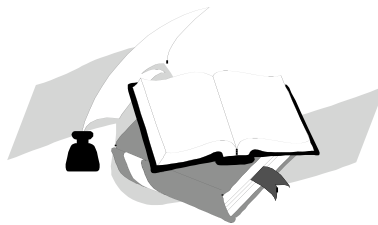


HOW TO WRITE COLLEGE RESEARCH PAPERS



**Mayland Community College
S.O.A.R. Program
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As a college student you will be required to write research papers for many of your classes. A research paper is an in-depth report on a particular topic. It involves seeking sources of information that may include facts, statistics, historical writings, etc. The topic is usually one that you select, although the instructor may assign a topic area.

This module is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the basics of developing and writing research papers. The second section covers information on different types of papers. You will learn how to approach writing assignments, how to find and document resources, how to prepare an outline, how to present your papers, and how to avoid plagiarism.

Section One covers the following topics:

1. Getting Started
2. Brainstorming Your Topic
3. Beginning Your Research
4. Outlining Your Paper
5. The First Draft
6. Writing the Paper
7. Proofreading and Revising
8. Documenting (Citing) Your Sources
9. Delivery

Section Two covers:

1. Book Reports
2. Term (Research) Papers
3. Short and Long Reports
4. Avoiding Plagiarism



1. GETTING STARTED

The first step in any research paper assignment is to decide on your topic. Be sure your topic is **manageable**, meaning you can cover it adequately; it is **appropriate** to the topic; and it is **interesting** to you. For example, in Sociology class you may be studying changes in society. The broad theme may be "societal changes in the last hundred years." A topic more limited in scope is "the effect of television on American society." Always try to narrow your topic down to something that you can cover adequately in the number of pages you are required to write. On the other hand, be careful not to select a topic too narrow or too difficult to research.

2. BRAINSTORMING YOUR TOPIC

Think of a brainstorm as a way of stirring up as many ideas as you can before you narrow them down to one specific idea. Using the theme mentioned above, "societal changes in the twentieth century," think of all the ideas that come to mind about changes that have taken place in our society since 1900. Write as many ideas as you can think of on the lines below:

You have just completed a brainstorming exercise! Your next step is to choose among the ideas you listed, selecting the one topic that interests you the most to write about. If you are having trouble brainstorming ideas, get another person to join you. Brainstorming works best in a group.

When you have selected your topic, do a **preliminary research scan** to be sure you will be able to find information about your topic. Go to the library and search out titles on this topic. Ask your instructor for his or her opinion about your choice of topic. Be prepared to change your initial idea or modify it if it does not seem feasible as a research paper topic.

3. BEGINNING YOUR RESEARCH

You have narrowed down your topic, begun your outline, and now you will search various sources for information. Use all the library resources that are available: the Internet, magazine file, books, newspaper articles, encyclopedias, periodicals, and the many databases available through **NCLIVE**. Ask the librarian for assistance if you are not sure how to find certain information.

As you begin your research, do not expect to be completely settled on your topic. You may come across something in your research that changes your focus or narrows down your topic. Make sure you take notes on any useful information you may encounter, but remember you will sort through this collection of data. You will not use every piece of information you collect!

USING 3X5 CARDS

Always carry a stack of 3x5 cards with you to record information from the sources you explore. Your entire paper can be drafted on your 3x5 cards before you type it. Be sure to document each source you use on the 3x5 cards. **See section # 8: Documenting (Citing)Your Sources**, for a look at what information you will need to record. Look at the sample below showing how to construct your 3x5 card.

SAMPLE 3X5 CARD

I. A. The Technology Revolution

Source: Gates 3, 9

"Now that computing is astoundingly inexpensive and computers inhabit every part of our lives, we stand at the brink of another revolution. All the computers will join together to communicate with us and for us" (Gates 3).

"The global interactive network will transform our culture as dramatically as Gutenberg's press did in the Middle Ages" (Gates 9).

When you have completed your research and have all the information you need to begin typing the first draft of your paper, the 3x5 cards can be arranged in stacks in the order in which the information is to appear in your paper.

