

Writing a Research Paper

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Preface

Writing a Research Paper presents guidelines on how you should approach your investigation of a selected topic. Your research paper will be a creation that is uniquely yours, based on God's Word, your own thoughts, and the information that you gather from a variety of sources. This booklet is designed to guide you in developing and publishing your topic.

There are many approaches to researching a topic and many ways to document your findings. The library has many resources which spell out various research techniques and writing styles. James D. Lester's *Writing Research Papers*, Twelfth Edition (2006), is one such resource that is excellent. The Internet also has many online resources which are helpful in this process, including the "A Research Guide for Students" website (visit <<http://www.aresearchguide.com/1steps.html>>).

You will need to consistently and accurately follow the recommended MLA style sheet. There are other manuals that creatively apply this style sheet, such as James D. Lester's *Writing Research Papers* and Jeannette A. Woodward's *Writing Research Papers: Investigating Resources in Cyberspace*, but the standard is the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, Sixth Edition (2003). The *MLA Handbook* can be purchased in most bookstores or you may access this information at the MLA website at <http://www.mla.org/style/style_main.htm>.

The research and writing skills learned in *Writing a Research Paper* should be cultivated for serving God. These skills will not only help you academically but in every area of life—at home, in church, in the community, or on the job. May God bless you as you seek to glorify Him, not only in the research and writing process, but in using these skills to advance the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Edward J. Shewan
Arlington Heights, Illinois
June 2000

Before You Begin

Writing a research paper is much like the task of a sculptor who takes a massive block of stone and chisels it into a work of art. As the writer gathers information and begins to chip away extraneous data, he begins to sculpt his large block of research into an artistic creation. By definition, a research paper deals with a limited topic and is based on information gathered from documents, books, periodicals, videos, CD-ROMs, internet resources, and interviews with experts in a particular area of knowledge.

Donald Davidson defines a *research paper* as follows:

The research paper ... is a long expository essay or article which represents the results of systematic inquiry into the facts.... The research paper is an answer to two questions: (1) What are the facts? (2) What do the facts mean? These two questions, when properly understood, fuse into one question: What is the truth? For facts rightly interpreted, are the truth.... The research paper demands of [the student], first, careful and diligent inquiry into the facts; second, accurate recording and reporting of the facts; third, inclusion of enough facts to make the discussion complete within its limits; fourth, honesty and clarity in interpretation of the facts.¹

A research paper is basically *an in-depth expository essay* in which you investigate a specific issue or problem, analyze what the experts have to say on the topic, and then make an evaluation of your findings. The problem or issue you choose to focus on is usually related to a broader historical, political, social, literary, or scientific context. Your task is to write an expanded expository essay that informs or explains.

1. Donald Davidson, *American Composition and Rhetoric* (Chicago: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939) 454–456.

Action Step:

Define the term research paper using your own words. Write the definition in your writer's journal or notebook, if you are keeping one.

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Your mind may be flooded with many questions: How do I start? What topic should I pick? Where am I going to find information to support my topic? How do I analyze the information I find? How am I going to arrange my material and write this paper? How should I cite my sources in the paper? These and other questions may seem overwhelming, but there is hope. If you have a plan, you will be able to conquer not only your fears or questions but your assignment as well. The following steps will help you in reaching your objective:

1. **Select and limit your topic.**
2. Carry out your **initial library research**. Gather your resources and prepare a "Works Cited" page.
3. Determine what your **thesis statement**, **limiting ideas**, and **audience** are going to be.
4. Write out your **thesis statement** and **general outline**.
5. Do **detailed library research** by reading and taking notes. (If necessary, revise your initial thesis statement and outline.)
6. Prepare a **detailed outline** from your note cards.
7. Write your **first draft**.
8. Do **additional research** if necessary.
9. Edit and write your **second draft**.
10. **Type the paper**, including parenthetical notes.
11. Check spelling and **proofread** your work. (Have someone else proofread your paper, if at all possible.)
12. Produce the **final draft**.

When you research a topic and publish your findings, you will not necessarily follow the exact steps outlined above.

Most likely, you will not follow each step in sequence either; rather, you will move ahead and then return to a former step and then move forward again. Often a looping pattern develops, where latter steps may be launched before certain previous steps, and former steps are revisited. The key is to *be flexible as your research proceeds*.

Since some papers do not require the same amount of attention, you must learn to *prioritize your writing assignments*—giving the most important ones the greatest effort. The length of your assigned papers will also determine which ones you tackle first. Beware though; a five-page project on some obscure topic may take as much time to write as a twenty-page paper on a more familiar one. In either case, you need to *schedule your time to meet the deadline*. If you miss the deadline, your grade will be affected accordingly.

