



## **Writing a Research Paper? Don't Panic!**

At some point, every student has to write a research paper. This may result in a lot of anxiety and confusion, but you can handle it! All it takes is persistence, patience, and a little practice – plus maybe a little help.

### **What is a Research Paper?**

A research paper is a synthesis of research, critical thinking, source evaluation, organization, and writing. It serves two purposes: to advance the body of knowledge in the subject field, and to give you, the student, an opportunity to enhance your own knowledge.

A research paper can also be defined by what it is *not*. It is not:

- A summary of a topic

- A book report

- An opinion essay

- An overview of a topic

- A summary of what others have written on a topic

It may include some of all of these, but it will, ultimately, offer a unique perspective or a new contribution to the topic under discussion.

There are two types of research papers: argumentative and analytical.

In **argumentative** papers, the writer takes a stand on an issue or topic. The paper is designed to persuade the reader of the writer's interpretation. The paper begins with an introduction that includes a thesis statement which sets forth the exact stand that the writer is taking. In an **analytical** paper, the writer usually begins with a question, either stated or implied. The writer then explores the topic in order to answer the question and derive a thesis statement. The paper discusses the topic in a way which supports the thesis.

### **How Do I Choose My Topic?**

When it comes to selecting a topic, you will usually be faced with one of two possible situations: Either your instructor gives you a topic, or you must select one on your own. Having a topic assigned is sometimes easier, because you can be relatively sure that the instructor approves of it and that there is sufficient information available to write a good,

complete paper. However, this can be very limiting. Also, the topic may also be something that doesn't interest you, which often means that you won't do your best work on that paper. If you want to work on a topic that isn't on the instructor's list but is of special interest to you, you can always ask the instructor if you could work on that topic instead.

On the other hand, when the instructor has you select your own topic, you may find yourself confused and a little fearful. It can be hard to find a good topic, especially when you're just getting acquainted with the subject. This is natural. The most important thing is to remember that the topic has to be relevant to the course. As soon as you know that a research paper is required, start thinking about possible topics. Pay attention to the textbook, lectures, and other materials as the course progresses. Keep watching and listening for something that interests you and that would make a good paper topic. As you begin to focus on a possible idea, ask the instructor if that would be a good subject for the research paper. If you find the due date approaching and you haven't found a good topic yet, ask for help. Talk to your classmates, other students in the same subject area, and your instructor about the assignment. Don't wait until the very last minute to start the research process.

### **How to Start**

1. Develop a tentative thesis statement. You can refine it as you do your research.
2. Brainstorm about everything you can think of that relates to the thesis.
3. Develop an outline of your paper.
4. Start researching your topic to find the supporting information you need.

For a step-by-step guide to researching your topic, see the Library Tutorial.

### **The Library, the Web, and Research**

Many students believe that all the information they might need is instantly available through the World Wide Web. With a few keystrokes and a click of the mouse, Google, Yahoo, or another search engine can retrieve millions of items on any topic. Why should you actually go to the library? There are several reasons.

- First, the Internet, by its very nature, is composed of an immense amount of totally *uncontrolled* information. This means it is the source of a large amount of good, reliable information but is also the source of a large amount of questionable, misleading, or downright bad information. Sometimes it can be very difficult to tell the good from the bad. Books, periodicals, and electronic resources at the library, on the other hand, have been selected specifically for their accuracy, reliability, and value.
- Second, professors usually want their students to find and use information from *scholarly sources*. The precise purpose of the university library is to make this type of information available. Although scholarly information can be found through the Internet, it's often not available to the general public. It may require

the payment of a fee, be limited to members of an organization or institution, or have other restrictions to access. The library, on the other hand, has already paid for the information and provides it to users at no additional cost.

- Third, it's easy to find millions of items on any topic through a search engine, but it can be very hard to find the exact, *relevant* information that will answer a specific question. Information in the library is *better organized*. In most cases, using the right subject headings or call numbers will make it easier and faster to find good results on a given subject. Plus, library resources have been selected specifically to support the university curriculum, so they are more likely to be relevant to academic research.
- Finally, *not everything is available on the Internet*. Many books and articles are protected by copyright law and are not available through free Internet sources. Searching the Internet for these sources may be a waste of time and effort and result in nothing but frustration. It will be much easier to find them at the library. And don't forget -- at the library, help is always available if you run into problems finding what you need.

The Internet can be a very useful tool, if it is used effectively and appropriately. The ASU Library has identified a large number of relevant, reliable websites on various topics. These can be found on the Library web page under Find Useful Internet Resources. Also, information sheets listing useful Internet resources for various subject areas are located in the Reference area. These lists will help you find good web-based sources for research.

### **Primary and Secondary Sources**

Often you will need both *primary* and *secondary* sources for your research paper. What is the difference between these? In general, a primary source is an original item, and secondary sources are things written about that item. For example, if you are writing a paper concerning Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, then the *Canterbury Tales* would be the primary source. An article written about the *Canterbury Tales* would be a secondary source. For historical research, primary sources are first-hand accounts of an event, such as diary entries, letters, eye-witness reports, or photographs. Secondary sources are writings based on these accounts, such as newspaper articles, biographies, or books about the event. In the case of scientific research, a report of an original research study would be considered a primary source, especially if it includes research data. A comparison or evaluation of two different research studies would be considered a secondary source.

