

Writing English

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Chapter 5

Writing a Research Paper

In further education one or more research papers is required to fulfil the education. It may be an essay on a novel or a play, a bibliographical study, a research on a historical event, or any other type of research or project paper. Forming a research paper demands the ability to gather information, develop, organise and describe ideas, and, of course, to write well. This competence goes beyond academic life and expands into the future life of most people, whether in business or in governmental institutions. Most of what has been mentioned in the previous chapters on writing a paper holds for writing a research paper – keeping in mind aspects such as the purpose, the audience, the appropriate style, clarity, preciseness, economy and variety as well as going through the process of getting ideas, drafting, revising, editing, etc. A research paper, however, differs from a regular, short text in terms of how to get ideas and how to document your sources. Whereas writing a regular text calls for information, knowledge and attitudes you already possess, a research paper requires you to find out what other people have said about your subject. Along with doing this research of what other people have said comes the duty of documenting your sources. Thus we can say that writing a research paper requires the following two elements:

- ♦ Conducting research
- ♦ Writing the paper

Conducting Research

When conducting research, you will need to find out what other people have said about your topic. The reason for this is that you can use such sources to prove or argue your point. Also, you can give your readers a possibility to read more about your topic⁵. Hence, when using your sources you should use them to support your claims. You must, however, be careful not to let them control you. You are after all the one who is communicating a message. This does not mean, of course, that you should ignore any text that contradicts your claims, but it means that you should only use sources that relate to your argument so that your message shines through clearly and unambiguously.

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Finding Sources

Some of the most obvious places to look for your sources are the Internet and the library. The Internet contains a lot of recent information. However, as the information on the Net does not go through publishing companies or any other type of censorship, you have to be extremely critical and sceptical concerning the validity of your source. Also, unless you are a very skilled Internet navigator, browsing the Net can seem very overwhelming with little organisational help. Information in the library, however, not only goes through a publishing process, but is very well structured. You will find sections reserved for reference materials such as encyclopaedias, handbooks and governmental documents as well as for books and periodicals. Books usually give you the overview and background knowledge needed in the beginning of your research. It is important to have a good solid background knowledge to see where your specialised topic and theme fit in. Periodicals, on the other hand, contain more recent and detailed information and are useful when you need to dig deeper into your topic. To get an overview of the materials available in or through the library, you can use its catalogues. The catalogues are generally organised according to names of authors, titles of works and subject headings.

After your visit to the library you may realise that some of your sources are so essential to you paper that you need to buy them. Owning books gives you the freedom to write comments in them, and you don't have to return them if other students are looking to borrow them. However, buying books can be costly, so to avoid wasting money you should find out as much as possible about your source to assess whether it is necessary to buy it.

Selecting Materials

Many books may seem interesting and relevant to your paper. However, time rarely permits you to scrutinise all the books you find. A good strategy for selecting relevant sources is to skim the table of contents, the introduction and the bibliography. Not only can the bibliography give you an idea of what type of information the book contains, it can also direct you to sources you might not otherwise think of.

Exercise 1

Imagine that your field of interest is American action films and that your thesis is that American action films focus on the plot at the expense of character development. Now look through the chapters of the books below and decide which chapters you ought to read.

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Book 1: American Movies

Chapter one: Romance

Chapter two: Drama

Chapter three: Horror

Chapter four: Comedy

Chapter five: New Trends

Book 2: Character Development

Chapter one: Famous Characters in Fiction

Chapter two: The Make Up of a Character

Chapter three: Funny Characters

Chapter four: Serious Characters

Chapter five: Character or Caricature?

Taking Notes

When skimming through your sources it is useful to take notes. A simple and systematic way of organising your note taking is to use note cards. Make note cards with subject heading on top corresponding to a preliminary jot outline of your paper. Besides the heading your note card ought to include the following three elements: the name of the source, page number and the note itself. Detailed information about your source is important for when or if you need to consult the source again for further scrutiny and for your bibliography. The note you write could be a very brief summary of what the source deals with, but can also be a quotation. If you own the source, you can even use post-it notes as markers. This makes it easier to locate the essential passages.

