



## 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. Develop 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

### Step 1: Develop Your Research Question

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

## Step 2 : Research Your Topic

- Begin your research as soon as possible!
  - Contact our Librarians at Alexander College if you need 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.
  - If you are unsure about the content you learned in class, consult your instructor!

**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 addresses and answers the research question.

A thesis statement should be:

- **Focused:** Tell the reader exactly what you are setting out to prove.
- **Limited in scope:** It should be specific enough to be explained within a single paper.
- **Arguable:** Readers should be able to disagree with you.
- **Supportable:** There should be evidence to support your claim.

**Note!** While most research papers use an analytical thesis statement, it is possible that your assignment may require a different kind of thesis. Refer to your assignment instructions or ask your instructor to see which is needed. There are three kinds of thesis statements you might use for a research paper:

**Analytical Thesis Statement** - introduces the topic that you will be analyzing in your paper, as well as your findings.

#### Example

While there have been many claims that vaccines can cause autism, an analysis of the scientific data shows that vaccines do not actually play a role in children developing autism spectrum disorder.

**Argumentative Thesis Statement** - provides your own stance or claim(s) for a specific issue or topic.

#### Example

Utilitarianism ultimately fails as a moral theory because the calculation of consequences can be cumbersome, there is no guarantee of justice, and the "greater good argument" may be used to justify some behaviour that humans intuitively condemn as evil.

**Expository Thesis Statement** - also called an explanatory thesis statement, explains an issue or topic to your audience.

#### Example

A butterfly's life cycle is characterized by four stages: egg, larva, pupa, and adulthood.

### 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.

## Outline: Sections

### Section 1: Introduction

- One or two paragraphs that introduce your topic and the structure of your research paper.
- Contextualize the topic by giving background information and definitions.
  - You can start with statistics or a brief introduction of a case study 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

- Multiple paragraphs that each discuss one main idea that supports and justifies your thesis.
- Explain how your ideas 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. This will be done in a specific style: MLA, APA, or CMS. Please ask your instructor if you are not sure which style to use for your assignment.

## 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. Then, support your point with evidence and your analysis and explanation of that evidence.
  - When you begin to discuss a new idea, that is 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.
    - These are needed for every single sentence that contains information from another resource!
  - References – end of your paper.
- Check the citation style guides or the Citation Skills Canvas course for help!

## Step 7: Proofread Your Essay

- Carefully proofread your essay multiple times. Check for grammar, flow, proper citations, etc.
- Run a Grammar Check (MS Word) or Proofreader (Mac Pages). **Avoid** AI tools like Grammarly which rewrite your work for you; they count as plagiarism.

For additional help, please make an appointment with a WLC Academic Writing Specialist at:



<https://alexander.mywconline.com/>