

Writing a Research Paper

Using Primary and Secondary Sources



Adapted from *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 11th Edition, Contributors Dayne Sherman, Jayetta Slawson, Natasha Whitton, and Jeff Wiemelt, 2010, 16-45, 555. Prepared by the Southeastern Writing Center. Last updated July, 2011.

Writing a print source (e.g., library, internet) research paper requires the systematic study of a topic that extends beyond your personal experience and knowledge. Your research may focus on *primary sources*—novels and poems, historical documents, government data, and so on—or *secondary sources*—other researchers' and scholars' interpretations of those original materials. Many projects, of course, involve both types of research. Remember that conducting print source research requires that you do more than simply locate, read, and report on the ideas of others; it requires you to think critically, evaluating and interpreting the ideas presented in your sources and developing new ideas of your own.

Following are some useful strategies for planning, conducting, and writing your research:

Planning and Conducting Your Research

1. Be sure you understand the assignment

- Has your instructor specified a general subject area or list of possible topics? Can you select a topic of your own?
- What is your purpose for writing? To explain? To persuade? Check for key words in your instructor's assignment indicating these various purposes (e.g., analyze, examine, evaluate).
- Who is your audience? Your instructor? Your classmates? How much can you assume your audience knows about your topic?
- What types of sources does the assignment specify (primary, secondary, or a combination of the two)?
- When is your paper due? How long should it be? What format and documentation style are required (MLA, APA, Chicago Style)?
- Are there any other requirements to attend to?

2. Develop a topic and research question

- If you have a choice, try to find a topic that truly interests you.
- Make sure your topic is sufficiently focused (neither too broad nor too narrow) and researchable (i.e., adequately documented in source materials that are readily available to you).
- Try using some informal writing (e.g., freewriting, journal writing) to develop and narrow your topic. For more information on informal writing, refer to the Southeastern Writing Center's handout *Generating Ideas*.
- Talk with your instructor and classmates about your topic.
- Do some exploratory research and reading to check the viability of your topic.
- Transform your topic into a *research question* to be answered. (Your answer to that question is the thesis of your paper.)

3. Design a research strategy

- Begin with some preliminary reading (e.g., general encyclopedias like *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*) to get a quick overview of your topic.
- Move on to more specialized encyclopedias, dictionaries, and biographical references (e.g., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *A Handbook to Literature*) to obtain information written by and for experts in your field of study.
- Consult general and specialized bibliographies and indexes (e.g., *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Humanities Index*, *Social Sciences Index*, *ERIC*) to find books and journal articles written on your topic. Remember, one good bibliography from a book or journal article can lead to many new and useful sources.

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- Use your library's on-line card catalogue to find books and journals. If you're new to the topic, try beginning with a broad subject search. Then use the Library of Congress cross-referencing headings to expand your search.
- Use an electronic search engine (e.g., Lycos, Infoseek, Altavista) to conduct an internet search for World Wide Web and FTP sites related to your topic.
- Ask your reference librarian or Writing Center consultant for assistance in using more specialized library and internet resources (e.g., interlibrary loans, special collections, government publications, electronic news and chat groups).
- Assemble a working bibliography of your sources. Update your bibliography regularly.

4. Analyze, evaluate, and apply your sources

- If necessary, distinguish between primary and secondary sources.
- Evaluate the usefulness of your sources. Is each *relevant* to your topic or research question? Is it *current*, if currency is an issue? Is it *reliable*? Is it appropriately *objective* (vs. biased)? Is it adequately *specialized* (vs. written for a generalized audience) and *authoritative* (i.e., well respected)?
- Read, take notes, and summarize your sources. Use separate *bibliographic notecards* for each or keep a *comprehensive research notebook*. Check your mastery of the source material by putting it into your own words. Paraphrase passages of particular note; save direct quotes for only the most important material.
- Use your notes to compare and contrast the sources you consult. On which points is there consensus? On which is there substantive disagreement? Begin to *synthesize* (i.e., put together or connect) the source materials.
- If appropriate, use your notes to *evaluate* and *apply* what you are reading. Do you agree or disagree? How can your sources be applied to your more general topic or research question?

Writing Your Paper

1. Write a prospectus or plan of action for yourself

- Identify your topic or research question.
- Describe its significance.
- Describe any background material relevant to your project.
- Propose a preliminary thesis or purpose statement.
- Map out a preliminary organizational plan that will best support your purposes.

2. Decide on a thesis for your paper

- Begin your project with a *tentative thesis* or preliminary statement of what you think your research will support. Use that tentative thesis to focus and organize your research and early writing.
- Revisit and revise your tentative thesis on a regular basis. Use your research and writing to test out that initial claim and make it more and more precise.
- As you conclude your research and begin writing in earnest, commit yourself to a final thesis that clearly indicates the *direction*, *emphasis*, and *scope* of your paper. Your thesis not only makes a claim about your research findings, but also previews the principal components and organization of your paper.
- For more information on formulating and writing a thesis statement, refer to the Southeastern Writing Center's handout *Developing a Thesis Statement*.

3. Prepare a formal outline to guide your writing

- Transform your plans for writing and the information you have gathered into a formal outline that shows the *sequence* and *logical relationships* among the parts of your paper (e.g., major points, subpoints, examples, specific details). In many cases, the main headings of your outline (i.e., the major points) will correspond to and elaborate the principal components of your thesis.
- Check for obvious gaps in your outline; these may indicate a need for further research.

4. Write an introduction for your paper

- Present relevant background or contextual material to situate your topic.
- Introduce and define key terms and concepts.
- Establish the particular focus of your paper and your purpose in writing. What is your research question?
- State your thesis—the conclusion your research will support.
- Elaborate your thesis to reveal your approach to your topic and your plan of organization.

5. Write the body of your paper

- Build the body of your essay around the points you want to make. Use your research notes—but don't let your sources organize your paper.
- Use descriptive section headings and strong topic sentences that correspond to the divisions of your outline.
- Use strong topic sentences to indicate your direction of development. Be sure to use clear transitional words and paragraphs to show the relationships among ideas.
- Integrate your sources into your discussion. Remember, however, it's your voice that needs to take the lead here, not your sources. Be sure to formally cite your sources when necessary.
- Summarize, analyze, and evaluate the published sources you use. Don't just report.
- Move up and down the "ladder of abstraction" from generalization to varying levels of detail and back to generalization.

6. Write your conclusion

- If your paper is fairly long or complex, you may need to review the major points for your reader.
- Explain the significance (e.g., implications, applications) of your research and findings.
- Use your conclusion to move from the detailed treatment of your research topic or question offered in the body of your paper to a more general level of consideration that parallels the broader context indicated in your introduction.
- Suggest areas for further research.

7. Revise your paper

- Begin revising by checking to see that your thesis is still appropriate for your paper.
- Check the overall organization of your paper. Make an outline of your completed draft and compare it to the outline you made before you began writing. Mismatches between the two outlines may indicate a need to revise your thesis.
- Check your use of the source materials. Are your sources smoothly integrated into the paper? Are direct quotations used selectively and balanced against summary, paraphrase, and your own original commentary? Is your use of the sources clearly and consistently documented through use of parenthetical citation, footnotes, and a works cited or reference list? Have you adequately interpreted, evaluated, and synthesized your sources rather than simply string their ideas together?
- Attend to paragraph-level concerns. Have you used clear topic sentences? Is there some logic to your organization of ideas within and between paragraphs? Have you used introductory, transitional, and summary sentences and paragraphs where needed.
- Proofread and edit your writing at the sentence and word levels. For more information on proofreading, refer to the Southeastern Writing Center's handout *Proofreading Strategies*.