Research Papers

Overview

Definition:
A research paper is an essay in which you explain what you have learned after exploring your topic in depth. In a research paper, you include information from sources such as books, articles, interviews, and Internet sites. You also use your own ideas, knowledge, and opinions. Most of your paper (as a rule of thumb, at least 80%) must be in your own words.

Main Ideas:
Your paper should focus on a central issue that interests you. Limit your topic so that you can cover it in a paper of the assigned length. Organize the paper around the points that are most important in your opinion. State your main ideas in your own words and use information from your sources to support them.

Paraphrasing and Summarizing:
Incorporate ideas and facts from your sources by paraphrasing and summarizing. Write the ideas in your own way, using different words and sentence structures and leaving out unnecessary details.

Quotations:
Use quotations when the author's words are especially well chosen or memorable. When you quote even a short phrase, copy the exact words, enclose them in quotation marks, and cite the name of the author or speaker.

Documentation:
When you give facts, paraphrase and summarize ideas, or quote someone else's words, you must document your sources. As a rule, anything that is not common knowledge must be cited. The purpose of documentation is to give credit to the author and to allow your readers to look up your sources. Your paper is stronger because you can prove that the information came from reliable sources.

Steps in the Process

Choose a Topic:
Select a topic covered in the course or assigned by the instructor. Discuss with your instructor any questions about an appropriate topic.

Do Library Research:
The college library has the best resources to do your research. Look for a variety of sources, such as books, periodicals, and Internet sites. Books give a broad perspective, while recent articles provide up-to-date information. You can search for articles from many newspapers, magazines,

and scholarly journals in the library's research databases, such as EBSCOhost. You can access the Sierra College Library's online resources from off campus through your MySierra account.

Narrow Your Topic:
As you do research, you may form a question that you want to answer or find that a lot of information is available about a particular aspect of your topic. For example, if you started with the topic deforestation, you might narrow it down to the deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon, or you might try to answer a question: Can logging be done in a sustainable way?

Read Actively and Make Notes:
As you read your sources, highlight and make notes in the margin (on copies). Write summaries of the main points in your own words, noting the source of each summary. If you copy groups of words, put them in quotation marks so that you will remember that you copied them.

Plan:
Decide how to organize your paper and make an outline that will help you stay on topic and present your ideas in a logical order.

Write and Revise:
Do not expect to write a finished paper all at once. First, get your ideas down on paper in a rough draft. Read it over and revise, trying to improve the content and organization. Ask someone else to read it and give you feedback. Edit your paper for sentence structure and word choice.

Document Your Sources:
In addition to citing your sources in the text of your paper, the last page will be a list of sources. Use the documentation style that your instructor assigns. Four common styles are Modern Language Association (MLA), American Psychological Association (APA), Chicago Manual of Style (CMS), and Council of Science Editors (CSE). You can pick up a free Term Paper Handbook for any of these styles at the Writing Center, and you can download them from the Writing Center website.

Proofread:
Read over the whole paper slowly and carefully, checking for errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Make sure your paper follows the assigned format. Use the spelling checker on the computer, but do not depend on it. The spelling checker does not catch misspellings of similar-sounding words, and it frequently suggests the wrong word as a correction. The grammar checker is even less reliable. Remember: You make the decisions, not the computer.