Using Sources

Having decided which sources to use in your paper you can choose between summarising and quoting. Quoting means copying your source verbatim. Summarising means giving a brief account of the main contents of your source, leaving out the details. You would quote a source when you feel you cannot express it more concisely yourself, otherwise you would summarise. For many students it often happens that they get so impressed by their source that they feel they cannot express it better themselves. It is, however, important to keep the number of quotations at a minimum. Too many quotations will prevent your own writing and your own message to shine through clearly. Remember that your message should be the predominant one and that the summaries and the quotations merely serve as a support for your claims.

Quotations as well as summaries need introduction. This is often done by reporting verbs. A most obvious one is the verb 'said'. However, a repeated use of this verb becomes monotonous, so vary it with verbs such as

5 acknowledge, argue, claim, disclose, imply, mention, point out, show, suggest, etc.

Short quotations (up to four lines) can be included directly in your text (surrounded by quotation marks). If they are longer they should be indented and often with shorter spacing or in a smaller font.

A: Short Quotation

Many theorists have attempted to define and demarcate the field of psychology. Rathus (1990) defines it as 'the scientific study of behavior and mental processes'. Other theorists prefer ...

B: Long Quotation

In his preface to Don Quixote Cervantes reveals the paradox of his storytelling: his attempt is to tell a story as plainly as it is, but still with the conscious knowledge that he could make his audience believe a lie:

You may depend upon my bare word, reader, without any further security, that I could wish this offspring of my brain were as ingenious, sprightly, and accomplished as yourself could desire; but the mischief of it is, nature will have its course: every production must resemble its author, and my barren and unpolished understanding can produce nothing but what is very dull, very impertinent, and extravagant beyond imagination.

(Cervantes: Don Quixote, p. 1. Wordsworth Classics. Hertfordshire. 1993)

Remember to write at least the name and year of your source. Information on publishing company and place (and other relevant information), however, must be included in your bibliography.

Exercise 2

Imagine that your field of interest is sports and psychology and that your thesis is that athletes can use cognitive strategies to enhance performance. You have found the following passage in a relevant book.

Summarise the passage below and quote a smaller passage from it.

C: Positive Visualisation

Like many other performers, Menhardt was also shown how to use the technique of positive visualisation. He envisioned himself going through the motions in a critical game situation. He pictured blocking the crowd out of his mind and focusing on the ball. He moved fluidly toward the ball as if in a trance – as if he and the performance were one – and booted the ball flawlessly through the posts.

And after his new combination of athletic, behavioral, and cognitive training, Menhardt returned to the team and made a last-second 54-yard goal against North Carolina State. He gave Penn State the winning margin: 9-6. That season he went on to convert 14 field goals in 20 attempts and all of his 28 kicks after touchdowns.

Menhardt was now engaging in what sports psychologists refer to as “peak performances.” In their review of the literature, Browne and Maloney (1984) found that such performances are characterized by intense concentration; ability to screen out the crowd and, when appropriate, the competitors (successful field-goal kickers and quarterbacks do not usually “hear footsteps” or focus on the opposition’s defenders rushing in); a sense of power and control over the situation; lack of pain and fatigue; and the sense that time has slowed down, as if the performance is being carried out in slow motion. They report that they can “see” the ball very well and that when they are at their peak, even fast balls seem to linger in the air as they come across the plate – so that to them, a fast ball might not seem very swift at all.

(Rathus, Spencer, A. Psychology, Fourth Edition, pp. 676-677. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Orlando, USA. 1990.)

Documenting your Sources

Whatever source you use in your paper must be documented (only famous sayings and biblical references can go undocumented). If you don’t document your sources, you will not only undermine your reader’s trust in whatever you say, but you can be accused of plagiarism. Plagiarism is the illegal act of stealing someone’s words pretending they are your own.

