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Guide to Writing a Great Research Paper

Once you have chosen a topic and have had it approved by me, you are ready to begin work on your research paper. I have written a guide (in conjunction with other writing specialists) to help you along the way. You can find many research paper-related links, including sample papers in MLA format, on our course website. As always, feel free to e-mail me at clfisanick@aol.com or give me a call if you have any questions.

I. Developing a Thesis

Substantive

A substantive thesis statement is an assertion; it states a claim you will defend through interpretation and argument. An example of a non-substantive thesis would be one that merely described what your paper will do. For example, “This paper will discuss the impact of Luther’s theology on the lives of the people of Germany.” Note that this statement asserts nothing substantive about Luther nor about “the lives of the people of Germany.” In fact, this statement asserts nothing. Such a statement would likely introduce an aimless recounting of various facts about Luther and Germany. You might consider beginning your thesis statement with the phrase “In this paper, I argue that... .” Such a phrase forces you to state clearly an assertion. If you are emphatically advancing an assertion, your thesis statement is substantive.

Arguable

A thesis statement is arguable when you can imagine an intelligent and informed individual holding a position contradicted by your thesis. The significance of research and analysis lies in their capacity to change and rearrange people’s beliefs. The purpose of an academic essay is to defend a contestable and provocative thesis by presenting your research and analysis. If your thesis simply asserts something that you and your readers would consider a “fact,” or if it asserts something with which no intelligent and informed person could reasonably disagree, then you can be certain that your thesis is not arguable.

Specific

A thesis statement is specific when it is expressed in words sufficiently precise for your readers to anticipate the ideas you will develop and elaborate throughout your paper. For example, if you presented a thesis statement that claimed that “the Renaissance altered European ideas about marriage,” we would find your thesis arguable (one could write an entire book defending or challenging this thesis) but not sufficiently specific for an eight-to-ten page paper. After completing your rough draft, consider how you might revise your thesis so as to make it a precise and specific statement of what you actually prove in your paper. By restricting and focusing the scope of your thesis statement, you increase the likelihood that your short paper will succeed in persuading your reader.¹

II. Doing the Research

¹ Information taken word for word from <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~jhughes/criteria.html>.

Using the Internet

Once you have developed your thesis, begin your research by turning to the Internet and the library. Despite popular opinion, there are many great research sources on the Internet. I have listed a few of them below: (NetFirst)

Your best source for information will be the library. In the library, you will find hard copy sources and your best friend: the reference librarian. If you feel overwhelmed on how to get started on this paper, then go to one of the reference librarians on the fourth floor of Alden. He or she will be able to point you in the right direction and help you find the sources that you need. If you have some experience with library resources, or you just want to try it on your own, then you will find the following online databases essential to your research. Go to the library's website, click on "OhioLink Home Page," and then click on "Ohio Link Databases" and search by subject or by name.

Using the Library

For this paper, *Book Review Digest* and *MLA International Bibliography* will be the most important databases, but you can also find excellent sources in the following databases: *Articles First*, *Newspaper Abstracts*, *Periodical Abstracts*, *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, *Bibliography of American Literature*, *Contemporary Authors*, and the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*. Just search for your topic and see what you can find. Each database will give you the citation so that you can go and find the article or book that you need to read for your essay. Below is a sample entry from *Book Review Digest*:

We were the Mulvaney's [book review]. Oates, Joyce Carol, 1938-; Gates, David, reviewer. *The New York Times Book Review* (Sept. 15 '96) p. 11

According to this citation, you can find this review on page 11 of the September 15, 1996 edition of *The New York Times Book Review*. You then need to check ALICE and see where we store old copies of *The New York Times Book Review*. Once you find the call number, then you can find the book and copy or take notes from the article.

Evaluating Sources

There are a number of ways to evaluate sources to determine if they are credible and worthwhile in supporting your argument. I have included one of those methods here, but you can find many more types at <http://www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm>. Use these checklists for Internet and library sources. Just because it is in the library does not mean that it is credible or worthwhile.

Summary of The CARS Checklist for Research Source Evaluation

Credibility	trustworthy source, author's credentials, evidence of quality control, known or respected authority, organizational support. Goal: an authoritative source, a source that supplies some good evidence that allows you to trust it.
Accuracy	up to date, factual, detailed, exact, comprehensive, audience and purpose reflect intentions of completeness and accuracy. Goal: a source

	that is correct today (not yesterday), a source that gives the whole truth.
Reasonableness	fair, balanced, objective, reasoned, no conflict of interest, absence of fallacies or slanted tone. Goal: a source that engages the subject thoughtfully and reasonably, concerned with the truth.
Support	listed sources, contact information, available corroboration, claims supported, documentation supplied. Goal: a source that provides convincing evidence for the claims made, a source you can triangulate (find at least two other sources that support it).