USING FLEXIBLE NOTES

Flexible notes are another note taking format some writers prefer. When using flexible note, you will devote one page or group of pages to each of your paper's main topics. On these pages, you will collect any quotes or paraphrases you may wish to use, documenting each.

Sample Flexible Notes

Domestic Violence

Bailey 34 1 out of 4 women experience violence in a relationship

Jones 4 "Violence is passed on from generation to generation, creating a cycle that contributes to homelessness, poverty, and crime."

Etc.

4. OUTLINING YOUR PAPER

The better organized a paper is, the more understandable it will be. If you have done your research using the 3x5 card method, the task of typing your first draft of your paper will be easier. The 3x5 cards, labeled properly, form a structured outline with headings and subheadings which include all the major points to be covered. Be sure to include section numbers for each 3x5 card so you will know where the information belongs in your outline. You will then be able to arrange your 3x5 cards in the proper order before writing the first draft.

The purpose of an outline is:

- to help the writer define the basic purpose and structure of the paper.
- to help the writer organize thoughts and lay the groundwork for the first draft.

Try comparing writing a paper to a carpenter building a house: first comes the blue print (the outline), next comes the foundation (the first draft), next comes the actual building of the structure from the framework (additional drafts) and finally comes the finished house (the completed paper).

Below is a sample outline:

Topic: Homeless in America

I. Introduction

- A. Homelessness is a serious matter in our society.
- B. Many homeless Americans are homeless due to circumstances out of their control; domestic violence, lack of employment, medical problems, mental illness are some of the leading causes. **(thesis)**

II. Body paragraphs

1st: Domestic violence

- A. 1 out of 4 women experience violence in a relationship (Bailey 34).
- B. Women and children often must seek housing at shelters when escaping violence
- C. "Violence is passed on from generation to generation, creating a cycle that contributes to homelessness, poverty, and crime" (Jones 4).

2nd: Lack of employment

- A. Most people who don't work lack competitive job skills.
- B. Many high school students are dropping out, leaving them unqualified for all but the most menial, low-paying job.
- etc.
- etc.

5. WRITING YOUR FIRST DRAFT

Most research papers have one of two general purposes: (1) to make or defend a point or (2) to provide information. If your instructor has not already stated the purpose, you must decide this before you begin your first draft.

After you have gathered together all your notes and material, think about how you would like to organize your paper. What specific information do you want to include to support your **thesis** (the point you are writing about or the purpose of your paper)? Prepare a scratch paper outline of your paper that includes your thesis and several statements to support it.

Exercise: Complete the following exercise, supplying some of the support statements for the thesis.

Thesis: *Community college is a wise choice for students of all ages.*

Support:

- *Community colleges have lower tuition.*

- _____

- _____

The first draft must include the following:

- Introduction
- Body (Supporting Paragraphs)
- Conclusion

The introduction reveals what you are going to tell the reader. The conclusion indicates in summary form what you have told the reader. The supporting paragraphs tell all the rest.

Introduction:

First, you must catch the reader's attention.

Example:

More than four million children in the United States are abused or mistreated each year, according to the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect.

Next you must indicate your **thesis statement**, which tells the purpose of your paper — the promise of what is to come.

Example:

Child abuse occurs in every community and across all races and socio-economic groups. It is a very serious problem in need of attention and prevention.

The **introduction** tells the topic of your paper and your position or attitude about the topic. You may use a catchy phrase or quotation, a startling statistic, a brief story, or

even a question to get your reader interested in your topic. **Avoid conversational language, making an announcement, talking directly to the reader, or assuming the reader has the same attitude about the topic as you do**, as in the following examples:

Did you know that millions of children suffer from abuse and neglect each year? I was shocked by what I read and I think you will be too. This paper will cover the problems of child abuse and neglect.

A better way to introduce a topic using a question is to make it general:

Is it possible that in a country such as ours, millions of children are victims of abuse and neglect each year?

Introductions are generally one paragraph but can be three or four paragraphs long, depending on the length of the writing assignment. Avoid the mistake of discussing one or more of their main points in the introduction.

