

## How to Write an Effective Research Essay



To write an effective essay requires you to follow a basic set of instructions:

### 1) Decide on a topic.

Brainstorm and do some preliminary research on your topic. Is it a topic you are interested in? Is there enough reliable information available to support a paper? Is the topic too broad or too narrow?

### 2) Prepare a web or diagram of your ideas.

You are still just brainstorming at this point, so any format you prefer to use is fine here. The purpose of a web or diagram is to put your ideas about the topic on paper, remembering that the structure you create here may still change before the final essay is complete having a web or idea diagram will enable you (and me) to know that you are on the right track.

### 3) Formulate your thesis statement.

Now that you have decided, at least tentatively, what information you plan to present in your essay, you are ready to write your thesis statement.

**The thesis statement tells the reader what the essay will be about, and what point you, the author, will be making.** You know what the essay will be about. That was your topic. Now you must look at your outline or diagram and decide what point you will be making (i.e. what position will you be arguing?) What do the main ideas and supporting ideas that you listed say about your topic? Your thesis statement should not be too broad or too narrow.

Your thesis statement will have two parts:

- The first part states the topic.
- The second part states the point of the essay (what are you trying to prove)

### 4) Formulate your thesis support statement.

After deciding upon your thesis statement, narrow down to **three main points/arguments** that support your thesis statement. These will be recorded in your thesis support statement.

5) **Begin taking notes and creating an annotated bibliography.**

You may do these steps either on the computer or on note cards (colour-coded note cards work well for this.) Whichever method you choose, you must be able to provide me with both your notes and your annotated bibliography. Be sure to be precise when writing both **direct quotations** and **paraphrases** from your research sources. Make sure you have all the relevant information required for **embedded citations** and the "works cited" page.

❖ *Refer to additional handouts for more information on these topics.*

6) **Begin preparing your essay outline by completing the section for the introductory paragraph.**

Remember that the introduction should be designed to attract the reader's attention and give him/her an idea of the essay's focus. Begin with an **attention-grabber**. The attention-grabber you use is up to you, but here are some ideas:

- **Startling information:** this information must be true and verifiable, and it doesn't need to be totally new to your readers. It could simply be a pertinent fact that illustrates your point. Follow it with a sentence or two of elaboration.
- **Anecdote:** an anecdote is a story that illustrates a point. Be sure your anecdote is short, to the point, and relevant to your topic. This can be a very effective opener for your essay, but use it carefully.
- **Summary information:** a few sentences explaining your topic in general terms can lead the reader gently to your thesis. Each sentence should become gradually more specific, until you reach your thesis.

If the attention grabber was only a sentence or two, add one or two more sentences that will lead the reader from your opening to your thesis statement. Finish the introduction with your **thesis statement** and **thesis support statement**.

7) **Continue with your note-taking and annotated bibliography.**

Elaborate on each of the three main points that support your thesis statement. In this elaboration, include research you have studied which supports each main point. Be sure to have at least **one direct quotation** and **one paraphrase** from reliable research to **support each main point**.

8) **Complete the three sections of the essay outline for the body of the essay.**

Remember that the body of the essay is where all the preparation up to this point comes to fruition. The topic you have chosen must now be explained, described, or argued; you will use the research notes that you have taken to do

this. Each main idea that you wrote down will become one of the body paragraphs. You must have a **minimum of three main points**; therefore, you will have a minimum of three paragraphs in the body of the essay.

Each body paragraph will begin with an introductory sentence. Elaboration can be further description or explanation or discussion. Your elaboration **should include a direct quote and a paraphrase** from one of your reference sources in each paragraph of the body of the essay. Make sure to note the **correct citation required**. Also include a concluding sentence for each paragraph and/or a transition into your next paragraph.

9) Complete the essay outline's conclusion section.

The conclusion brings closure to the reader, summing up your points or providing a final perspective on your topic. All the conclusion needs is three or four strong sentences. Simply review the main thesis of the essay (being careful not to restate it exactly as you did in your introduction.) You can briefly describe your feelings about the topic (remembering to still write from the third-person point of view). Even an anecdote can end your essay in a useful way.

