



THE DOCUMENTED ESSAY

General Guidelines

A research paper or documented essay is a piece of writing in which you incorporate information—facts, arguments, opinions—taken from the writings of authorities in a particular field. Sometimes a research paper is no more than a report of current thinking in a field, but more often a research paper demonstrates a thesis of your own, relying on outside (secondary) sources for development and support of the thesis.

In other words, you should not think of a research paper as merely a series of quotations from several sources on a subject, or just a summary, in your words, of those sources—although you will probably include both quotation and summary in your paper. Rather, the research paper is your synthesis of information on a topic: the bringing together of information from various sources to establish a new perspective and to create a new understanding of that material. It is your contribution to the field you are studying; you have educated yourself on the topic and have come to an original conclusion about it, original in the sense you have thought of it yourself from the research you have done.

Writing a research paper involves moving through several stages and performing a number of tasks. Although it is not a strictly orderly process (you will be involved in several activities simultaneously), there is a sequence to follow with starting, developing, and finishing strategies.

Characteristically, the process entails narrowing a large, general subject to arrive at a carefully focused thesis and collecting and incorporating evidence/information that explains, clarifies, illustrates, argues, and otherwise supports your thesis. Because both research and writing involve going back over things as much as going ahead, you will need to give yourself plenty of time for exploring different directions (including some that you may abandon), for seeking more information and discovering connections and relationships within it, for clarifying your understanding of your topic in order to create a working thesis, for refining the thesis, and for writing and revising the final paper.

GETTING STARTED

The first step in writing a research paper is to ask a meaningful question about a subject. A meaningful question is one which deals with an important aspect of a subject and which can be answered, at least tentatively, with available information. If your professor assigns a topic or a question for you to write on, s/he has done some of your work for you. A professor's question is based on knowledge of the important issues in her/his field. But if you are given only a broad subject or if you have to choose your own subject, you must do some preliminary research to find out what kinds of problems or issues are dealt with by people involved in the field. For this preliminary investigation, you may consult encyclopedias, textbooks, or other general reference works which offer summaries of general knowledge in the field. A look at indexes or periodicals in the field will give you a sense of the topics that experts are writing about.

TECHNIQUES FOR GENERATING IDEAS

Brainstorming

- on paper
- into a recording device
- with a classmate
- with your instructor
- using lists or diagrams
- questioning through who, what, where, when, why, how?

Asking yourself questions

- What have I learned about the subject from class or from my notes?
- What have I learned from the text(s) in the course?
- What do I know about the subject from my own experience?
- What am I interested in finding out about the subject?
- Where can I find more background information on the subject that will stimulate further thought or more questions?

As you do your preliminary reading, make notes on other questions that occur to you, on areas that particularly interest you, on problems that suggest themselves. You must read actively, probing the material for a perspective to which you can commit yourself. It is impossible to predict how long this first step will take, but do not expect the process to yield immediate results. Give yourself time to consider your preliminary reading and to play with the possibilities.

Consider the overall strategy for your paper:

Should it

- review sources? (arrangement by ideas—not authors)
- analyze and synthesize sources? (arrangement by arguments—not authors)
- persuade the reader? (argue for a thesis of your own)
- inform the reader?
- do a combination of the above?

When you have narrowed your subject to a manageable topic, you can begin to focus your research on materials that refer to your particular interest. (How large a topic you can handle depends, to a large extent, on the length of the assigned paper and the amount of time you have.) As you continue to focus your research on a limited area, you may formulate a preliminary, tentative thesis—a main idea or proposition which your paper will discuss.

Having a preliminary thesis will help make you an active reader. As you examine sources, look for quotes, illustrations, statistics, etc. that support your stated position. Be aware that your thesis will evolve as you continue your research. Do not feel obligated to stay with a thesis that does not accommodate your changing understanding of a topic.

LOCATING SOURCES

Writing an effective documented essay often depends on your ability to utilize the resources available in the Hunter College library or a borough or local branch of the public library. You must go beyond Google and Wikipedia searches. Finding and examining appropriate research materials as quickly as possible will result in more effective research. If you have not used a library for research before, begin by consulting librarians. They can let you know what kinds of materials are available and help you use indexes, guides, and computer data bases to locate sources of information. Second, use your sources efficiently. When you find a book you think may be useful, scan the table of contents and the index and read the introduction to determine whether or not the book has information you need. Check the author's bibliography to see what sources s/he has consulted. When you identify a useful book or periodical, look for more work by that author or check additional issues of the same magazine for related articles. Third, use your professor as a resource. S/he should be able to guide you to promising material by helping you to evaluate your sources and directing you to the important writers and works in a field.

ORGANIZING THE RESEARCH AND THE ESSAY

As you read, **keep accurate notes**. You may take notes in a notebook, but many writers find that research is easier to organize and manipulate if it is on index cards. For each source you use, make a bibliography card with all the information you will need for bibliography and footnote citations: the author's or authors' name(s), the title, the publisher, the city of publication, the date of publication, and the medium. Then, on separate note cards, copy the quotation, fact, statistic, or idea that you want to use from the source, one item to a card. Keep track of the source for each card by noting the author's last name or a shortened version of the title on the card. Digital note-taking options are available, but it is important to use a system that works efficiently for you, no matter what the medium.