Usually your instructor or the instructions for the course will give you a list of requirements for writing your paper:

- Choice of topics
- Length of the report
- Style of documentation to be used
- Requisites for doing a “Works Cited” page
- How the paper is to be presented
- Whether the topic has to be approved, an outline needs to be submitted, or note cards are required to be handed in
- If there is any penalty for submitting a late paper

Consequently, *you must plan ahead*.

Action Step:

Write the course requirements for writing your research paper in your journal or notebook.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

It is important to say something about plagiarism and documentation. These are related issues in that the former has to do with honesty in presenting your findings, and the latter has to do with how to honestly give credit to those you have cited. **Plagiarism** is the act of taking the ideas of someone else and passing them off as your own. Even if you paraphrase or summarize the words of an author, you have to cite your source to avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism is a serious offense, which most educators and institutions have recognized. Few, however, speak about why it is truly wrong.

As Christians, we should uphold the highest standards. Ultimately we do not answer to man but to God. The eighth commandment specifically declares that we should not steal; in essence, plagiarism is a type of larceny. It is the stealing of another's ideas and presenting them as your own. In other words, you are lying about the source of your information and deceiving your readers into believing that the ideas you present are your own. When you plagiarize, you sin first against God and second against others—thus breaking the two greatest commandments (Mark 12:30–31).

We dare not fall into the trap of plagiarism, but should always give credit where credit is due, which brings us to the second issue—*documentation*. Whether you are making a direct quotation, paraphrasing, or simply reiterating someone else's thoughts, you must cite the source of that information. The question arises, though, "Should I use footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical notes?" Obviously, your course requirements should be followed explicitly; however, the standard which is now widely accepted is parenthetical documentation.

What is **parenthetical documentation**? It is the means of citing a source of information in the body of a paper, as opposed to placing notes at the bottom of the page (footnotes) or at the end of the paper (endnotes). For example, if I were citing Ron Fry's delightful book *Improve Your Writing*, I would simply put his last name followed by the appropriate page numbers of the citation in parentheses: (Fry 82–90). If you wanted to know more about the source, you could turn to the "Works Cited" page at the end of the text for full bibliographical information on Fry's book.

Parenthetical documentation will be covered in detail later, but it has been introduced here for two reasons: (1) if you are having someone else type your paper, you need to find a typist who knows this style of documentation, and you should make plans to do so now; and (2) when you begin to write your paper, you should immediately begin to document your paper accordingly.

The Modern Language Association (MLA) style is more or less the standard for documenting research papers at most undergraduate institutions today. The MLA style uses parenthetical notes for documentation and “Works Cited” pages for bibliographical information. If you have any questions regarding this style, be sure to consult a research manual that teaches the MLA style of documentation.²

PLAN AHEAD

The following ***eight-week plan*** will help you in mapping out what you have to do and when you have to do it:

Weeks One and Two

- Contact a typist by _____. (Do not wait until the last minute or you may not find someone available. Be sure that your typist knows the MLA style sheet.)
- Select your general topic by _____.
- Complete your initial research by _____.
- Prepare a functional “Works Cited” page by _____.

Weeks Three and Four

- Finalize a workable topic by _____.
- Write your thesis statement by _____.

2. The standard for this style is based on Joseph Gibaldi's *The MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*, Second Edition (1998) and his *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, Sixth Edition (2003), which has been adapted for high school and college students. Other useful manuals that use the MLA style are Jeannette A. Woodward's *Writing Research Papers: Investigating Resources in Cyberspace* (1997) and James D. Lester's *Writing Research Papers: A Complete Guide*, Twelfth Edition (2006).

- Develop your general outline by _____.
- Gather the majority of your research material by _____.

Weeks Five and Six

- Finish gathering your research material by _____.
- Compose your final outline by _____.
- Write your first draft by _____.
- Lay aside your work for a couple of days.
- Reread your first draft, making any notes on the draft in regard to additions or deletions, by _____.
- Write your second draft by _____.
- Lay your paper aside for another two days.
- Read your second draft out loud or have a relative or friend do so for you by _____.
- Make any final changes. Check sentences for clearness, transitions for effectiveness, mechanics, and spelling by _____.

Weeks Seven and Eight

- Compose the final draft by _____.
- Proofread by _____.
- Type the final draft by _____. (Be sure your typist has plenty of time to type your paper, including the “Works Cited” page, and knows the required style.)
- Proofread by _____. (Do not depend on your typist to do this for you—you *will be sorry*.)
- Type the “Works Cited” page by _____.
- Submit your paper by _____.

These steps may be adapted as you see fit. Typing the paper yourself will also save time. Remember that writing a good paper takes time, so plan ahead. Get out your calendar and fill in the dates for each step of the process. As a rule of

thumb, plan to spend half of your time on **research** and the other half on **writing**.

