Writing an A+ Research Paper

Sample

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Writing an A+ Research Paper

A Roadmap for Beginning and Experienced Writers

By Douglas Grudzina
& Boris Kolba

Prestwick House

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HOW IS THIS BOOK DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER BOOKS?

To be assigned a research paper is probably one of the most stressful events in the life of a high school student, but it does not need to be, because, as this book will show you, a research paper is really nothing more than a well-written essay that contains information from sources other than your own mind.

The mystique of the research paper lies essentially in the time allowed a student to write one and in the arcane system of citation, documentation, and attribution that make a research paper *look like* a research paper. Stripped of its trappings, however, the research assignment is not terribly different from any other writing assignment. In fact, it should be a pleasant time for you to learn more about something that really interests you and then show off your knowledge to your teacher.

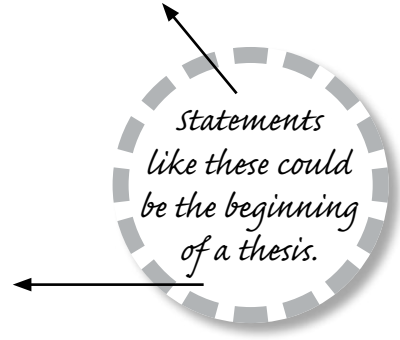
Most other research paper guides and handbooks perpetuate the "cult of the difficult task" by focusing on the form and format and dividing the task into smaller chores, each of which is made to look insurmountable in its own way. Those research guides provide a few models and then leave you stranded just as you are about to begin your own paper in earnest.

This book won't.

Writing an A+ Research Paper will stay with you from the first day of school to the day you turn in your final draft. More than that even, this book will provide you with companionship as you embark on this rite of passage. As you work on your research project, you will meet Ella and Rob, who also have been assigned research papers. Ella will be your model, and you will actually be asked to help Rob. Then, you'll have the opportunity to apply what you've learned and practiced to your own research assignment. Your teacher might also ask you to help some other students, Eva, Ian, and Nikki, as they navigate the waters of the research pool.

Focus on one aspect of your topic. You may focus on a single problem, what caused that problem, and how it was solved (or not solved). For example, if you chose the Constitutional Convention, you could focus on **the question of slavery and how it was addressed in the Constitution.**

You could also focus on one event, what led to it, and its long-term effects. For example, if you chose the topic of Westward Expansion, you could focus on the Louisiana Purchase, including **what led up to it** and **how it affected America's growth and development.**



For more on coming up with a preliminary thesis, see pages 19-21.

REQUIREMENTS

- 6–10 typed pages, double-spaced, front of page only

- At least five sources
  - What kinds of sources will you need? Where will you find them? Does five seem like a lot?

For more on sources, see Chapter 3.

- MLA-style citations and Works Cited Page
  - What does this mean? MLA style is one of the special formal requirements for research papers.

For more on citations and Works Cited Pages, see pages 196-201.

3. What is a thesis?

Thesis is another word you've no doubt heard and used a number of times before. It can mean something general, such as "the most important part of an essay," or it might zero in on something as specific as "the last sentence of an essay's first paragraph." Neither definition does much to help you understand exactly what a thesis actually is.

The dictionary definition of *thesis* is "a proposition supported by an argument." Any time you make an argument, you have a thesis. If you try to convince your parents that your curfew is unreasonably early, your thesis could be: "I should be allowed to stay out later on weekends." If you're telling skeptical friends just how amazing a feat it is to win the Tour de France seven times, your thesis is probably: "Lance Armstrong is a great athlete." In both cases, your thesis is the actual point you are arguing.

For a research paper, we can define a thesis this way:

A thesis is the central argument about a topic, supported by facts, ideas, and examples collected through research.

You already know that a research paper is *thesis-driven*. It does more than merely report what you've learned about your topic—it makes a case about your topic. The thesis is at the core, and the whole paper focuses on making and supporting that argument. Of course, almost every essay you write for school has a thesis, but a research paper thesis is different, for a couple of reasons:

> **A research paper thesis is based on your research.** Remember, research is a way you learn about your topic. Your thesis—the argument you make about your topic—must be based on what you learn. You can think about your thesis from the beginning, but your research comes first—your final thesis will grow out of that research.

Soon, Ella has her focused, specific topic: Jamestown's role as a model for future English settlements in North America.

Ella reads on in her notes and in her textbook. She even starts doing a little bit of research on the Internet, searching to further develop her thoughts. Of course, she writes down her ideas in her notes. First, however, she turns in her topic to her teacher for approval. Once she gets that approval, her notes become the beginning of her thesis.