Since you want to avoid making your paper a string of quotations, and you want to incorporate your research into the text of your paper effectively, **try to paraphrase** on your note cards instead of transcribing long blocks of quotations. A paraphrase is not a sentence from the source in which you have changed two or three words and then used the rest of the author's sentence. A paraphrase is a brief account of the author's meaning in your own words. Typically, you will paraphrase a passage of several paragraphs or pages (or even longer sections) in a few sentences. The effort of paraphrasing is worth it because the process of paraphrasing will sharpen your understanding of a source as you draw out the main ideas.

It is wise to stop every so often, perhaps after reading each source, to **reconsider your thesis**. Should it be refined, qualified, expanded, abandoned? When you begin to write the paper, your judgment may change, of course. The very act of trying to write the paper, to shape the material, will prompt you to see your topic in new ways, clarifying what was hazy, perhaps even leading you to revise your thesis.

Your thesis is the key to organizing your paper. It defines your purpose in the paper and so suggests a shape which will convey that purpose to a reader. Different writers progress to a final thesis in different ways. Some write a rough draft immediately, without worrying much about

defining a precise thesis. These writers clarify their intentions as they write, arriving at a thesis by struggling with their material until a purpose and shape begin to emerge. Typically, this approach involves rewriting repeatedly, perfecting the shape of the paper through a series of drafts. Other writers first formulate a thesis and then outline a tentative structure before writing their first draft. In this case too, rewriting will be necessary because ideas will emerge during the composing process that may not fit into a predetermined outline structure. But the work of perfecting an outline may accomplish the work of several drafts.

It is useful to **review the notes** from your reading and list important details from these notes (those that recur or support your hypothesis, for example) as a first step to setting up categories for an outline. Moving from notes to an outline involves connecting the information from different note cards according to categories of important ideas. As with your tentative thesis, your outline may move through more than one stage. You may see gaps that need to be filled, information that needs to be added or deleted, or material that needs to be rearranged to produce a logical sequence of ideas.

It may become clear to you that you need more information about some aspect of your topic, and at this point you may return to the library for further research. You may even do this more than once as you go through several drafts. When you have enough information to adequately support your thesis or fulfill the paper's purpose while satisfying the required length of the assignment, you may consider your research complete. The final outline will serve as a bridge between the information you have gathered and the presentation of that information in the documented essay/research paper.

WRITING AND REVISING

Preparation of a first draft involves understanding the nature and function of the three basic sections of an essay: the introduction, which places the research question within a context and presents the thesis; the main body paragraphs, each of which develops a separate but related aspect of the topic; and the conclusion, which usually reviews the thesis and major supporting points and may also suggest questions for further study. Include quotes and paraphrased material where appropriate. In general, keep quotes as short as possible, so they serve your purpose and do not dominate the essay.

Arriving at the final draft through a series of revisions involves shifting from the point of view of a writer to that of a reader. As you write and revise, consider your audience. Would an intelligent reader understand your argument and why you made it? Would your argument be likely to persuade an independent thinker? To "see again" with the distance of a reader leads the writer to analyze what s/he has written for clarity, organization, and unity. As in writing any essay, you should not expect your paper to come out finished in one draft. Allow yourself time for rewriting.

Reread each draft as you would any essay, checking for the following:

- Unity: Does everything in the paper relate to the thesis?
- Coherence: Do paragraphs and sections follow one another in a logical order?
- Development: Are your points fully explained?
- Style: Are ideas expressed clearly?
- Mechanics: Is the paper in correct, edited English?

CITING AND DOCUMENTING

Citations (parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes) are not so mysterious as they sometimes seem. They are included in a research paper in order to give credit to an author for information or ideas taken from her/his work. Documentation also includes complete publication information so that a reader can locate and review the source material to determine if you have used information fairly and accurately or to find out more about the subject.

A **citation**—either parentheses including the last name of the author, a page number, and sometimes the year or a raised number indicating a footnote or endnote—**must appear after each quote or paraphrase in your paper**. You need not cite “common knowledge” in a field—information that everyone who studies the subject knows or facts that are generally accepted in all the sources you consult. Specific statistics, names, dates, places, findings, and interpretations or ideas that are unique to an author must be cited.

Generally, you will have to include a **Bibliography, Works Cited** list, or **References** section, arranged alphabetically, at the end of your paper. Information you will need to provide includes the author’s (or authors’) full name(s), title of the work, editors (if any), publisher, city and state of publication (and country if not published in the U.S.), the year of publication, page numbers (if necessary), and medium. However, documentation styles vary. Whenever you are given an assignment that includes research or documentation, be sure to ask your professor which style you should use. The order of information as well as spacing and punctuation are different for different styles. It is important to use a style guide or manual and to check your work very carefully to be sure that it conforms exactly to the required style.

The most prominent documentation styles include the following: **MLA** (Modern Language Association), commonly used in the liberal arts and the humanities, which incorporates parenthetical documentation within the text and a list of works cited, including full bibliographic information, at the end of the paper; **APA** (American Psychological Association), used primarily in the social sciences, which utilizes an author-date citation system within the text and lists references alphabetically in a reference list at the end of the paper; **Chicago** (from *The Chicago Manual of Style*), used widely in the humanities as well as by many professional authors and editors, which features two basic documentation systems: (1) notes and bibliography, and (2) an author-date system. Other documentation styles include **ASA** (American Sociological Association), **AMA** (American Medical Association), and **Notes-Bibliography (Turabian)**.