Writing Research Papers

Writing a research paper is easier if you approach it as a project with distinct tasks and a systematic process. This document lays out a sequence of basic tasks involved in writing a research paper. Use this document as a supplement to Thomason Library's [research tutorials](#).

Crafting a Topic

Establish what your paper is about

What exactly will you be researching for the paper? Unless your topic already is chosen by your professor, you [need to decide](#) what will be the main subject matter of your paper. Knowing what you are and are not interested in will help guide this first step. Find a topic that interests you and start asking questions about it and [reading up](#) on it.

Narrow the scope

A strong research paper will be aggressively limited in its scope, or how big of a topic it aims to address. "Media and society" is a topic with such a large scope, for example, that it constitutes an entire field of research — it is a *subject area* more than a paper *topic*. What kind of media, exactly? What aspect of society? When and where? For what kinds of audiences? These kinds of questions will narrow the scope of your topic.

Formulate a question

Think of your research paper topic as [a question you are trying to answer](#) or a problem you are trying to solve. Some preliminary reading should start to give you a sense for the kinds of questions to ask. Review your notes from class, too. Has your professor or other students raised any questions that were not fully discussed? Has the professor given advice about interesting lines of inquiry? Has a specific class topic stimulated your interest and made you want to know more?

Doing Research

Use the library to find source material

Start by consulting the Writing Center's guide to Using Source Material. [Thomason Library](#) gives you access to good source material you can't find on the Internet. If you limit your research to Google, you will generate a lot of commercial and for-profit content, whereas the library's academic databases will steer your search in the direction of academic publication and research — precisely what you want to be using in your research paper. In the library, books, periodicals, bibliographies, and other print resources will contribute to your research. You should see what the library can access for your project, either by looking through [Research Guides](#) or by talking to an actual librarian and getting help that way.

Critically evaluate source material before using it

[Critically evaluating](#) the credibility of sources you uncover may be the most important part of research. Once you find source material that seems relevant to your project, you'll need to decide if it is credible enough to use. All source material is not created equally, which means a paper is strong only if the sources on which it relies can withstand critical scrutiny. An Internet search, for example, can at times lead you to primary sources and other useful material, but what is more likely is that it will throw in a mix of outdated content, false claims, hucksterism, and misinformation. By contrast, a library's research databases are far less likely to turn up junk source material. Your job as a researcher is to exercise intelligence and distinguish between material you can use and material you should ignore.

Here are some questions to ask when critically evaluating a book or other printed material:

Questions about the author. Who is it? What are the author's credentials? What institution or organization does the author work for? What else has the author published? What is their public reputation as a scholar?

Questions about the publisher. Is the publisher a university press? University presses are going to be the most reliable publishers because they hire professionals to scrutinize everything they publish. Other large publishing houses (such as Random House) also provide reliable works. If you don't recognize the publisher, do a quick Internet search to find out if they are reputable.

Questions about the work. Does the work include a bibliography or list of works cited? Does the work include footnotes or endnotes that substantiate the author's claims?

With Internet sources, ask the questions listed above along with some additional considerations:

Be skeptical if there is no author. Most authors are proud of their written work if it is reliable. Internet articles without human authors may be commercially motivated and/or contain unsubstantiated opinions.

Organizations publish works, too. Sometimes no human is named as an author because a work has been published by an organization. In this case the skill to develop is knowing how to determine the organization's credibility. Often a *.org* website will be more reliable than one using a *.com* domain. Advocacy organizations tend to publish less objective work than organizations associated with research centers and universities.

Keep track of source material

Even for short writing assignments it can be hard to keep track of all the sources you look at. This is why best research practices require precise organization of source

material. If you follow the advice below, your research process will go more smoothly than if you ignore it:

Use file folders systematically. On your computer, create folders that make sense according to a system. This means spending time on your computer and making decisions about files you want to keep together and files you want to keep separate. If you can see how your files are organized by category and hierarchy, then it is easier to retrieve files you need and put new files in their right place.

Use file names systematically. Leverage your computer's file display settings so that it shows you the files you want to see in the order you want to see them. This skill will require you to use similar file names (or file name templates) for similar kinds of files. Numerical or alphabetical systems may work best.

Use a bookmark manager. If part of your research does require Internet searches, save site URLs in a bookmark manager. Every web browser provides a basic system for managing bookmarks. Others can be downloaded or purchased as applications.