❖ *The essay outline must be handed in with the good copy of your paper.*

10) Write the rough draft of your essay. Edit the rough draft.

- Write the introduction.
- Write the body of the essay.
- Write the conclusion.
- Edit.

❖ *The edited rough draft will be written in class. It must be handed in with the good copy of your paper.*

11) Write the good copy of your research paper.

The final copy must be word-processed and double-spaced. It must include a title page (see example) and a works-cited page (see example.)

12) Add the finishing touches.

You have now completed all of the paragraphs of your essay. Before you can consider this a finished product; however, you must give some thought to the formatting of your paper.

• **Check the order of your paragraphs:** Look at your paragraphs. Which one is the strongest? You might want to start with the strongest paragraph, end

with the second strongest, and put the weakest in the middle. Whatever order you decide on, be sure it makes sense.

**Check the instructions for the assignment:** when you prepare a final draft, you must be sure to follow all of the instructions you have been given.

- Are your margins correct?
- Have you titled it as directed?
- What other information (name, date, etc.) must you include?
- Did you double-space your lines?
- Are your embedded citations and referencing done correctly?

➤ **Check your writing:** nothing can substitute for revision of your work. By reviewing what you have done, you can improve weak points that otherwise would be missed. Read and reread your paper.

- Does it make logical sense?
- Do the sentences flow smoothly from one another?  
If not, try to add some words and phrases to help connect them. Transition words, such as "therefore" or "however," sometimes help.
- Have you run a spell checker or a grammar checker? This is a good beginning but computers cannot catch every error, so make sure to read it over and get someone else to do so.

**Once you have checked your work (using the check-list provided) and perfected your formatting, your essay is finished!**

**CONGRATULATIONS!**

## Embedded Citations: MLA Style

1. The simplest way to cite sources is to use parenthetical references or embedded citations. The author's last name and the page number from which the **quotation, paraphrase or idea** is taken must appear in the text in parentheses and a complete reference should appear in your "Works Cited" list.

### For example:

One runaway states, "Drunk, my dad couldn't work steady anymore, so he'd work on and off. He'd sober up for work and tank up after work" (Webber, 126).

2. If you cite another paragraph from the same work, or if the author or authors are clearly indicated in your text, common sense dictates that you only need to add page number(s) for the citation.

### For example:

According to Webber, street kids are more likely to suffer abuse at the hands of their parents (123).

3. If you are citing two or more articles by the same author, distinguish the sources by adding a date after the author's last name **or** by adding an abbreviation of the title after the last name.

### For example:

(Webber, 1991, 54). (Webber, 2000, 62-64).

or

(Webber, Street kids, 21). (Webber, Homeless, 35-40).

4. If you are quoting from a Web page, your citation for a parenthetical reference follows the same format as any regular citations for author, editor, title, etc. **with one exception.** Where no page reference is available on a Web page, indicating only the **author's last name, or the short title**, without page reference would be all you need for a parenthetical reference provided that a corresponding entry has been made in your "Works Cited" list.

### For example:

(Child Welfare League) or (Hynes)

5. Place quotations longer than four lines in an indented block of lines and omit the quotation marks. Start the quotation on a new line, making sure you indent. Your citation should come after the quotation.

For example:

Reading is defined by Johnson "as a construction of meaning from written text" (1999, p. 4). Johnson compares reading and the comprehension of written text with a symphony orchestra:

Reading involves the orchestration of a number of different cuing systems in a coordinated and fluent manner to access meaning from print . . . it is a holistic act, a lifelong endeavor requiring practice and there may be more than one interpretation of the text. Although reading can be broken down into subskills such as discriminating letters or identifying words, performing the subskills at one time does not constitute reading. Reading can be said to take place only when the parts are put together in a smooth, integrated performance. (1999, p. 4)

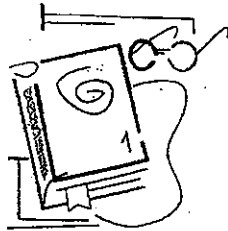
Hager and Gable (1993) consent that since the early 1980s, reading researchers have begun to define reading comprehension "as a process of building meaning from inherent or prior knowledge as well as understanding derived from textual material" (p. 170). They illustrate the many factors that affect reading comprehension in their citation of researcher Valencia (1989) and her colleagues:

6. When quoting from plays, cite the act, scene, and line numbers for Shakespeare's plays, and the page number, act and scene (if any) for other plays.