You will have to put the name (and year) of your source in the text when you quote or summarise a text or certain ideas from a text. But you also have to enclose a complete bibliography in your paper. In this bibliography you must include all the works you have cited as well as the works that have helped shape your ideas. Your sources have to be listed in alphabetical order by author’s last name.

You need to include the following information about each of the sources:

- ◆ Name of the author(s). Last name first, followed by first name or first name initial(s) – if there is more than one author, the first name of these authors or their first name initials are written before their last names. If your source is written by a lot of authors, you can write the name of the first author and write et al. for the rest of the authors. Some books are written by several authors but with an editor in charge of the compilation of contributions. In this case you write the name of the editor followed by the abbreviation “ed.”.
- ◆ Article or book name. If you have used only a chapter of a book or an article in a journal, you write the name of the chapter/article followed by the name of the book/the name of the journal. The name of the book/article is usually underlined or written in italics.
- ◆ Publisher
- ◆ City of publication
- ◆ Pages
- ◆ Date/year

The following are examples of how to document a source. As you can see, there are different ways of including the information needed (e.g. putting the year after the author or in the back, using italics or underlining, etc.). You must, however, remember to be consistent in your choice.

Schmidt, R. W. And Richards, J. C. (1980). ‘Speech acts and second language learning’, *Applied Linguistics*, 1/2, 129-157.

Hymes, D. H. (1972). ‘On communicative competence’, in Pride, J. B. And Holmes, J. (eds.), *Sociolinguistics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Bode, S. et al. Listening In and Speaking Out: Advanced, New York: Longman. 1981

The following abbreviations may be useful in documenting your sources:

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Ed. | editor, edition, edited by |
| Et al. | et alii, and others |
| Ibid. | ibidem, in the same place |
| Il., illus. | illustration, illustrated by |
| Loc.cit. | loco citato, in the place cited |
| n.d. | no date given |
| p., pp. | Page, pages |
| passim | in different sections of the text; no page or pages cited |
| vo., vols. | volumes |

Writing the Paper

Your sources will provide you with the necessary information to back up your paper. However, it is a very bad idea to wait for all your research to be done before you start writing your paper. If you put out the writing process until all the research has been done, you'll end up procrastinating your entire paper because you can always find sources relevant to your paper. You may feel that you need to read more and more and end up with a massive amount of materials, and finally it will seem too overwhelming to embark on a paper. The best cure against procrastination is to let the research and the writing run parallel.

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The writing process for a research paper could be:

- Phase 1: Getting Ideas
- Phase 2: Narrowing down your topic and organising your ideas
- Phase 3: Making a preliminary jot outline
- Phase 4: Thesis
- Phase 5: Intensive research
- Phase 6: Formal outline and thesis check
- Phase 7: Writing a rough draft
- Phase 8: Revising
- Phase 9: Editing
- Phase 10: Publishing

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Phase 1: Getting Ideas

Sometimes your instructor will give you a theme or a choice of themes to choose from. Other times you will have to define your own theme (with assistance from your instructor). Start with brainstorming. You can use some of the strategies mentioned in chapter 4. You can also try starters like the following

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1. During this education/this course a central concern/an interesting focus has been ...
2. In jobs relevant to this education, knowledge about these areas may be important...
3. The society/certain groups of people may benefit from knowing...

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Exercise 3

Brainstorm with one of the starters above.

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Phase 2: Narrowing Down your Topic and Organising your Ideas

After the brainstorming you need to narrow down and organise your topic. Again, you can use the strategies mentioned in chapter 4. If you still have problems narrowing down your topic, you can make a preliminary visit to the library and make a few note cards (see above on taking notes). Organise the note cards in piles according to topics. The pile with the highest number of note cards will be your topic, as this will be an indication that this is the topic you are most interested in ... or at least this is the topic you have been most successful finding relevant materials for.