We'll talk about preliminary theses more in our next section, **"How do I start thinking about a thesis?"** on pages 34-39.

EXERCISE ONE:

PRACTICING NARROWING TOPICS

Rob, another student in Ella's class, could use some help narrowing his topic. Follow the process Ella used and advise Rob how to focus his topic by filling in the missing steps for him.

Rob's Topic

Broad Topic:	*Narrowing:*	*Focused Topic:*
Westward Expansion →	• Settlers left overcrowded East Coast for land, opportunity • Settlers struggled against elements, lack of resources • New cities and states formed, railroads followed • Changes in land use, transportation, communication, and nation	→

EXERCISE THREE:

COMPILING YOUR OWN LIST OF POTENTIAL SOURCES

Now, apply what you have learned and practiced to your own research assignment. Using any or all of the Search Engines, Subject Directories, and Meta-Search Engines, begin to compile a list of potential sources with comments, as Ella did above.

1. List some of the search words and phrases you will use:

2. Follow the format below and record the potential sources you find and take notes on their probable usefulness.

URL:

Site Title:

Site Contents:

NOTES:

Site Maintained By/Source(s):

Source 1:

Type of source: *Web Site*

Title: *The Virtual Jamestown Archive*

URL (or other identification as applicable): *http://www.virtualjamestown.org/*

Description: *"...a digital research, teaching and learning project that explores the legacies of the Jamestown settlement and 'the Virginia experiment.' Includes maps, labor contracts, public records, firsthand accounts and letters, and a reference center featuring a timeline and biographies (including Pocahontas, Captain John Smith, and Chief Powhatan). A collaboration between Virginia Tech, the University of Virginia, and the Virginia Center for Digital History."*

Is this source relevant? *Yes*

Why or why not? *The "legacy" of the "Virginia Experiment" will certainly include the impact of the failures and successes of this plantation colony on the development of future colonies. The "legacy" will also include Jamestown's influence on the development of the United States.*

Is this source credible? *Yes*

Why or why not? *The site is maintained by three highly respected and prestigious schools and foundations. The source also contains primary source material: firsthand accounts, letters, etc.*

13. How do I keep track of the sources I've found?

So far, we've spent the bulk of our time and energy finding and evaluating potential sources. The reason for that should be fairly obvious: without enough information, you cannot write your paper. Without *good* information from reliable sources, you'll never be able to support your thesis.

How many sources *are* enough? There's no way to answer that question. Your teacher will probably impose a minimum expectation (for example, no fewer than five sources of varied types), but that is only to help you learn that copying out of a single book, or cutting and pasting from a couple of websites is not research—in fact, it's plagiarism, and we'll deal with that a lot in later pages.

Again, how many sources are enough? You'll know you have enough sources when you finish writing your paper, and you feel good that you've made the best case you can for your thesis.

Having *enough* sources, however, and gathering *enough* information, as you've learned, are not the problems. At some point you need to keep track of your sources and the information you get from each.

In Chapter 2, we listed "Organizing Sources" as the second major step of the research process. As books, articles, and website bookmarks and printouts begin to form little mountains in your work area, you can fight the chaos with some basic organization strategies. It's helpful to start organizing **while you're hunting**, instead of trying to bring order to your sources after the fact (sort of like putting your clothes away as you're done with them, rather than letting everything pile up and trying to clean your room once a month).

There is no one specific way to organize your sources, but that does not excuse you from having to experiment with different organizational strategies and finding what works for you. Probably the two most likely organizational patterns, however, would be by usefulness and by sub-topic.

> **By importance or usefulness**: You've already spent a good deal of time evaluating your potential sources for their credibility, relevance, and overall usefulness. Chances are you'll want to examine the sources you think will be most useful first, saving those you have doubts about for later—if you end up needing them at all.

Chapter 4

IN THE THICK OF IT

16. What do I do with all of these sources?

You know that they say the best way to take off a band-aid is to rip it off and get it over with in a hurry. They also say the best way to get used to cold water in a pool or lake is to just dive in and get yourself wet.

It's the same with doing your research.

So, gather all of the tools you've assembled: research process timeline (including due dates of preliminary components), preliminary thesis, preliminary outline, prioritized list of potential sources, and dive in. If you need to visit any museums or actual sites, schedule those visits. If you need to interview anyone, make your initial contact and schedule the interviews. (ALWAYS keep in mind that you might want time to do follow-up visits or ask follow-up questions while you are still in the note-taking stage.) Check libraries for the availability of any books or other hard-copy sources (including CDs and DVDs), perhaps even signing them out to use first, while you know that they are available.