A Viable Scenario

Let's say your research paper is due eight weeks from now; then you should establish goals for each week. Set aside the first week to select and limit a topic. During the second week, find various sources and prepare a functional "Works Cited" page. Reserve the third and fourth weeks for preparing the preliminary outline, reading your sources, and taking notes. Block out two or more hours at set times to do this library research.

During the fifth and sixth weeks, finish gathering sources and taking notes, detail your outline, and write the first draft. Schedule week seven for editing and rewriting your work, and preparing your "Works Cited" page. When all is said and done, proofread and type the final copy in the eighth week. Using your time wisely is the key to success.³

Action Step:

Copy the above eight-week plan into your journal or notebook and fill in the dates.

Next, we will take a closer look at your most important research tool—your local library.



3. For a helpful article on how to make wise choices, turn to Appendix C.

Using The Library

The library is one of the greatest depositories of human knowledge in the world. The library enables you to access nearly any type and amount of information available in the English language, and more. In your desire to improve your research skills, the library stands out as one of the best resources. By the mid 1990s, there were approximately 100,000 libraries in North America. These not only have a fixed set of volumes, but many provide inter-library loan services and access to the World Wide Web.

Let us say you have never darkened the door of your local library, and you do not have the foggiest idea where to go to find a book or how to start researching your paper. Upon entering the library, you should first ask someone at the front desk to help you get acquainted with your particular facility. The librarian is a specialist in the area of library science and can be an immense help in your library research. If the librarian is not available, look specifically for the card catalog.

THE "CARD CATALOG"

The card catalog has been traditionally housed in a large file-type cabinet, listing all the books available at your particular facility. Today, however, nearly all libraries have replaced the old card catalog system of accessing information with the computer terminal. This terminal prompts you through a series of "commands" to help you locate the information you desire. In either case, there are three basic ways to locate a specific listing—by title, author, or subject. If it is a *fiction* book, then search for it by title or author; but if it is a *non-fiction* book, then look it up by title, author, or subject. All of these titles, authors, and subjects are listed in alphabetical order in the card or computer catalog.

❑ Dewey Decimal System

If your topic deals with the works of Charles Dickens, simply look under “D” or the name “Dickens” in the card catalog; or, if you want to increase your knowledge on insects, look under “Insects.” You will be able to access the books listed by the **call number** or “Dewey decimal number” located in the upper left-hand corner of the cards in the card catalog.

If you are using the computer catalog, the number may be listed on the screen either to the right of the entries, if several truncated listings are given at once, or to the left as it would appear on a physical catalog card. If a printer is available, you do not need to write anything down—simply hit “p” for a printout of the items you want to locate. The electronic card catalog will even tell you if the book you want has been checked out and when it will be available.

Call numbers were devised by Melvil Dewey, who was a famous librarian and educator. Dewey is best known for originating the decimal system for classifying library books. The **Dewey Decimal System** is based on three-digit numbers—as shown below. These numbers are further extended beyond the decimal point for the various subclasses of books. Normally the library is divided up into sections according to these subjects. With the call number in hand, you will be able to find the section in the library stacks marked as follows:

THE DEWEY DECIMAL SYSTEM	
000–099	General Reference Works (<i>encyclopedias, indexes, etc.</i>)
100–199	Philosophy (<i>books on how to think</i>)
200–299	Religion (<i>books on the various world religions</i>)
300–399	Social Sciences (<i>government, economics, geography</i>)
400–499	Language Arts (<i>grammar, etymology, languages</i>)
500–599	Science (<i>astronomy, biology, chemistry, etc.</i>)
600–699	Technology (<i>engineering, medicine, etc.</i>)
700–799	Arts & Recreation (<i>music, painting, theater, sports, etc.</i>)
800–899	Literature (<i>essays, plays, poetry, prose, etc.</i>)
900–999	History (<i>biography, history, and travel</i>)

Each of these major headings are then divided further into sub-levels for more limited subjects, and then subdivisions for specific categories under each subject. These classifications are basically for non-fiction type books; however, all fiction books are listed under “Literature” in the Dewey Decimal System in alphabetical order by the last name of the author.

❑ Library of Congress System

The Library of Congress—which is considered one of the largest libraries in the world—offers an alternate classification system based on letters, rather than numbers, for major subjects. Although this system has greater flexibility than the Dewey Decimal System, it is more complex and lacks the logical decimal features of Dewey’s system. The **Library of Congress system** is more suitable for larger libraries in academic and research fields. The general classifications for this system are given below:

A	General Works	M	Music & Books on Music
B	Philosophy, Psychology, Religion		
C	Auxiliary Sciences of History	N	Fine Arts
D	History: General & Old World	P	Language & Literature
E-F	History: America	Q	Science
G	Geography, Anthropology, Recreation	R	Medicine
		S	Agriculture
H	Social Sciences	T	Technology
J	Political Science	U	Military Science
K	Law	V	Naval Science
L	Education	Z	Library Science

REFERENCE BOOKS AND RESOURCES

Besides the books that you are able to check out and take home, there are many reference books that cannot be removed but may be very beneficial to your research objectives. The *encyclopedia* is the logical place to start for a general overview of any given subject. This resource provides summary articles, outlines, and sometimes a selected bibliography at the end of the entry. Please note that encyclopedias are used for subject overviews and are not considered valid sources.

