

# WRITING RESEARCH ESSAYS

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The research essay requires extensive evidence to support a focused thesis. Key to writing an effective research paper is gathering sources that comprehensively address an appropriately focused topic, and synthesizing the information to present a strong argument supporting a clear thesis.

## GETTING STARTED

Before you go into the library, it is important to think carefully about what you are going to write about. Take some time to brainstorm how you are going to approach your topic. This will give you the focus you need to find relevant sources.

If you are not sure where to start, do some preliminary research to get a sense of the context of your topic. Read background information in an encyclopedia or look up unfamiliar concepts in a specialized dictionary. Use your new knowledge to help you brainstorm how you will approach the assignment.

## DEVELOPING A FOCUS

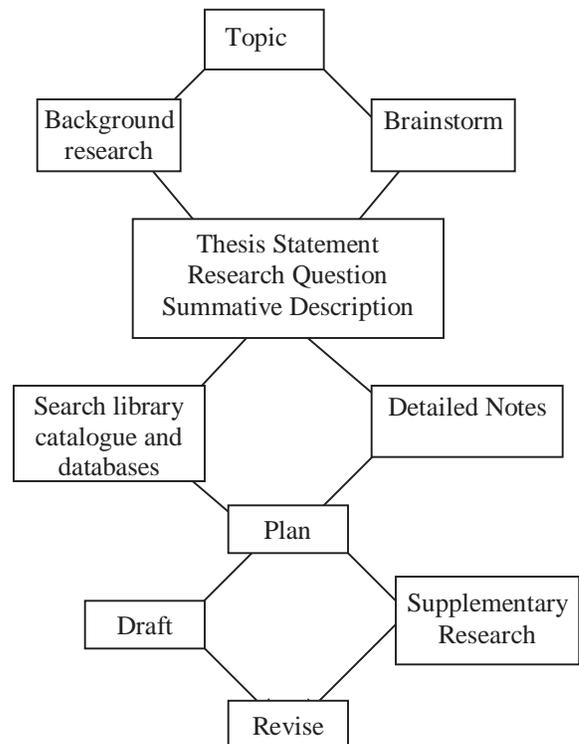
The goal of the initial research and brainstorming process is to develop a clear research question, tentative thesis statement, or summative description. (Which you choose will depend on the assignment.) This will help you to research more efficiently because you will be better prepared to evaluate whether a particular source is relevant to your topic.

## GATHERING SOURCES

Develop a search strategy. Determine which terms or concepts are specific to your project and use these to target relevant sources. Keep track of the searches that you have tried so you don't waste time on ineffective strategies.

Bring a written copy of your tentative thesis statement or research question with you while you complete your library research. When you find a possible source, check this statement in order to evaluate the relevance of this source. Having a clear statement of your focused topic will also help you resist being enticed by tangential information. Remember, though, that you may wish to refine your focus as you complete more research.

Skim each source you are considering to determine how it relates to your research question or working thesis. If you cannot see the connection, don't use that source.



**Tip:** If you are having difficulty locating good sources, consult with the reference librarians or book a Research Skills Instruction appointment online <<http://content.library.utoronto.ca/utsc/help/>>.

## ANALYZING YOUR RESEARCH

Read through the material you have collected critically and carefully. It is important to know exactly what the authors are saying and why.

Take detailed notes as you read. Be careful to keep track of which source you are taking notes from.

Focus on identifying the main conclusions of the book or article, and the approach the author uses to arrive at that conclusion. Aim to have a short summary of the whole, with a few pertinent details. Use direct quotations only if they are vital to establishing your point.

**Tip:** As you are reading consider ways of categorizing the information. This will help you **analyze** the ways your thesis might be supported and **synthesize** evidence in a relevant way.

Step back and reconsider your thesis statement, research question or summative description in light of the reading you have completed. Does the evidence answer the question or support the thesis? Has the data, or any of the arguments, caused you to change your mind? If necessary, revise your tentative thesis statement, research question or summative description to fully account for the information your research has uncovered.

## SYNTHESIZING INFORMATION

Remember that a research essay is not a simple shopping list of facts; it is a synthesis of evidence in response to a very specific question, thesis statement or controlling theme.

Read through your notes carefully. Look for ways of categorizing or grouping points together, according to overarching concepts. Use these categories to help you develop a structure for your paper.

<b>Example 1 – List of Facts</b>	<b>Example 2 – Synthesized Information</b>
Adler and Ostrove (1999) found that individuals who score lower on measures for occupation, education and income are likely to suffer from worse health. Macintyre (1998) and Marmot and Wilkinson (1999) examined the connections between socioeconomic status and overall health. Individuals from different countries have different levels of health; people living in places with lower socio-economic status suffer from more health problems than those in countries with a higher socio-economic status (Bobak & Marmot, 1996) A study comparing Lithuanian men with Swedish men found that the former were worse off in terms of SES and overall health (Kristenson, 1998).	Evidence indicates that socioeconomic status (SES) is an important indicator of health. In particular, low scores on measures for SES, including occupation, education and income, indicate that an individual is more likely to suffer from worse health than someone with higher scores (Adler & Ostrove, 1999; Macintyre, 1998; Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999). Cross-cultural comparisons also support this finding (Bobak & Marmot, 1996). For example, a comparison of Lithuanian with Swedish men found that the former scored lower on both socioeconomic indicators and overall health (Kristenson, 1998).

## DRAFTING YOUR PAPER

Once you have organized your information, you can either draw up a detailed outline, or start writing. Which approach you choose will depend on how you prefer to work. Are you more comfortable thinking through your essay before starting to write? If so, draw up a detailed outline to help you map out your points. If not, then you may prefer to start writing right away, get your ideas on paper, and then go back and edit to ensure a clear flow.