As you begin your paper in earnest, this chapter will help you approach your sources, get as much from them as you can, and keep yourself always organized, so that you don't lose sight of the final paper you are eventually going to have to write.

Chapter 6

WRITING YOUR RESEARCH PAPER

24. What am I aiming for?

Let's return for just a second to our original definition of a research paper from Chapter 1:

> A research paper is a thesis-driven essay that uses relevant, credible sources to support its ideas and arguments.

What this means, then, is that what you are writing is essentially an essay, and it must be structured like an essay with an **introduction**, a **body**, and a **conclusion**.

It is, however, a specific type of essay—*a thesis-driven* essay. Therefore, your introduction must introduce your thesis and then present a broad overview of the information you will present to support that thesis.

Our definition also specifies that this essay uses *sources to support…ideas and arguments*. Therefore, the **body** of this essay will look like what we've been examining and practicing above: a presentation of your information, citation and attribution of your sources, analysis and evaluation of your sources, along with your own insights and reflection.

Finally, because your research paper has been defined as a close-cousin to a persuasive paper (*thesis-driven, support, arguments*), your **conclusion** must sum up the evidence presented and establish the validity of your point—your thesis.

As you write, you will keep your outline and your notes close at hand. Your outline informed your notetaking (and each note should be coded with the outline notation for where you intend to use that information in your paper). Writing this draft is not a matter of deciding what to say where—those decisions have already been made. Your task at hand is *simply* to flesh everything out—just as you've practiced in the previous exercises.

In short, you are now searching for perfection. All of the individual parts of that perfection have been focused on and polished individually. Now, you simply need to put them all together.

The exceptions might be schools in which your instructor keeps returning drafts to you for revision until they are absolutely perfect. On the one hand, you hope that *each* draft will be your final draft, but your paper might actually go through three, four, or more drafts before it is accepted for grading.

30. Why, when, and how do I cite my sources?

Two issues we've already dealt with at some length are the issues of credibility and plagiarism. When we first talked about credibility, it was from the standpoint of your finding and using credible sources. Now that you are writing your final paper, you need to worry about your own credibility. Appropriate attribution and citation within your paper and documentation at the end of your paper will do a lot to bolster your credibility.

Likewise, being sincere and honest with where you got the facts, examples, and illustrations you are presenting—giving credit where credit is due—will greatly lessen the chances that someone—especially a slighted source—will charge you with taking credit for work that is not your own.

Imagine this: you tell a very funny joke to a friend. A little while later, you walk into a room and hear your friend tell *your* joke as if it were *his*. He gets the credit for making his audience laugh. At the very least, you would have expected your friend to say: "I heard the funniest joke from [insert your name here]" before telling the joke.

That's essentially what citation and documentation are: giving credit to the sources from which you got information for your paper.

One of the most basic forms of "giving credit" is the Works Cited Page at the end of your paper. Understand that this is a *requirement* of a research paper, not an option. You should *never* ask your teacher or professor whether a Works Cited Page is required because one is *always* required. *Every time* you consult a source that is outside of your own body of knowledge, you **must** include

34. How can I fix any careless errors that could lower my grade?

There's an adage that says, "The devil is in the details," and this is absolutely true in the worlds of academics and publishing. While the arrival of the personal computer and word-processing program made the processes of revision and proofreading easier than they had ever been before, it also raised the standard for final draft correctness. Whereas, in the days of the typewriter and carbon paper, a writer may actually have been allowed to submit a manuscript with one or two minor typographical errors per page, today, the entire manuscript is expected to be error-free. Since the technology exists to find an error and correct it without having to retype an entire page, the writer is expected to use it.

Therefore, your final draft needs to be as close to perfect as this paper is going to be, and you, the writer, have no excuse for flaws—especially easily correctable flaws—that will detract from the overall quality of your work. It is, therefore, in your best interest to take a day or two before your final paper is due and pay attention to the details.

Before you print:

1. **Run a spelling and grammar check**. *Do not allow any automatic changes or "change-alls."* You must look at each "error" your computer finds and each "correction" it suggests. Spelling and grammar checks do not recognize last names, place names, and variant or archaic spellings. Ella does not want to lose points because she followed her computer's advice when it told her to change *John Rolfe to John Rifle.*
2. **Scroll through every page of your paper and made certain everything is formatted the way you want it.** Word processing programs often do interesting things to blocks of text when you cut or copy from one document and paste into another. Margins and indentation; bolding or italics; even text size, font, and color can be change simply by pressing "delete" to make one paragraph merge with the paragraph above it.