Other general reference works like dictionaries, thesauri, atlases, handbooks, almanacs, concordances, and indexes are useful for specific facts and support material in a given area. If you desire a more in-depth look, however, find reference books that contain detailed information on your topic. Keep in mind, though, that reference sources such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc. should rarely be cited in your paper as sources, unless they provide technical definitions or pertinent statistics that uniquely support your topic.

Not only should you utilize these reference works, but also magazine and newspaper articles, pamphlets, brochures, government documents, anthologies (collections of poems, stories, excerpts, etc.—chosen by a compiler), as well as non-print (microfilm, film, video, CD-ROM, DVD, and Internet) resources. These are just a portion of the holdings found in the reference section of your local library.

REFERENCE INDEXES AND GUIDES

The best approach to any kind of library research is reviewing a wide variety of sources. “But how can I find such a range of reference material on my particular topic?” you might ask. Besides the card catalog, there are several kinds of **indexes** available to you: newspaper and periodical indexes, vertical files (which hold pamphlets, brochures, etc., too small for the stacks), and the *Monthly Catalog of United States Documents*.

The most useful is *The Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*, which lists published articles from about 170 of the most popular magazines in Canada and the United States. The most recent articles, essays, poems, speeches, and stories will help in giving you up-to-date information on your topic. The *Reader’s Guide* is published twice a month, except for the months of February, July, and August when it is issued once; all entries are listed by author and subject—except stories, which are listed by title. This information is also available on CD-ROM and other electronic databases.

The *International Index* is similar, but covers over 250 American and foreign magazines that are more academically oriented. The *Essay and General Literature Index* is also a useful reference tool in locating articles, essays, and speeches found in collected works or compilations.

Another often overlooked resource is *The Encyclopedia of Associations*, which gives any particular organization's historian by name and lists certain specialists in your area of interest. If these experts live close by, you could make a point of interviewing them personally. If this is not possible, you could write, e-mail, or call them to gain valuable information you would not be able to get any other way.

Action Step:

Plan a visit to your local community library and become familiar with the staff and resources that are available.

Here are a few easy steps to follow when doing library research:

- Start with a general topic and outline, so you can focus your research and formulate a workable topic.
- Familiarize yourself with your local library.
- Get to know your librarian, who can help you find the resources you need.
- Then, go to the dictionary to look up any key words in your topic so you have a clear idea of what they mean.
- Next, refer to one of the primary encyclopedias such as *Britannica*, *Americana*, *Grolier's*, or *World Book*. This will give you an overview and historical background on the general topic you are researching.
- Do your initial research through various library and Internet resources.
- Consult the *Reader's Guide*, *Essay Index*, and other principal directories and indexes for more specific information.
- Another valuable resource tool is *The Basic Guide to Research Sources*, which lists government and private works, in all areas of knowledge.
- Make frequent use of your local library—one of your best resources for doing research.

The following brief listing gives various types of reference works that might be helpful for your research paper:

General Dictionaries

Oxford English Dictionary

Webster's Third New International Dictionary

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language

Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language

General Encyclopedias

Encyclopedia Americana

Encyclopedia Britannica

Grolier's Encyclopedia

World Book Encyclopedia

Periodical Indexes

Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature

Humanities Index

Social Sciences Index

Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory

Bibliography Indexes

Bibliographic Index: A Cumulative Bibliography of Bibliographies

Library of Congress Catalog: Books, Subjects

The New York Times Guide to Reference Materials

A World Bibliography of Bibliographies

General Biography Indexes

Biography Index

Dictionary of American Biography

The New Century Cyclopedia of Names (three volumes)

Who's Who in America

Writers' Biography References

American Writers

Dictionary of Literary Biography

Twentieth Century Authors

The Writer's Directory

Almanacs and Yearbooks

Information Please Almanac

The International Yearbook & Statesmen's Who's Who

Whittaker's Almanac

World Almanac and Book of Facts

Atlases

The American Heritage Pictorial Atlas of United States History

The Canada Gazetteer Atlas

National Geographic Atlas of the World

New York Times Atlas of the World

Rand McNally Atlas of World History

Literature References

Bartlett's Familiar Quotations

Benét's The Reader's Encyclopedia

Granger's Index to Poetry

H. L. Mencken's New Dictionary of Quotations

Government Resources

Statutes of Canada

Congressional Record

Monthly Catalog of the United States Government Publications

Public Affairs Information Service Bulletin

Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States