This can become somewhat fuzzy, so if you have a question about whether a source is primary or secondary it might be best to ask the professor giving the assignment before using the source in a paper.

### **Peer-reviewed, Scholarly, or Academic Journals**

Frequently your research paper assignment will require you to use articles from peer-reviewed or academic journals. What are these?

Peer-reviewed, scholarly, or academic journals are periodicals that publish academic or research-based articles written by scholars in the specific field of study. The articles are submitted, then scrutinized by recognized experts in the author's field in order to assure that the work is of high quality for the field and is worthy of publication in the journal. (This is the peer-review process.)

Scholarly articles can generally be identified through their structure and language. They usually include:

- the author's credentials and institutional affiliation
- an abstract (a summary of the article's purpose, conclusions, etc.)
- a formal structure including an introduction, literature review, research methodology, analysis, and conclusions
- statistical analysis (not always, but often)
- references to earlier research
- a bibliography or list of references
- scholarly language and terminology

Scholarly journals are usually published by universities, professional organizations, or academic publishers, and most of them do not accept advertising. For academic research, articles from magazines or newspapers are not as valuable as those published in peer-reviewed journals.

Most of the databases available through the ASU Library have an option of searching for peer-reviewed articles only. Look for a check box titled "Scholarly (peer-reviewed) journals," "Scholarly journals," or "Peer-reviewed publications." The Reference Librarians at the library can help answer questions about finding scholarly articles, and the library has a useful handout on identifying a scholarly journal.

### **Evaluating Information Sources**

No matter where you find information for your research paper, you must use your own critical analysis to determine whether it is good, worthwhile information that is relevant to your topic. When you are evaluating information, you should consider the following points:

- Who wrote it? Try to find information about the author. Was it written by an authority in the field, an expert who has special knowledge about the topic? Is the author reputable? Often information about the author is shown in the book, article, or web site. If you can't find any information about the author, you might want to find another source.
- When was it written? Is the information up-to-date? If you are doing historical or literary research, this may not matter, but if you need current information, check the date of publication carefully. Also check the dates of the author's sources, listed in the bibliography or reference list. Even if the article or book was

published recently, the author may have used older sources which will date the information presented.

- Is the information accurate? Accuracy is one of the most important aspects of any information source. You may not be able to answer this right away, but check it against other sources. Compare different sources as you do your research in order to judge the accuracy of each one.
- Was the document published by a reputable organization or agency? If it's an article, was it published in a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal, or in a trade magazine, a popular magazine, or a newspaper? If it's a book, was it published by an academic press or one that publishes more popular books? If it's a website, who is responsible for the site – a university, an organization, a government agency, a company, or an individual? Different publishers or organizations may specialize in certain subject and certain types of information.
- Why was it written? Is the author trying to convince you of something or persuade you to believe something specific? Does the document display any bias? Does it present a fair, balanced view, or is it one-sided? Editorials and opinion articles have their value, but you must have unbiased, objective information for a good research paper.

## **Plagiarism**

When writing a paper, it is very important to avoid using other people's ideas or research without giving them credit. Failure to credit sources is *plagiarism*, and can result in serious consequences, ranging from getting an F on an assignment to being suspended from the university. Plagiarism is a form of cheating, or stealing from the author. Examples of plagiarism include:

- Copying or paraphrasing from a source without crediting the author
- Using another person's words or ideas as if they were your own
- Quoting from another person without indicating that it is a quotation
- Summarizing information from another source without indicating where it came from
- "Cutting and pasting" from an online source or the Internet without citing the source

Whenever you use information from another person or source, you must indicate the source it came from. For more information about plagiarism, see the Academic Dishonesty section in the *ASU Catalog*.

## **Citation Information**

All sources should be *cited* (or *referenced*) both in the text of the paper and in the list of references (bibliography) at the end of the paper, using the citation format (APA, MLA, etc.) required by the class. If you paraphrase the information, or put it in your own words, you should cite the name of the original author. Information taken word-for-word from a source should be enclosed in quotation marks and the exact source, including the page

number and name of the author, should be cited. The professor of the class or a Reference Librarian can provide information on correct ways to cite sources.

Most professors in the College of Education and the College of Business, as well as those in the behavioral sciences, require students to use the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* as a style guide for research papers, including citing sources. Professors in other areas may require students to use the *Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* by Kate Turabian, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, or the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Copies of all these style manuals are available at the ASU Library. The Reference Librarians at the ASU Library can answer most questions about citing sources in any of these formats. Informative handouts that briefly address the most common questions about citing resources are available in the Reference area. The Writing Center on campus can also assist with citation difficulties.



### **If All Else Fails...**

Do not hesitate to ask a Reference Librarian. Reference Librarians are available to help you at all times during the library's operating hours. Stop by the Reference Desk for assistance, or call (256) 233-8267 or e-mail [refdesk@athens.edu](mailto:refdesk@athens.edu).