When Citation is Not Needed:

Common sense and ethics should determine your need for documenting sources. You do not need to give sources for familiar proverbs, well-known quotations or common knowledge.

## The Simple Guide to Writing a "Works Cited" Page



1. What is this "Works Cited", "Bibliography", "Reference List" stuff about?

Each of the above terms refers to a special page included at the back of any research paper. It tells your reader which sources you consulted when you wrote your essay. The different terms are used by different styles of citations. In English class, we will use the **MLA Style**, which means we will be using the term "Works Cited" as the title of our page.

2. How do I prepare this "Works Cited" page?

Included in this information sheet are a variety of examples. Pick the example which applies to the sources you consulted and follow the example to the letter. In the preparation of a "Works Cited" page, details are very important. There is a right way to do this and a wrong way; you need to be sure your details are accurate. Double-check your work.

To organize your sources, you simply put them in **alphabetical order by author's last name**. *If there is no author*, then use the **title of the source** to alphabetize the sources. You **never number sources** in a "Works Cited" page. You also do **not divide your sources by type of source** (i.e. books first, then articles, then websites etc...). It's simple, alphabetical order by author's last name or title if there is no author.

**You space your sources out in the following way for MLA Style:**

- Each entry is **single-spaced**. The first line starts at the left-hand side of the page and each subsequent line (line that comes after) is indented five spaces.
- There is a **double space between each entry**.
- Simply follow this pattern for all the sources you used, and you have completed your "Works Cited" page.

Attached to this sheet you will find the most common examples of how to record your citations. You will also be instructed about where you can obtain an electronic copy or a hard copy of a complete referencing guide should you need it.

3. Is there anything else I should know?

There is one more thing to remember about MLA Style – **each source listed** on your "Works Cited" page must be used as an **embedded citation** in the body of your essay. This means that not all of the reference sources you have looked at in your research will be on the "Works Cited" page; you only list the sources you actually quoted or paraphrased in the essay.

4. What is an embedded citation?

Embedded citations are used in the MLA Style to cite research that has either been **directly quoted** or **paraphrased**. Embedded citations must be included in the essay for **each fact/statistic that is not considered common knowledge** for the majority of the population. Otherwise, the essay is considered plagiarized.

❖ When in doubt, CITE.

EXAMPLE:

Works Cited

Berge, P. and Saffioti, C. *Basic College Research*. Neal-Schuman, New York, 1987 as cited in <http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/writingresearch>.

Engkent, Lucia. *Skill Set: Strategies for Reading and Writing*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Gladwell, M. "Should a Charge of Plagiarism Ruin Your Life?" *What The Dog Saw*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2009.

Hacker, D. *Rules for Writers*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Stern, L. *What Every Student Should Know About Avoiding Plagiarism*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.



## Web Citation

Here are the items that are recommended to be included in a citation for information on the Web or Internet:

- Web page
  - name of author(s) -if known
  - title of the work - in quotes, if known
  - title of the Web page - in italics, if applicable
  - date of last revision
  - URL
  - Date accessed
- **Example:**
- Ackermann, Ernest. "Writing Your Own Web Pages." *Creating Web Pages*. 23 Oct. 1996. <http://people.umw.edu/~ernie/writeweb/writeweb.html> 10 Feb. 1997.

## Paraphrase: Write it in Your Own Words

Paraphrasing is one way to use a text in your own writing without directly quoting source material. Anytime you are taking information from a source that is not your own, you need to specify where you got that information.