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Phase 3: Making a Preliminary Jot Outline

Having found your main topic, you need to identify your subtopics for it. Again, you can use the strategies mentioned in chapter 4. If you still have problems organising your ideas, take your library note cards corresponding to your main topic and try to organise them into smaller piles. Make headlines for each of the piles. This will be your preliminary jot outline.

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Phase 4: Thesis

Based on your preliminary jot outline, try to narrow your ideas down to a single thesis. A thesis is like the thesis statement mentioned in chapter 2. It must be specific and unambiguous, stating your view on your topic or your intention to find the answer to one main question. Remember that your view on your topic should not be based on your personal, emotional opinion or some intuition, but that you must communicate a view that has emerged on logical grounds.

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Exercise 4

Evaluate the following theses. What makes them good? What makes them bad? If you feel they are bad, improve them.

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1. Some people prefer living in the country where the houses are cheaper, the pace is slower and the people spend more time with their neighbours. Other people prefer the fast city life, enjoy isolation and don't mind living in small apartments.
2. I think that motivation is an important factor in the learning process.
3. In this paper I am going to write about female characters on film.

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Phase 5: Intensive Research

Having a preliminary jot outline as well as a preliminary thesis make up a good guide for your library research. It helps you focus and structure your

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research. However, don't let your jot outline be too cemented as you might get inspired by ideas from your research. Make note cards corresponding to your preliminary jot outline. Start your research as mentioned above

Phase 6: Formal Outline and Thesis Check

Shortly after your trip to your library you should try to make a formal outline. This will relate to your jot outline, but having done some intensive research, it may look slightly different. You may also need to revise your thesis.

Phase 7: Writing a Rough Draft

Start off with the introduction. Even though you are likely to change it at a larger stage (when revising) it is useful to attempt at one already now. A preliminary introduction helps you focus your paper. An introduction must include your thesis, and every sentence, every paragraph in the rest of your paper must relate to your thesis. After the introduction you embark on your body taking a starting point in your formal outline. It usually seems more manageable to treat each subtopic one by one. Remember, however, that even though you may feel strongly for your topic, your arguments must be based on logic not on personal, emotional views or experiences. See also chapter 2 on how to structure a paper.

Phase 8: Revising

A long research paper requires several revisions. The revision procedures are the same as the ones mentioned in chapter 4, but since it is a long paper and since you have visited the library several times, have been inspired by new ideas and probably changed your thesis a bit, you may need to take extra care that everything in your paper contributes to your thesis. As with a short paper, it is always a good idea to have someone look through your paper, among other things to check that your arguments seem logical and that your chapters and paragraphs relate to your thesis.

Phase 9: Editing

The procedures for editing will be the same as those mentioned in chapter 4. Again, it must be stressed that peer correcting is a good idea.

Phase 10: Publishing

The procedure for publishing will be the same as the one mentioned in chapter 4. When you have spent a lot of time on a long paper, you probably don't

have the energy to think of the lay-out. It is nevertheless important to hand in a paper that that looks well-organised and that does not disturb the eye.

Supervisor

Most students will have a supervisor for their paper. If you have one, use her/him. You must, however, respect the fact that your supervisor may be busy and may not be able to meet with you as much as you want. Thus it is important to get as much out of your meetings as possible. You must work before the meeting, during the meeting, and after the meeting.

Before the meeting: Always bring concrete ideas to the meeting (even if it is a virtual meeting), preferably something in writing, and, preferably, send it in advance. You can ask your supervisor to go through some of your materials; not the entire paper, but the important bits, where you may have questions, insecurities, etc.

During the meeting: At your first meeting, you must tell about your ideas for a thesis, methods, concepts, ideas, empirical research, and come up with a preliminary jot outline. Your supervisor can then comment on this. This will give you something concrete to go on with until you meet again.

After the meeting: Shortly after your meeting with your supervisor's comments fresh in memory, you should put something down in writing. It will give you a sense of accomplishing something.

Exercise 5:

Keep a journal of the work you have done in this chapter.

1. Describe the activities you have done
2. Discuss whether these activities have been useful for learning how to write a research paper. Give reasons.