

WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER

A number of texts offer guidance on how to write a research paper. We provide a few for use within the Writing Center, including:

Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 6th ed. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003.

Hacker, Diana. Research and Documentation in the Electronic Age. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.

There are also online resources, such as Diana Hacker's Research and Documentation Online:

<http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/index.html>

Or the Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL):

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/ResearchW>

Choosing a Topic

There are a few things to keep in mind as you formulate a research question or topic. Avoid questions and topics that are too broad or speculative (Hacker 2-3). In other words, your topic should be specific enough that you will be able to adequately address it within the given page requirement, and it should be something for which you will be able to find relevant research materials. However, you don't have to finalize a topic or question before you begin research. Exploring existing materials may help you narrow, revise, or reformulate your topic.

Conducting Research

The librarians at the Honnold-Mudd Library are happy to help you with research questions. When looking for sources, remember to consider articles as well as books. The BLAIS catalogue is useful for finding books, but you can also explore databases for articles within specific academic disciplines.

The Internet can also be a useful research tool, but it is important to critically evaluate the sources you find. Whereas most books and journals are peer-reviewed before they are published, there are no such restrictions for websites. For help determining whether an online source is reliable, consult one of the Hacker references listed above.

And More...

The Writing Center has handouts on other useful tools, such as how to cite sources and how to incorporate quotations into your paper. The back of this page has a list of questions drawn from the Purdue University OWL that should be useful during the revision process.

Questions for Revision

- Does your title give readers a good idea of what's to come? (Have you even come up with one yet? Remember, "Assignment #3" is not a title!)
- Is your thesis statement or research question clearly stated?
- Is there enough lead-in in the introduction to establish the importance of and context for the statement/question? Is there too much? Too little? By the end of the introduction, is it clear to the audience what kind of material will follow? If so, are these expectations fulfilled? That is, do you follow through?
- Is it clear where your introduction ends and body begins and where the body ends and the conclusion begins? In other words, are your paragraph indents meaningful?
- At the same time, are there transitions between all sections and paragraphs to create flow and unity?
- Does each body paragraph have a topic sentence? If you took your thesis/question and all your topic sentences, would that correspond to what you want to say in your paper? If not, do you need to revise your thesis/question or re-examine your subpoints?
- Do the topic sentences (1) make a connection back with the thesis/question, (2) establish a link with the previous paragraph's content (perhaps the chronological relationship, any comparisons/contrasts?) and (3) give enough information that the audience could guess where a particular paragraph's development would lead?
- With or without a formal concluding sentence, do you somewhere near the end of each paragraph remind readers why you are saying what you are saying by moving back to abstract, general terms?
- Does the order of paragraphs make sense? (e.g., maybe the transitions seem forced because they aren't in the right order)
- Are your paragraphs too short (say, fewer than 4 sentences) or too long (longer than about 8)? Is there some combining or separating of issues that needs to take place? Or do you simply need to generate more content or delete irrelevant material?
- Are your examples reliable, representative, and convincing? Are there enough of them (or too many) to develop the main idea of the paragraph in the word count you have available?
- Are your sources convincing? Is there enough balance between your own insights and expert opinions?
- Is everything that should be referenced, referenced?
- Are all sources and direct quotations explained or have you left them standing on their own?
- Has anything that goes off topic or is not essential (given your word limit) been cut? (TIP: whenever you know you have to cut something but you're finding it hard to do, cut and paste it in a separate file so that you feel it hasn't been obliterated. In a couple of weeks, you'll probably go back and wonder why you were so attached to the passage in the first place!)
- Does the conclusion say something different from your introduction? Does it leave a good lasting impression or is it wishy-washy?

Writing a Research Paper: Revision. Online Writing Lab, Purdue University. 18 Nov. 2004
<<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/ResearchW/revise.html>>.