Exercise: Look at the following sample introduction. Identify the attention-getting device and the thesis statement:

According to the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect, more than four million children in the United States are abused or mistreated every year (Rappaport 12). Four thousand or more children die as a result. Undoubtedly, this number of reported cases represents only a small portion of the total number of children who are being abused. Child abuse can occur in many situations and in many communities. It is a very serious problem today, a problem that is in need of prevention, a problem we cannot ignore.

Attention-getting device:

Thesis statement:

Body/Supporting Paragraphs

The body of the paper will be difficult to write unless you have prepared a good outline and have a foundation from which to build. A body paragraph begins with a topic sentence backed up with facts, details, reasons, or examples. You may include quotes or opinions. Mainly you are trying to give more information to develop your opening thesis

statement and educate the reader about your topic. Here is a sample of a body paragraph to support the thesis previously introduced:

(Note: the MLA format for citing sources is used here.)

Several reasons exist which have lead us to become a nation with one of the highest rates of child abuse and neglect in the world. The first of these is the problem of poverty. Families who live in poverty and lack the basic resources for survival often do not have the means to provide adequate food, clothing or shelter for their children. Many families today are headed by a single female, who does not work because of the high cost of child care, has limited work skills, or cannot provide for her children on the minimum wage salary she earns (Whitney 29). Berber states that "the majority of single parent families in this country live below poverty level, unable to provide for the basic nutritional, medical, and personal needs of their children" (34). Along with these problems, many families, mostly women and children, are left homeless and without a means of support due to domestic violence. According to the American Medical Association, domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women and children...etc.

Exercise:

Does the above paragraph support the thesis? _____ How?

What points does the writer make about the problem of child abuse and neglect?

Here are some key points to remember in developing supporting paragraphs:

Unity - you clearly state the thesis, with all supporting paragraphs backing up the thesis. (Note: avoid using statements like, "In this paper I will...")

Support - you provide at least three separate supporting points for the thesis with specific evidence for each of the supporting points.

Coherence - your paper has a clear method of organization with smooth transitions from one idea to the next idea. It has an effective title, an introduction, supporting paragraphs and a conclusion.

Sentence structure - your sentences are clear and complete; you use adverbs, adjectives, capitals, and periods correctly; you eliminate needless words; you check your spelling and vary your sentences.

Read the following and identify which of the two examples shows coherence:

_____ A. *Domestic violence is known to be a leading cause of homelessness in our country. As a matter of fact, many teenagers learn violence in the home and enter abusive relationships when there is violence in the family.*

_____ B. *Domestic violence is known to be a leading cause of homelessness in our country. More women, children, and teenagers are left without a place to stay when threats or actual experience of violence force them to flee their homes, often unable to return.*

Explain why you chose either A or B:

The Conclusion

Just as your introduction captures the reader's attention, your conclusion should leave the reader thinking about the issues you presented while bringing your paper to a logical end.

Some writers prefer to restate the main points in the conclusion. Other strategies may be used, such as an inspiring quotation, a dramatic example, or an important statistic. If you begin your paper with a question, you may decide to answer the question in the concluding paragraph. You might also urge the reader to take action on an issue, solve a problem, or change a belief.

Do not make the mistake of introducing new points that were not developed in the body paragraphs. Moreover, never leave the reader hanging, wondering if you forgot to end the paper or left something out. Be sure your ending sounds like an ending, **without using conversational language** such as, "this is all I have to say," or "this concludes my paper on the topic of _____," or even worse, "The End."

Below are some sample concluding paragraphs:

Topic: Dreams

Today scientists have discovered some of the most complex and intriguing functions of the human brain, but the meaning of one of the oldest and simplest functions of the brain, dreaming, is yet to be discovered.

Topic: The Problem of Television

Reading stimulates a child's imagination and so encourages thinking and doing. Television, however, promotes a more passive attitude. Children see television as the answer to all of their problems. It fills their time, keeps them company, answers their questions, and makes them laugh or cry, all by just pushing a button. To watch television a child really does not have to do anything. That is the real problem.

