



Academic Writing Guide: How to Write a Research Paper

Research Paper: What It Is

A **research paper** is a type of academic writing where you demonstrate in-depth knowledge and analysis of a chosen topic. It involves the process of gathering information and organizing interpretations of various authors in a way that supports your original idea.

Research Paper: What It Is Not

A research paper is **NOT** a summary of what various authors have found about a topic or a summary of how various authors interpreted their findings. It is also **NOT** a presentation of your personal feelings or impressions.

The Seven Steps to Writing a Successful Research Paper

1. Choose your research question
2. Research your topic
3. Develop a thesis statement
4. Organize an outline
5. Write your essay
6. Cite your sources
7. Proofread your essay

Now that we've listed the **seven** steps for writing a successful research essay, let's look at each step in depth.

Step 1 – Choose Your Research Question

Your instructor may give you a specific research question to answer or several research questions for you to choose from.

If your instructor allows you to create or choose your own research question, here are some tips to get you started:

- Choose a topic that interests you!
 - You can choose a topic that relates to the course and connects to your personal identity and experiences.
- Narrow down the scope of your topic.
 - For example, you can start by choosing specific time and place (e.g., ‘American Social Movements during the 1960s’ is more specific than ‘Social Movements’).

Research Question: Do vs. Don't	
Do	Don't
<p>Clear and Concise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on a single topic that is limited in scope.• Explain your research question in the fewest words possible.• Example: <i>How does socio-economic status affect college students' extracurricular involvement?</i>	<p>Too General or Too Specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't focus on multiple topics or be too broad in scope.• Don't ask about information that is not relevant to the reader.• Example: <i>Are college students involved in extracurricular activities?</i>
<p>Open-Ended Answers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage a variety of interesting answers and interpretations.• Example: <i>In what ways does racial and ethnic representation influence one's self-image?</i>	<p>Yes or No Answers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't ask questions that can be answered with a 'yes, a 'no,' or any other short, simple answer (e.g., a word or a phrase).• Example: <i>Are racial and ethnic stereotypes bad?</i>
<p>Researchable and Answerable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can be addressed in a single study and within the given time.• Can be answered by an abundance of accessible academic sources.• Example: <i>How is Canada's immigration policy shaped by historical, political, and economic factors?</i>	<p>Not Researchable and Not Answerable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't conduct multiple or long studies.• Cannot be answered due to a lack of accessible academic sources.• Example: <i>Is Canada's immigration policy the best in the world?</i>

Step 2 – Research Your Topic

- Begin your research as soon as possible!
 - Contact our Librarians at Alexander College if you need any help with your research.
- Make sure you are using reliable sources.
 - Look for scholarly, peer-reviewed sources.
 - Wikipedia is NOT considered an acceptable academic source for your research.
- Make sure you understand the ideas, concepts, arguments, and claims that your sources are presenting.

Tip! Steps 1 and 2 are interchangeable. If you have chosen a research question, you can begin researching your topic. If you have not decided on a research question, you can start with general research and then form your question based on what interests you.

Step 3 – Develop a Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is one or two sentences that answers and addresses the research question.

A thesis statement should be:

- Focused: Tell the reader exactly what you are setting out to prove.
- Limited in scope: Prove your case within the limits of your paper.
- Arguable: Readers should be able to disagree with you.
- Supportable: There should be evidence to support your claim.

Step 4 – Organize an Outline

Don't skip the outlining step!

- Essay outlines help you organize your ideas into a logical sequence and keep similar ideas together.
- Remember to add your sources into your outline as you write; this helps you avoid plagiarism.

A research paper typically has **four** sections.

Section	Definition
1. Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One or two paragraphs that introduce your topic and the structure of your research paper.
2. Discussion/Body	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multiple paragraphs that each discuss one main idea or point that supports and justifies your thesis.
3. Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One or two paragraphs that<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Restate your thesis and the main ideas of your research paper.○ Provide the implications of your research.
4. References	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A separate section after your essay where you list all the sources you referenced in your research paper.

Outline: Sections and Examples

Section 1: Introduction

- Contextualize the topic by giving background information and definitions.
 - You can start with a case study or statistics to highlight your topic.
- Provide an overview or outline of the structure of your paper.
- Give your thesis statement, usually near the end of the introduction.

Section 2: Discussion/Body

- Discuss the main ideas and points that you are using to support your thesis.
- Explain how your research and thesis contribute to existing research.

Section 3: Conclusion

- Wrap up your research paper by reiterating your research question, thesis, and the main ideas of your paper.
- Identify the importance and implications of your research.

Section 4: References

- List all the sources (e.g., articles, magazines, newspapers, etc.) you referenced in your research paper.

Step 5 – Writing Your Essay

- Use the outline as a guide when you are writing your research paper.
- Note that you have organized your thoughts into **SECTIONS**, not paragraphs.
 - A section may have one or more paragraphs.
- Each paragraph in the **discussion/body section** should explain one main point that supports your thesis.
 - This point should be expressed in a topic sentence at the start of the paragraph.
 - When you begin to discuss a new idea, that is usually a clue to start a new paragraph.
- Make sure everything refers to your thesis, so you stay on topic.
 - Check to see if your thesis and conclusion agree. If they don't, you may need to revise something in your essay.

Step 6 – Cite Your Sources

- Remember to “**CITE AS YOU WRITE.**”
- You will need to cite in two places:
 - In-text citations – in your paper.
 - References – end of your paper.
- For more information on the use of sources and citations, please refer to:
 - [Academic Writing Guides](#)
 - [Citations](#)

Step 7 – Proofread Your Essay

- Proofread more than once.
- Run Grammar Check (MS Word) or Proofreader (Mac Pages)
 - These are useful tools, but they cannot catch every single error.

For additional help, please make an appointment with a Writing & Learning Centre Humanities specialist at: <https://alexander.mywconline.com/>