psychological Association) and MLA (Modern Language Association). It is best to become familiar with the documentation format required before beginning your research. Then, as you read, keep a detailed record on where you found the information. This record will save you a lot of time later on.

Reference:

Troyka, L.Q., & Hesse, D. (2006). *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers*. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada Inc.