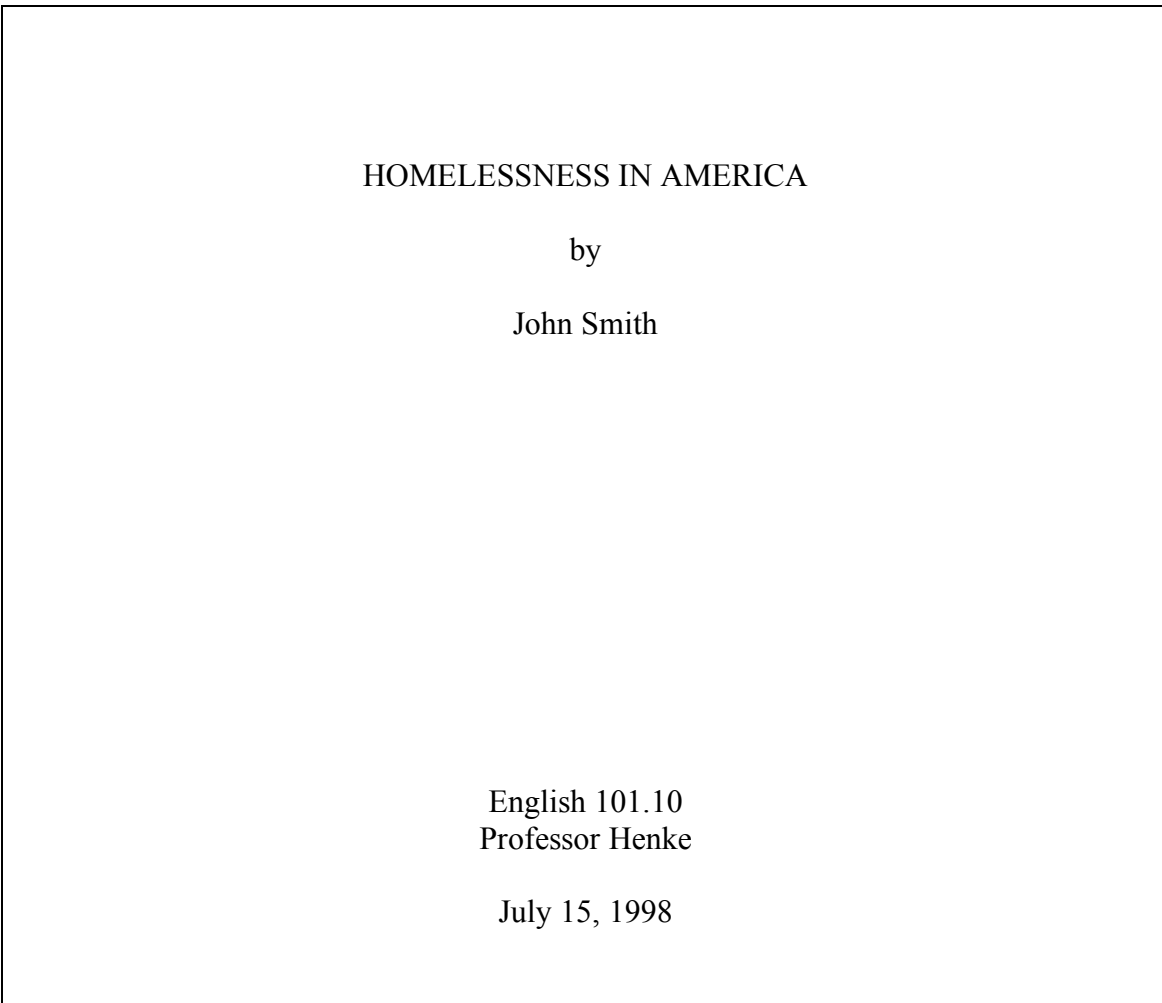
6. WRITING THE PAPER

Once you have completed your initial draft, or drafts, you are ready to prepare the final draft – the paper you will turn in. It should contain a cover page (see illustration A1), an introduction, a main body, a summary and a conclusion.

As you move from introduction to main body to summary and conclusion, strive for unity and coherence. Repeatedly ask yourself, "Do my supporting paragraphs relate to and develop my thesis?"