Manage citations accurately. Put [Zotero](#) on your computer and use it! Otherwise, you will need to gather citation information the old fashioned way by designating a separate document for copying and pasting [source citation](#) information and hyperlinks that will take you back to the original source. Such documents can later be revised into your bibliography or works cited page, but Zotero will keep your citations in order and even make works cited pages for you.

Take notes as you go

As you start the paper process by freewriting, working on thesis statements, and reading up on your topic, make extensive notes along the way. Write extensive notes while reading source material. Otherwise your thoughts and ideas will not find

expression in a usable form. You should plan on writing many more words than will actually end up in the final draft of your research paper. It is okay during the early drafting stage to write notes to yourself and to ask yourself questions in written form. Be deliberate about writing in full, complete sentences instead of just jotting words and phrases. See Stage 2: Drafting of The Writing Process.

Writing the Paper

Start formulating a thesis

When you can boil down the central claim of your paper into a single, well-crafted sentence, you have begun formulating the thesis of your paper. How to word your thesis can be a tricky task, so don't expect to figure it out right at the beginning. Consider using the University of Arizona's [Thesis Generator](#) to help you get started. Once formulated, the thesis is the bottom line to your whole argument, the road map for your argument, the backbone of your research. No research paper can succeed without a precisely-formulated thesis, and no thesis is ready for prime time unless it is specific, argumentative, and significant.

Make an organizational plan for the paper

Paper plans can take many forms. Outlines, lists, and mapping clusters are widely used examples. An important consideration when planning your paper is how you are understanding and writing about relationships between your ideas — what comes first and why; what comes after that and why; and so on. These relationships are important because they guide the development of your paper from one idea to the next. Try at first to make broad connections between your ideas, and then later you can connect and draw more complex relationships as you come to understand your research topic more.

An effective organizational plan may begin with freewriting that lacks polish and linear structure. From there the writer goes back through and starts clustering similar ideas and observations into paragraphs. Connected paragraphs are then placed into different

parts of a document, or even into separate documents. (Drafting software such as [Scrivener](#) gives writers a way to make many separate documents and keep them all in one file.) Once the main sections of the paper come into focus, they can be mapped out in outline or storyboard format. Organizational plans don't materialize all at once. It is more often the case that they evolve during the research process.

Divide the paper into sections

Research papers in standard academic English are expected to have a distinct introduction, body, and conclusion. Here are some tips:

Write the introduction last. You may need to write a rough introduction to get you going, but in most cases a writer doesn't know exactly what they need to say in the introduction until after the body of the paper has been written. Once the body of the paper is finished, then you can write a strong introduction because you know for sure what will happen in the paper. Avoid the common error of waiting too long to tell your readers what you want to tell them.

Have a strategy for the introduction. Too many introductions consist of "throat-clearing," where a writer winds up and warms up before getting to the point. Not all introductions need to provide background information. Many strong introductions hit the ground running. Some common ways to do that are: quickly explaining what is at stake in the paper; describing a conversation or debate the writer is engaging; stating the research problem right away or proposing one or two responses to the problem. Again, it is easier to write a strong introduction once you have a developed sense for the body of the paper.

Organize the body so your readers can follow. After reading the introduction, your readers should already have a sense for what the paper is about, what your position or findings are, and why the paper matters. Since the body of the paper is where you show your work, it also is where you as the writer can help to educate your readers about your topic. Take your readers through the project

step by step and be sure to use subheadings (if allowed in the discipline) that keep your readers on track. Consider these common organizational structures:

- chronological
- simple to complex
- more familiar to less familiar
- less contestable to more contestable
- more important to less important
- earlier understanding to new or alternative understanding
- general analysis to specific examples or applications
- theoretical framework to case study or critical interpretation

Make the conclusion count. Readers should gain something by reading the conclusion. Often a recapitulation of the research method and findings, many conclusions include a discussion section where the writer explains why the research is important, or perhaps acknowledges some limitations or potential problems that other writers may want to address. In some fields in the humanities, it is increasingly acceptable for the writer to formulate a call to action that follows from the paper's findings or main argument.

Adhere to your discipline's citation style

Different academic displines use different citation styles, so you want to make sure you are using the citation style that is expected for the assignment you're working on. The Internet is full of citation guides, instructions, and templates. Some are better than others, and it is easy to get overwhelmed by the volume of information about citing sources. Use these links for guidance on correct citation style:

Thomason Library Citation Guide

Purdue OWL

References

Booth, Wayne C. and Gregory G. Colomb. *The Craft of Research.* Chicago: University

      of Chicago Press, 2008.