III. Writing the Paper

Developing Your Introduction

Your introduction should:

- Not begin with a dictionary entry nor with an extravagant statement. The former shows a lack of imagination about how to provoke your reader's interest; the latter shows a lack of judgment about the appropriate scope for five to seven page paper.
- Motivate your readers to be concerned with your topic and with the question you are addressing. Often, the "hook" you use to gain your reader's interest reappears, in reconsidered form, as the "so what?" aspect of your conclusion. Experiment with different ways of provoking your reader's interest in your subject and the question you intend to answer. Avoid sterile formulas and sweeping generalizations (such as sentences that begin with "Throughout human history..." or "In all societies...").
- Persuade your reader that you are answering a question that is both amenable to academic research and worthwhile for your reader's consideration. Often, this amounts to giving your reader a sense that you are addressing a gap in our knowledge or understanding of some phenomenon.
- Include your thesis statement.
- Be no more than one or two paragraphs. Given that this is a five to seven page paper, you should have no more than one page of introduction.²

Developing the Body

- Clearly state each of the subordinate points that you intend to prove in order to establish the truth or plausibility of your thesis statement. To do this well, you should have a topic sentences for each of your paragraphs and transitions that make the progression of your argument clear to your reader.
- Provide substantive evidence to support each of your points.

² Adapted from <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~jhughes/criteria.html>.

- Acknowledge your sources openly and correctly. You must use MLA in-text citations to document all instances in which you summarize, paraphrase, or quote a source. You can find MLA guidelines all over the Internet, in Diana Hacker’s reference book, and on our course website.
- Be sure that you have met the minimum requirements for the number of sources and kinds of evidence for the paper.
- Use direct quotations only when necessary. (See the “Quoting and Paraphrasing” section below.)
- Acknowledge and rebut counterarguments when the evidence being used admits of strong alternative interpretations. Remember, the point of a thesis-defense paper is to persuade an intelligent reader to accept your thesis. If you do not deal with major objections that such a reader might raise, you are not likely to persuade your reader. If the counterargument would lead you to qualify a claim, then you should qualify it.³

Developing Your Conclusion

- Reiterate and state more fully the main point, the thesis, of your paper. Generally, your conclusion will echo key terms or concepts from your introduction. A conclusion should not introduce new evidence or arguments.
- Elevate the significance of your argument. In your introduction you “sold” your reader on the importance of your work; in your conclusion, you want to reiterate and extend its importance. Having persuaded your reader of the plausibility or truth of your thesis statement, can you offer your reader some sense of the benefits that come with this new, clearer understanding?⁴

Quoting and Paraphrasing

The biggest problems students have when writing research papers is in quoting and paraphrasing sources. If it is not done well, then it can make a great paper seem like a sloppy paper. You generally need direct quotation when the specific words of your source matter because: (a) you want focus on how the author phrased or expressed things, (b) you want to capture the vividness of the author’s expression, or (c) you intend to substantially criticize the author, and you wish to depict the author’s stand or perspective fairly. Quotations should be kept as short as possible. Under no circumstances is it acceptable to cobble a paper together out of a series of direct quotations. Remember that quotes (and paraphrases) are evidence and therefore must be introduced, analyzed, and discussed. Unless you explain to your reader what he or she is supposed to discern or infer from a given quotation, the quotation is merely filler—a group of words, not even your own, that contribute nothing to your argument.⁵

Direct quotations are another person's exact words--either spoken or in print--incorporated into your own writing.

- Use a set of quotation marks to enclose each direct quotation included in your writing.

³ Adapted from <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~jhughes/criteria.html>.

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- Use a capital letter with the first word of a direct quotation of a whole sentence. Do not use a capital letter with the first word of a direct quotation of part of a sentence.
- If the quotation is interrupted and then continues in your sentence, do not capitalize the second part of the quotation.

Mr. and Mrs. Allen, owners of a 300-acre farm, said, "We refuse to use that pesticide because it might pollute the nearby wells."

Mr. and Mrs. Allen stated that they "refuse to use that pesticide" because of possible water pollution.

"He likes to talk about football," she said, "especially when the Super Bowl is coming up."

Indirect quotations are not exact words but rather rephrasings or summaries of another person's words. Do not use quotation marks for indirect quotations.

According to their statement to the local papers, the Allens refuse to use pesticide because of potential water pollution.

Below are some further explanations and examples of how to integrate quoted prose into your own writing.

Quotation within a quotation

Use single quotation marks for a quotation enclosed inside another quotation. For example:

The agricultural reporter for the newspaper explained, "When I talked to the Allens last week, they said, 'We refuse to use that pesticide.' "

Omitted words in a quotation

If you leave words out of a quotation, use an ellipsis mark to indicate the omitted words. If you need to insert something within a quotation, use a pair of brackets to enclose the addition. For example:

<i>full quotation</i>	The welfare agency representative said, "We are unable to help every family that we'd like to help because we don't have the funds to do so."
<i>omitted material with ellipsis</i>	The welfare agency representative said, "We are unable to help every family . . . because we don't have the funds to do so."
<i>added material with brackets</i>	The welfare agency representative explained that they are "unable to help every family that [they would] like to help."