Be sure you can answer these questions: What is the thesis? How does the information presented support the thesis? If the purpose of the paper is to provide information or to make a point or defend a position, does it do so?

A1: Cover Page



7. PROOFREADING AND REVISING

After you have completed typing your paper, read it out loud. If it does not sound right, make changes as needed. Have another person, preferably someone skilled in proofreading, read it as well. Proofreading your own paper can be difficult. You may miss mistakes or be reluctant to make changes because you have already worked so hard on it.

Exercise: In the paragraph below, identify the mistakes underlined by writing the letter of the mistake (shown below) above the underlined area.

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| a. Sentence fragment | d. Dangling modifier |
| b. Run-on | e. Missing comma |
| c. Inconsistent verb tense | f. No mistake |

I had a strange experience last summer. I was shopping for a birthday presents when I came to a small shop. I was going to pass it by. Until I saw a beautiful blue robe on a mannequin in the window. Stopping to look at it , the mannequin seemed to wink at me or so I thought. I was really surprised, I looked around to see if anyone else was watching. Shaking my head I stepped closer to the window. Then I really began to question my sanity, it looked like the mannequin moved its legs. My face must have shown alarm because the mannequin then smiles. And even waved her arm. I sighed with relief, it was a human model after all.

8. DOCUMENTING (CITING) YOUR SOURCES

The time to document your sources is during your research. It is most important that you provide this information; otherwise, you risk being accused of plagiarism, which means presenting someone else's words or information as your own. **All information gathered from sources must have an in-text citation, even if you paraphrase it (put it in your own words).**

The various ways of citing your sources are shown below. You are likely to use many of them in a research paper. **The MLA format is used here. Another format you may use is the APA format.**

In-Text Citations and Direct Quotes – if you use any information that comes from an outside source, you must include an in-text citation. If you quote the exact words of an author, you must put the author's words in quotation marks and include the author's last name and the page number, as shown below:

"Community colleges offer technological and vocational programs that are often not available at four-year institutions" (Brown 12).

OR

Brown states that, "Community colleges offer technological and vocational programs that are often not available at four-year institutions" (12).

Or, in a case where you use more than one source from Brown:

"Community colleges offer technological and vocational programs that are often not available at four year institutions" (Brown, "Today's Community Colleges." 12).

Internet Source: include author's name, if shown; if no author is shown, include the article title; if the title is long, include the first few words of the title. **DO NOT** include date, page numbers, or URL.

(Brown).

or

("Today's Community Colleges").

Or

("Microbial Invasions of...").

Citations at the End of a Paper:

Your research paper should end with a list of "**Works Cited**," which includes all the sources you used in the paper.

Following is a guide for documenting various sources of information using the **MLA** format. For information on the **APA format**, consult the LRC or the SOAR Lending Library for additional information on source documentation.

1. Book - One Author:

Arner, Robert E. Effective Communication in Business. Cincinnati: South Western Publishing Company, 1990.

2. Book - Two Authors:

Koontz, Harold, and Cyril O'Donnell. Principles of Management. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985.

3. Book - Several Authors:

Shepherd, Hilton D., Richard Smith, and Ann Klein. Introduction to Modern Business. New York: Random House, 1995.

4. No Author Cited:

Begin with the title of the article.

5. Journal Article:

Sigband, Norman B. "The Cover Letter." The Journal of Marketing. 17 Dec. 1990:49.

6. Reports:

Federal Trade Commission, *Report of the Federal Trade Commission of the Merger Movement*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989, 35.

Birney, A.J., & Hall, H.M. (1996). Early identification of children with written language disabilities. (Report No. 81-1502). Washington, DC: National Education Association.

7. Newspaper article, no author:

"Study Finds Free Care Used More." Editorial. APA Monitor. 13 June. 1994, sec. A:11.

Newspaper article, with author:

Lubin, J.S. "On Idle: The Unemployed Shun Mundane Work." Chicago Daily News. 6 July. 1996:C2.

