How to Write a Research Paper

Most university courses involve some sort of extended writing assignment, usually in the form of a research paper. Papers normally require that a student identify a broad area of research related to the course, focus the topic through some general background reading, identify a clear research question, marshal primary and secondary resources to answer the question, and present the argument in a clear and creative manner, with proper citations.

That is the theory, at least. But how do you go about doing it all? This brief guide provides some answers.

Teaching Yourself

From the outset, keep in mind one important point: Writing a research paper is in part about learning how to teach yourself. Long after you leave college, you will continue learning about the world and its vast complexities. There is no better way to hone the skills of life-long learning than by writing individual research papers. The process forces you to ask good questions, find the sources to answer them, present your answers to an audience, and defend your answers against detractors. Those are skills that you will use in any profession you might eventually pursue.

The Five Commandments of Writing Research Papers

To write first-rate research papers, follow the following simple rules—well, simple to repeat, but too often ignored by most undergraduates.

1. Thou shalt do some background reading, think hard, and speak with the professor in order to identify a topic.

At the beginning of a course, you will probably not know enough about the major scholarly topics that are of most importance in the field, the topics that are most well-covered in the secondary literature or the topics that have already had the life beaten out of them by successive generations of writers. You should begin by doing some general reading in the field. If nothing else, begin with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a wonderful but sadly neglected resource. Read a few books or articles on topics you find of interest. Follow up the suggested reading on the course syllabus or the footnotes or bibliographies of the texts you are reading for the course. After that, speak with the professor about some of your general ideas and the possible research directions you are thinking about pursuing. And you should do all this as early in the course as possible.

2. Thou shalt have a clear research question.

A research question, at least in the social sciences, begins with the word “why” or “how.” Think of it as a puzzle: Why did a particular political or social event turn out as it did and not some other way? Why does a particular pattern exist in social life? Why does a

specific aspect of politics work as it does? How has a social or political phenomenon changed from one period to another? The question can be general or particular. Why have some countries been more successful in the transition from Communism than others? Why did the Labour Party win the last British general election? How have conceptions of race changed in the US since the 1960s? How do different electoral systems affect the behavior of political parties?

The point is that you should attempt to identify either:

- novel trends, developments or outcomes in social life that are not readily apparent (the "how" questions), or
- the causes of a particular event or general trend (the "why" questions).

Professional social scientists—historians, political scientists, sociologists, international affairs experts—work on both these kinds of questions. In the best published social science writing you will be able to identify a clear "how" or "why" question at the heart of the research.

"How" and "why" questions are essential because they require the author to make an argument. Research questions that do not require an argument are just bad questions. For example, a paper on "What happened during the Mexican revolution?" requires the author to do no more than list facts and dates—a good encyclopedia entry, maybe, but not a good research paper. "What" and "when" questions are only the starting point for writing research papers. Obviously, you need to have a firm grasp of the facts of the case, but you must then move on to answer a serious and important "why" or "how" question in the paper itself.

3. Thou shalt do real research.

"Real research" means something other than reading secondary sources in English or pulling information off the Internet. Real research means using primary sources. What counts as a primary source, though, depends on what kind of question you are trying to answer.

Say you want to write a paper on the causes of Communism's demise in eastern Europe. You would begin by reading some general secondary sources on the collapse of Communism, from which you might surmise that two factors were predominant: economic problems of Communist central planning and Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union. Primary sources in this case might include economic statistics, memoirs of politicians from the period or reportage in east European newspapers (available in English or other languages). Bring all your skills to bear on the topic. Use works in foreign languages. Use software packages to analyze statistical data.

Or say you want to write about how conceptions of national identity have changed in Britain since the 1980s. In this case, you might examine the speeches of British political leaders, editorials in major British newspapers, and voting support for the Scottish National Party or other regional parties. You might also arrange an interview with an expert in the field: a noted scholar, a British government representative, a prominent journalist.

The point about primary sources is that they take you as close as possible to where the action is—the real, on-the-ground, rubber-meets-the-road facts from which you will construct your interpretive argument. There are, however, gradations of primary evidence. The best sources are those in original languages that are linked to persons directly

involved in the event or development that you are researching. Next are the same sources translated into other languages. Then come sources that are studies of or otherwise refer to direct experience. In your research, you should endeavor to get as close as possible to the events or phenomena you are studying. But, of course, no one can speak every language and interview every participant in a political or social event. Part of being a creative scholar is figuring out how to assemble enough evidence using the skills and resources that you possess in order to make a clear and sustainable argument based on powerful and credible sources.

One other note for Georgetown students: In a city that contains one of the world's great research libraries, representations from nearly every country on the planet, the headquarters of countless international organizations, numerous research institutes, and scores of other political, economic, cultural, and non-governmental associations and institutions, both domestic and international, there is absolutely no excuse for the complaint that "I can't find anything on my topic in Lauinger."

4. Thou shalt make an argument.

Unfortunately, many undergraduate research papers are really no more than glorified book reports. You know the drill: Check out ten books (in English) from the library, skim through three of them, note down a few facts or mark some pages, combine the information in your own words, and there you have it.

This will not do. Your paper must not only assemble evidence—facts about the world—but it must weave together these facts so that they form an argument that answers the research question. There are no once-and-for-all answers in any scholarly field, but there are better and worse arguments. The better ones have powerful evidence based on reliable sources, are ordered and logical in the presentation of evidence, and reach a clear and focused conclusion that answers the question posed at the beginning of the paper. In addition, good arguments also consider competing claims: What other counter-arguments have been put forward (or could be put forward) to counter your points? How would you respond to them? In fact, consideration of counter-arguments is often a good way to begin your paper. How have scholars normally accounted for a particular event or trend? What are the weaknesses of their accounts? What evidence might be marshaled to suggest an alternative explanation? How does your account differ from the conventional wisdom?

5. Thou shalt write well.

Writing well means presenting your argument and evidence in a clear, logical, and creative way. An interesting argument cloaked in impenetrable prose is of no use to anyone. Sources must be accurately and adequately cited in footnotes, endnotes or in-text notes using a recognized citation style. The writing style must be formal and serious. Tables, graphs or other illustrations should be included if they support your overall thesis.

These are only a few guidelines on how to write research papers. You will no doubt develop your own styles, rules, and techniques for doing research, making arguments, and presenting the results of your work. But if you follow the commandments above, you will be well on your way to writing good research papers—and hopefully learn something about an important political or social topic along the way.