### **A paraphrase is...**

Your own rendition of essential information and ideas expressed by someone else, presented in a new form.

One legitimate way (when accompanied by accurate documentation) to borrow from a source.

A more detailed restatement than a summary, which focuses concisely on a single main idea.

### **Paraphrasing is a valuable skill because...**

It is better than quoting information from an undistinguished passage.

It helps you control the temptation to quote too much.

The mental process required for successful paraphrasing helps you to grasp the full meaning of the original.

### **6 Steps to Effective Paraphrasing :**

1. Reread the original passage until you understand its full meaning.
2. Set the original aside, and write your paraphrase on a note card.
3. Jot down a few words below your paraphrase to remind you later how you envision using this material. At the top of the note card, write a key word or phrase to indicate the subject of your paraphrase.
4. Check your rendition with the original to make sure that your version accurately expresses all the essential information in a new form.
5. Use quotation marks to identify any unique term or phraseology you have borrowed exactly from the source.
6. Record the source (including the page) on your note card so that you can credit it easily if you decide to incorporate the material into your paper.

### **Some examples to compare:**

#### The original passage:

Students frequently overuse direct quotation in taking notes, and as a result they overuse quotations in the final [research] paper. Probably only about 10% of your final manuscript should appear as directly quoted matter. Therefore, you should strive to limit the amount of exact transcribing of source materials while taking notes. Lester, James D. Writing Research Papers. 2nd ed. (1976): 46-47.

### A legitimate paraphrase:

In research papers students often quote excessively, failing to keep quoted material down to a desirable level. Since the problem usually originates during note taking, it is essential to minimize the material recorded verbatim (Lester 46-47).

### An acceptable summary:

Students should take just a few notes in direct quotation from sources to help minimize the amount of quoted material in a research paper (Lester 46-47).

### A plagiarized version:

Students often use too many direct quotations when they take notes, resulting in too many of them in the final research paper. In fact, probably only about 10% of the final copy should consist of directly quoted material. So it is important to limit the amount of source material copied while taking notes.

### Paraphrasing Assignment:

**Directions:** Read each passage carefully. Then cover-up the passage and write a paraphrase. Try not to look back at the original passage!

1) Of the more than 1000 bicycling deaths each year, three-fourths are caused by head injuries. Half of those killed are school-age children. One study concluded that wearing a bike helmet can reduce the risk of head injury by 85 percent. In an accident, a bike helmet absorbs the shock and cushions the head. From: "Bike Helmets: Unused Lifesavers." Consumer Reports (May 1990): 348.

2) "The Antarctic is the vast source of cold on our planet, just as the sun is the source of our heat, and it exerts tremendous control over our climate," [Jacques] Cousteau told the camera. "The cold ocean water around Antarctica flows north to mix with warmer water from the tropics, and its upwellings help to cool both the surface water and our atmosphere. Yet the fragility of this regulating system is now threatened by human activity." From: "Captain Cousteau." Audubon (May 1990): 17.

3) The twenties were the years when drinking was against the law, and the law was a bad joke because everyone knew of a local bar where liquor could be had. They were the years when organized crime ruled the cities, and the police seemed powerless to do anything against it. Classical music was forgotten while jazz spread throughout the land and men like Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, and Count Basie became the heroes of the young. The flapper was born in the twenties, and with her bobbed hair and short skirts, she symbolized, perhaps more than anyone or anything else, America's break with the past. From: Yancey, Kathleen. English 102 Supplemental Guide (1989): 25.

4) While the Sears Tower is arguably the greatest achievement in skyscraper engineering so far, it's unlikely that architects and engineers have abandoned the quest for the world's tallest building. The question is: Just how high can a building go? Structural engineer William LeMessurier has designed a skyscraper nearly one-half mile high, twice as tall as the Sears Tower. And architect Robert Sobel claims that existing technology could produce a 500-story building. From: Bachman, Ron. "Reaching for the Sky." Dial (May 1990): 15.

