

Explanation of the Research Paper

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Why write a research paper?

Your instructor has given you a research assignment to introduce you to library and/or field research and to develop your ability to combine your knowledge and interest with the facts and ideas that have already been contributed by others on a particular subject.

What is a research paper?

In many ways, writing a research paper is very similar to writing a standard college essay. Both require you to work through the following steps:

- Choose a topic
- Define and narrow it
- Determine your audience
- Gather information and ideas to work with
- Organize your ideas
- Write the paper
- Rewrite and edit it

The major difference, however, is that when you write a research paper you move beyond your own personal knowledge and use the knowledge of others in a particular field. The research process corresponds to the prewriting process of a standard essay. You collect your ideas and information by either conducting interviews, distributing and analyzing questionnaires, observing activities on site, and reading books and periodical articles written on your topic.

Reading for research papers is different from textbook reading or pleasure reading, for it requires you to read selectively. Reading selectively means that you look for ideas, facts, and opinions that relate to your topic, and then you analyze and evaluate them for use in your paper.

The research paper, therefore, should not be a mere collection of quotations or a list of facts and opinions; it should be a strong presentation of a key idea—your idea—that relies on other sources for support, clarification, and verification.

Types of research papers

There are two major types of college research papers, those that survey and those that analyze. In a survey paper, you do not attempt to argue a point or take sides on a particular issue; rather, you provide a representative sampling of facts and

opinions of other writers on that point or issue. In general, college English classes do not typically assign this type of research paper. The most commonly assigned research paper is the analysis. In the analytical paper you must interpret, question, compare, and judge the information you use. In other words, in a survey you don't commit yourself to a position (or opinion). In an analysis, however, you use the ideas, opinions, and facts of others to make your own point. And, in doing so, you make this information work together in an argument you create, one that leads to a conclusion of your own.

Getting started on your research paper

Both the research paper and the standard essay have much in common. The prewriting or research process for the research process paper, though, is much more time-consuming than the idea-generating you do for the standard essay. The research process involves locating sources, reading or conducting field research, and note-taking. Therefore, you should begin working on your paper as early in the semester as possible and budget your time wisely. For that purpose, the Writing and Reading Success Center provides guidelines to help you set up a schedule for preparing a research paper.