8. Encyclopedias:

Murray, Laura K. "Potassium." Encyclopedia Britannica. 1991 ed.

9. MLA Citations for Electronic Sources:

Internet sources:

Last name, First Name or Initial. Name of Page. Source of article. Date you accessed the page. URL.

Author:

Miller, D. "The Problem with Parasites." HowStuff Works. 13 Mar 2004.
Internet: [http://www.science works.com/irg/12/21-para.htm](http://www.scienceworks.com/irg/12/21-para.htm).

No author:

"Mind Control Exposed." Church of Scientology. 1966. 22 Jul. 2004.
Internet: <http://www.scientology.org/wis/wiseng/31/31-mind.htm>

NCLive Information

NCLive Books:

Same as any book citation, but add at the end: **Resource Vendor or Publisher. Resource or Database (If different from vendor). Date you accessed the information. Actual page numbers sited.**

Smith, George. Critical Interpretations of Silas Marner. New York: Putman, 1998.
NetLibrary. 8 Aug. 2001

***Note: NetLibrary is both the Resource Vendor and Database in NCLive, so it's only listed once. If the resource or database has a different name, list it as well.*

NCLive magazines:

Last name, First Name. "Article Title." Magazine Title. Date: page numbers, Resource Vendor or Publisher. Resource or Database. Date you accessed the page. Printout page numbers.

Traub, James. "The Hearts and Minds of City College." New Yorker. 7 June 1993:42-53. EBSCO Host. Academic Search Elite. 14 Oct. 2001. Rpt. 1-4.

NCLive Journals:

Last name, First Name. "Article Title." Journal Title. Volume (year): page numbers, Resource Vendor or Publisher. Resource or Database. Date you accessed the page. Printout page numbers.

Huntington, John. "Science Fiction and the Future." College English 37 (1975): 340-58. EBSCO Host. Masterfile Premier. 12 Feb. 2001. Rpt. 1-8.

(This information approved by the CCC&TI English Department, August, 2001.)

9. DELIVERY

Delivery means how your paper is presented, its look and style. Appearance is important as it determines how a paper is initially evaluated by the instructor. A well-presented paper may benefit from what it called the "angel effect," meaning its appearance alone invites a more favorable response.

Reports need to have clear, bold headings, plenty of white space, separate pages for graphs or illustrations, and an overall professional appearance. Before you encase it in a colorful plastic protector, find out if your instructor prefers something different. Plastic protectors, though attractive, are slippery and difficult to stack, often resulting in an avalanche of papers covering the floor. Some instructors prefer no protective covering at all. Find out what your instructor wants.

Here are some basic rules about paper delivery or presentation:

- Always type your papers on a word processor.
- For some reports, a separate title page is preferred.
- Use at least a 12 pitch font and one-inch margins.
- If not specified, use double spacing.
- Cite your sources according to teacher guidelines, using either bibliographies, footnotes, APA or MLA styles.
- If using a long quotation (more than four lines) indent the entire quotation using double spacing, and cite the source.
- Use a "normal" font like Times New Roman or Arial.



Final Check: Use the following checklist to see if you have covered the basics:

- ___ Attention-getting device
- ___ Thesis statement
- ___ Discussion of topic in three or four ways
- ___ Examples
- ___ Facts, quotations, opinions
- ___ Citations of all sources
- ___ Paraphrases when needed
- ___ Adequate length/word count
- ___ Topic sentences to support the thesis
- ___ Well-organized, well-written, and grammatically correct paragraphs
- ___ Conclusion to bring paper to a logical end
- ___ Proofreading by someone else



SECTION TWO

1. BOOK REPORTS:

A book report is different from a research paper primarily because it deals with one book in its entirety. It does not compare it with other books or attempt to make judgments as to its value. The report may include some background about the author of the book, other work, reputation, or circumstances dealing with the making of the book. You need to answer the following questions:

1. Who is the author?
2. What is his/her reputation?
3. What are his/her other works?
4. Are there any important circumstances connected with the book?
5. What kind of book is it? (fiction, history, poetry, etc.)
6. What is the subject of the book?
7. What material does it treat?
8. What is the theme of the book?
9. What is the method of organization?
10. What is the tone and style of the book?