Block quotations

A quotation that extends more than four typed lines on a page should be indented one inch from

the left margin (the equivalent of two half-inch paragraph indentations). Maintain double spacing as in the main text, and do not use quotation marks for the block quotation.⁶

IV. Avoiding Plagiarism

I recommend that all of you visit Indiana University's plagiarism page located at <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html>. It offers great information on how to recognize and avoid plagiarism. The majority of plagiarism cases that I have dealt with were mostly because students did not understand that what they were doing was plagiarism. **I will fail you for the quarter if I discover that you have deliberately plagiarized.** By deliberately, I mean knowingly lifting material directly from sources, having a friend write your paper, or paying for someone to write your paper.

V. Grading Criteria

A = Outstanding

An "A" paper has a strong, clear, interesting, narrow, and specific thesis and an introduction that provides an interesting, helpful preview of the content, logic, and organization of the paper.

An "A" paper provides relevant, concrete evidence and logically persuasive reasons for every assertion.

An "A" paper has a clear and consistent overall organization that relates all the ideas of the paper together logically in a thoughtful, sophisticated, and memorable manner with ample transitions to aid the reader.

An "A" paper has unified, coherent, and well-developed paragraphs without exception.

An "A" paper has almost no errors of grammar, punctuation, word choice, or usage. The writer consistently uses sentences that are clear, concise, effective, and varied in terms of length and structure.

An "A" paper synthesizes the information and arguments from multiple, reliable sources into its own argument, summarizing its sources fairly and assessing them critically.

An "A" paper has few, if any, errors in using MLA documentation.

B = Good

A "B" paper has a strong, clear, interesting, narrow, and specific thesis, but the introduction is not a wholly adequate preface to the content, logic, and organization of the paper.

A "B" paper provides relevant, concrete evidence and logically persuasive reasons for most assertions.

A "B" paper has a clear and consistent overall organization that relates all the ideas of the paper together logically with transitions for the reader at significant points in the paper.

⁶ Copied directly from http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_quote.html.

A "B" paper has unified, coherent, and well-developed paragraphs for the most part.

A "B" paper has some errors of grammar, punctuation, word choice, or usage. The writing is always clear, although it is not always concise, effective, and varied.

A "B" paper uses multiple, reliable sources, but uses them merely to provide specific evidence for its own argument.

A "B" paper uses MLA documentation well with only a few minor errors.

C = Adequate

A "C" paper has a clear thesis, but the thesis is vague, broad, uninteresting, or not wholly relevant to the assignment.

A "C" paper provides evidence and reasons for most assertions, but the evidence and reasons are frequently not the most relevant or the most logically persuasive or the most thoroughly developed.

A "C" paper has a clear and consistent overall organization, but the organizational principle is vague, uninteresting, or inadequate. Transitions tend to be weak, uninspired, or vague.

A "C" paper has significant problems with the unity, coherence, or development of some of its paragraphs.

A "C" paper has a number of errors of grammar, punctuation, word choice, and usage, but the writing remains comprehensible at all times. The sentences are sometimes short and choppy or long and wordy.

A "C" paper uses evidence from a source of questionable reliability uncritically or relies too heavily on a single source at a key moment in its argument.

A "C" paper shows that the reader has a grasp on MLA documentation but does not use it well.

D = Deficient

A "D" paper has a thesis, but the thesis is unclear and vague.

A "D" paper rarely provides real evidence or real reasons for its assertions. The paper is made up mostly of unsubstantiated opinion.

A "D" paper does not have one clear organizational principle or does not follow through on its initial organizational principle consistently.

A "D" paper has frequent problems with the unity, coherence, or development of its paragraphs.

A "D" paper has many errors of grammar, punctuation, word choice, and usage, and the writing is sometimes incomprehensible with little variation in terms of sentence length and structure.

A "D" paper relies heavily on unreliable sources or does not take advantage of the range of sources and viewpoints available on its topic.

A “D” paper shows that the reader has little or no knowledge of MLA documentation.⁷

I will be tough on your research paper. You need to show me that you have been paying attention all quarter and that you took the time to develop a thesis, find and carefully read your sources, and write an intelligent, well-crafted research paper.

I urge you to re-read this handout often and to go to the Academic Advancement Center in Alden for help with writing your paper. Take all of the materials I have given you and explain to them what I am asking you to do. They can help you if you get stuck. As always, you can call me (between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. only) or send me an e-mail (the best method). I will be more than happy to talk to you about your paper. Good luck! I look forward to reading what you have written.

⁷ Adapted from <http://gsteinbe.intrasun.tcnj.edu/tenj/syllabi/Rhet2essaycriteria.html>.