

SECTION 1

**INTRODUCTION
TO THE
RESEARCH
PROCESS**

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2 Guide to Writing a Research Paper

Writing is an essential way to communicate in academic fields. When you write, you share your opinions, report research findings, express new connections between ideas, question common assumptions, and demonstrate knowledge. When your ideas are written, they are available to many people, both now and in the future. Therefore, it is very important to understand how to write an academic paper that is thorough, well-organized, accurate, and original.

Types of Academic Papers

An **essay** is a fairly short piece of writing (generally several pages long) that is narrowly focused and is not necessarily based on scholarly research. An essay may be based on factual evidence, such as a report on a particular topic, or based on the writer's personal opinion and experiences, such as a response to a text or a persuasive essay. Essays and research papers are similar in their overall organization—introduction, body, and conclusion—but the elements of a research paper tend to be much longer and more well-developed.

A **research paper**, or term paper, is a common requirement in academic courses, both undergraduate and graduate. The expectations for research papers vary according to the academic field. In social sciences (history, linguistics, communication, etc.), research papers are a common requirement. Science classes (such as chemistry, physics, or biology) tend to not require research papers as frequently. In your discipline-specific courses, the professor will tell you whether a research paper is required and will provide the format and style requirements for that particular field. In a research paper, the writer must support his or her perspective with other scholars' research to create a comprehensive discussion of the paper topic. A research paper demonstrates thorough knowledge of a particular topic, based on the writer's in-depth reading on the subject, critical analysis of the material, and careful exposition of the topic. The process of writing a research paper requires a good deal of time, energy, and focus in order to find and read high-quality, relevant sources that support your thesis, and then to develop a thorough discussion of the topic. Because research papers may be many pages long, the body of a research paper is sometimes divided into sections in order to keep the organization clear for the reader. The academic research paper is the precursor of other important writing you may do in your discipline—reports, theses, dissertations, and journal articles.

Just as in an essay, a research paper must have a **thesis statement**, which presents the central focus of the paper and the writer's point of view on the topic. A **thesis statement** is a sentence in your paper—usually in the introduction—that expresses the main idea of the entire paper. It frequently indicates the relationships between ideas in the paper and/or the flow of ideas that will follow. (See Section 2 for more information on thesis statements and research questions.)

Report and Argument Research Papers

All research papers require an exploration of the work of other scholars on the chosen topic. The type of research paper you write will depend on your research question and your treatment of the information that you gather. There are two basic types of research papers: **report research papers** and **argument research papers**. It is important to understand which type of paper your instructor expects and which type is suited to your topic. Knowing this will help you determine what form your thesis statement will take and how you approach the topic in your paper.

Report Research Paper

A **report research paper** is a common element of undergraduate courses. It requires that the writer gather information from several sources and present it in paraphrase (i.e., in the writer's own words) in a coherent, organized way. In this type of paper, the student discusses what others have written without attempting to add personal opinions about the issue. Writing a report research paper requires finding sources on the chosen topic, gathering facts from these sources, and presenting the information gathered in an organized paper. Analysis of the topic is central to a report paper: The writer must break the topic into logical parts in order to evaluate and understand it. In doing so, the writer becomes an expert on a very specific topic and can present the information to the reader in an interesting and coherent way. An example of a report topic would be "The history of the electric light bulb." This type of assignment allows the student to examine scholarly sources and to demonstrate the knowledge gained through research.

Argument Research Paper

An **argument research paper** is one in which the writer uses other sources to support his or her own opinion on an issue. The writer may make judgments about others' ideas, add personal comments and opinions, and present facts in order to support the overall argument. University courses often require argument research papers, and scholarly work in general communicates new perspectives and advances in knowledge through this type of writing. An argument paper may conclude with a suggestion for future research, and this can form the basis of a proposal (as for an undergraduate or graduate thesis or a dissertation).

To write an argument research paper, you must read relevant scholarly research on the topic and then use these sources to support your thesis in such a way as to convince readers of your opinion. An argument paper must take a stand on an issue that has several different points of view. Whereas a report paper presents facts and information gathered from other sources, an argument paper simply presents a perspective that not all readers may agree with. An example of an argument topic is "Pipelines are an effective and safe means of transporting crude oil across land." The writer's goal in such a paper is to persuade the reader of his or her point of view, with that view being supported by other scholars' research and informed opinions.

4 Guide to Writing a Research Paper

Overview of the Research Process

The process of finding relevant sources, gathering information, and drafting and revising a research paper can take weeks or even months. There are many stages in writing a strong research paper, starting with thinking about an interesting and appropriate topic, proceeding into the actual research process, and finally, moving into the act of writing. A project of this magnitude is much more manageable, and the final product is generally better, when the process is broken into steps, as shown in [Figure 1.1](#). It is important to remember that a good research paper cannot be written at the last minute, so be sure to allow enough time to focus on each of these steps and to construct your research paper to your satisfaction.

[Figure 1.1](#) illustrates that you may need to move back and forth among these steps as you develop your ideas and discover new facts about your topic. Many of the steps include a question to help you evaluate if you are ready to move on to the next step. If the answer is Yes, then you are ready to proceed. If the answer is No, then it is helpful to return to that step (or an earlier step) and spend more time working on that stage of the process. Although moving backward in the process may seem tedious, doing so early on can help you avoid lengthy revisions later and, in the end, you will have a stronger paper.

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Figure 1.1 The Research Process