2. LITERARY ANALYSIS

Literary analysis papers are different from book reports. They most closely resemble argument-based research papers. In a literary analysis paper, you will argue a point about a work of literature, using the work to support your assertions. You may also use research for other authors and critics.

3. TERM (RESEARCH) PAPERS

The research paper and the term paper are basically the same thing. They both require that you obtain material for them from many sources. Your purpose is to collect, study, and evaluate the material being researched and present it in an organized and understandable way.

Like the book report, you need to be able to answer certain questions when starting to write a research paper:

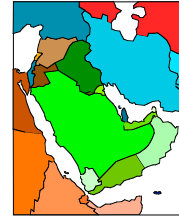
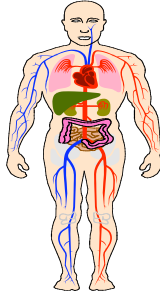
1. What critical terms and ideas need to be defined?
2. What are the problems involved?
3. Who is involved?
4. What have others said about the topic?
5. What is the history behind the topic?
6. What changes have occurred?
7. What will happen if no solutions are found?
8. What solutions have been proposed?

These questions provide background information to enable you to approach your research topic. Assuming that you know little about the topic you are researching, you must familiarize yourself with it. To do this, first choose a topic you are interested in, or one that appeals to your reading audience. Below is a list of ideas you may consider, adapted from the *Student Guide for Writing College Papers*:

1. Current issues.
2. National or international events.
3. Political, educational, religious movements.
4. Politics, business, sports, science, environment.
5. Processing of goods for food, clothing, shelter, transport.
6. Plant or animal breeding and raising.
7. Your city, town, or region.
8. Your school, college, or university.
9. Your hobbies or special interests.

It is best to avoid subjects that are too bizarre or so broad that you cannot narrow them down to a specific topic. For example, the topic of "world art" is very broad. Narrowing it down to one aspect, such as "the paintings of early 19th century artists," makes it much more manageable.

Choose topics for which information is available; otherwise, your research will be frustrating and time-consuming.



4. SHORT and LONG REPORTS

A short report is simply what the title states: it is limited to one or two pages, or a set number of words. A long report, as the title implies, is usually several pages in length. Both kinds of reports may involve research, careful examination of a topic, evaluation, or analysis.

The following components are generally found in long reports, though they may be required for some short reports:

1. **Title Page:** includes the title of the report, the author (you), the date, and the name of the instructor and the class for which it was prepared.
2. **Table of Contents:** contains the topics which the paper covers, in the order in which they appear in the paper, with page numbers.
3. **List of Illustrations:** lists any graphs or illustrations you have included in the paper.
4. **The Report:** is the body of your report, with page numbers on each page.
5. **Appendix/Bibliography:** contains the sources which you used and cited in your report.

The long report is not as difficult an assignment as some students believe. When you consider that a 12-page report consists of 4-5 pages of material other than the body of the report (the title page, table of contents, bibliography, etc.,) the actual report is only 7-8 pages long. Most well-chosen topics will provide far more information than you will need to write a complete and informative paper. Your job is mainly to organize and present the material in a way that will be understandable and informative to the reader.

AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is the act of using another person's ideas, words, or writing and presenting them as your own without acknowledging the source. This pertains to information taken from any source, including the Internet. Plagiarism, *which is the same as cheating*, also includes using false references. Most instructors are very skilled at

detecting work that is plagiarized. College policy demands that plagiarism be taken seriously as it is a violation of the academic honesty code. It could result in a failing grade for the paper and for the course.

To avoid this very serious and embarrassing problem, put all quoted material in quotation marks and cite sources for all paraphrases, quotations, and significant ideas. Your instructor and SOAR counselor can assist you if you have questions.

A Final Word...

Writing papers is a learning process. You will always be improving and perfecting your skill. Be open to criticism and suggestions. With these guidelines you will find that writing papers is not as difficult as it may seem. Above all, allow yourself to make mistakes and learn by them. In time, your creative talents will come forth and you will write papers to be proud of.



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