

# HOW TO WRITE A RESEARCH PAPER

## RESEARCH PAPER DEFINED

A research paper is a written discussion based on an analytical thesis supported by a collection of ideas and information. This information is gathered from materials that others have written. In one paper, you will be presenting the information you have found from many different sources. Your personal creativity will be shown by the strength of the thesis you develop, the organization of your materials, your presentation of the paper, and how you use your sources.

A research paper presents ideas and facts you have found through the reading of various materials to support your thesis. This information is presented according to a prescribed method and covers a limited topic. Remember, presenting the words, ideas, or opinions of someone else as one's own is plagiarism. This is illegal! When quoting directly from a source, use quotation marks and repeat the source exactly, including punctuation. Be sure to give credit to the source by citing it in the text of your paper and in your work cited page (bibliography). Give credit, also, when paraphrasing. (*See handout: "Using Quotations in a Paper."*)

## SELECTING A TOPIC

Unless your instructor assigns the topic, the best procedure to follow is to select several possible topics and determine the amount of information that is available on each. You may be limited in your topic choice by the resources available that support a single idea. The best research paper is one that is based on many sources. To find material for your paper, you will be expected to make use of all the reference materials in the library and through electronic sources.

After considering several topics, determining the material available, and deciding the length of your paper, narrow your topic to a specific subject of a general topic.

1. **Examples of Non-literary Topics** reached by narrowing the broad topic of *The Presidency*
  - a. The changing role of the president in relation to the Congress over the past fifty years
  - b. How John Kennedy handled the Cuban Missile Crisis
  - c. The effect of Eisenhower's appointments to the Supreme Court
  
2. **Examples of Literary Topics**
  - a. How Fitzgerald reveals the failure of the American dream in *The Great Gatsby*
  - b. Water imagery in T.S. Elliot's *The Wasteland*
  - c. Voltaire's use of satire in *Candide*
  - d. Similar characters and theme in three of Katherine Anne Porter's short stories

## FORMING A THESIS STATEMENT

After selecting your topic, form a thesis statement, which is the controlling idea and "blue print" for your paper. The purpose of your paper is to persuade the reader that your thesis is a valid one. See handouts: "*The Thesis Statement*" or "*Literary Works: Patterns for a Thesis*" depending upon whether the paper is literary or non-literary in nature.

1. **Example of Non-literary Thesis Statement:**

Throughout the history of the Bell System, the United States government made decisions that have greatly damaged its operation and growth.

(*For a non-literary paper, first start learning all that you can about your chosen subject.*)

## 2. **Examples of Literary Thesis Statements:**

- a. In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald reveals the failure of the American dream through characterizations of George and Myrtle, Tom and Daisy, and Gatsby himself.
- b. In An Enemy of the People and Pillars of Society, Ibsen uses setting, plot, and characterization to develop the theme of hypocrisy.

(If you have chosen a literary work, first read the novel, play, or poem [primary source]. Then read what the various critics [secondary sources] have to say about this particular work. Check the library for these sources.)

### **TAKING NOTES**

If you take notes carefully as you read various materials on your topic, you can easily organize your materials later. Once you have taken notes from a source, you should not have to consult these materials again. Your notes, *written in your own words*, should contain a brief summary of the information and an identification of the source. Here are some helpful hints for taking notes:

1. For each source, be certain to list the following: subject, author's name, title, volume, page, year of publication, edition, etc.
2. Write your information on the topic (if you have quoted, check for accuracy).
3. Be accurate, but be as brief as possible. You do not have to write complete sentences as long as you can understand what you have written later. Abbreviations may also be used.
4. Quotations should be copied correctly and enclosed in quotation marks. Note the page number(s) from which the quote was taken.
5. It is unnecessary to write down facts that you already know. Write only new information.

### **WRITING THE RESEARCH PAPER**

When you have finished taking notes, you are ready to begin writing. This process begins with an outline and ends with your final paper. Here are the steps to follow:

1. Make an outline using your notes. This will serve as a guide for writing your paper.
2. Arrange your notes in the same order as your outline.
3. Using your notes, write the first draft of your paper, putting the information into your own words. Use quotations sparingly.
4. Once you have written your draft, you will need to reread it, make corrections, and read it again.
5. *See handout: "A Seven-Step Writing Formula."*

### **CITING A SOURCE**

Paraphrasing is the rephrasing of someone else's words. Remember, however, that ideas taken from other sources must be cited in order to give credit to the original source. Quoting is writing, word-for-word, someone else's words, which must also be cited. You must pay close attention to the original wording, spelling, and punctuation. Short quotations (four typed lines or less) should be included in the text of your paper, set off by quotation marks.

#### 1. **Non-literary Examples:**

- a. It is the abortion restrictions imposed in the sixties by Bucharest's leader that "helped topple Ceausescu's regime 23 years later" (Jones 36).
- b. According to Joseph M. Colucci, head of fuels and lubricants at General Motors Research Laboratories, unleaded premium gasoline has become a "marketing phenomenon, causing people to buy higher octane gasoline for their cars than they really need" ("Gasoline" 8).

## 2. Literary Example:

The young waiter rudely suggests that the old man has no "regard for those who must work" (66).

Longer quotations of more than four typed lines should be indented ten spaces from the left margin. (Some instructors prefer both margins to be indented--be sure to check before you type your paper.) **Do not use quotation marks.** The citation follows the final punctuation in this case, so it does not appear to be part of the text. With poetry, the citation indicates line number(s) of the poem.

## 1. Non-literary Example:

Colleges and universities are supposed to be, along with parents and religious organizations, the guardians of our nation's moral values. When discrimination is part of the hiring system, when exploitation is part of the recruiting process, when athletes do not get an education, our nation's institutions of higher education have forfeited that guardianship. (Lapchick 69)

## 2. Literary example:

Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlor watching her door. The blind was pulled down within an inch of the sash so that I could not be seen. When she came out on the doorstep my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my eye, and when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, quickened my pace and passed her. This happened morning after morning. I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood. (Joyce 4)

*(Note: when indenting an entire paragraph that begins with an indentation itself, such as the one above, indent an extra three spaces in the first line.)*

## WRITING A WORKS CITED PAGE (BIBLIOGRAPHY)

The Works Cited page, located at the end of the research paper, contains a correct listing of all sources from which you quoted or paraphrased. **Only sources actually used in a paper are to be cited.** Each entry on this page must contain all of the information needed for identification and library research. Entries on this page are listed in alphabetical order by the author's last name or title, if no author is given. (See handout: "MLA Style Guidelines for Works Cited")

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Your completed paper should be typed, double-spaced and compiled using the following guidelines:

1. Page one should include your name, instructor's name, course title, and the date at the upper left corner of the paper. Next, center the title of the paper just above the first line of the research paper. (According to the Modern Language Association Handbook, a title page is not required. However, if your instructor requires one, type it according to the individual instructor's guidelines and place it on top of the research paper.)
2. Your name and page number should appear on each page of the paper (in the same place consistently), beginning on page 1 (unless you are required to have a separate title page, in which case numbering begins on page 2 of the document) and ending with the Works Cited page.
3. Top, bottom, left and right margins should be one inch.

For more information on the research paper, consult Writing Research Papers by James D. Lester or Hodges' Harbrace College Handbook by Hodges, Whitten, Horner, and Webb.