Writing Your Paper with Documentation

Inquire: Writing a Research Essay

Overview

The research essay can be one of the most daunting writing tasks assigned in a composition class. Not only do you need to complete the writing process as you normally would for any essay, you also have to organize and incorporate extensive research to support your point. The process can be lengthier than writing a regular paper that doesn’t use much outside support. So, where should you start? How different is this writing process from others?

Big Question: What does the writing process look like for a research essay?

Watch: The Research Process

Are you ready to begin writing your research essay? As someone exploring this lesson on a computer, you probably use the Internet often for a wide variety of reasons. Maybe you spend your day on social media, reading news articles, playing games, or finding answers to questions that come up during the course of your day. We tend to use search engines to answer almost any question that comes to mind. Taking the time to write a research essay can be a great way to explore a topic you’re curious about in great depth.

A research essay is one of the most daunting essay forms. Not only do you have to complete the writing process, but you also have to create a research question and conduct research before you can even begin to write. Once you’ve identified a topic — either because it was assigned to you, the course is focused on a particular topic, or you’re simply interested in a specific topic — you need to develop a research question. This question will guide you as you search through search engines, databases, journals, websites, and books for answers to your question.

The answer you find may be completely different from the one you intended to find. That is the beauty of a research essay; you might find yourself drawing a conclusion that is different from the one you began with. It’s important to keep an open mind as you research, so you give yourself room and space to change your mind if the research convinces you. Whatever conclusion your research guides you to will be the foundation for your essay’s argument. Being open-minded throughout this process can also help you identify potential counterarguments you will need to address in your essay.
Overview
To begin your research essay, you'll need to start with a topic. Oftentimes, this is easy to identify, since it falls within the parameters of the course or a particular assignment. Once you have a topic to examine, though, what do you do with it? How do you turn a topic into an argument? It's important to remember that a topic like “Stem Cell Research” is neither an argument nor a claim. What do you want to say about stem cell research? Are you in favor of it? Should it be used as a treatment? Is it ethical? Your answers to these questions can help you form an argument.

Developing a Research Question
Once you have chosen a topic as a starting point and have done some background research, you are ready to zero in by developing a research question. A research question is a focused, clear, and arguable question that will be at the center of your project. Using a research question, rather than just having a general topic, is a good approach because it allows you to enter the research process with an open mind. Without an open mind, any “research” you do will simply be going through the motions.

Let's say you would like to buy a car and decide to do some research before making a purchase. If you set out having already decided to buy a particular make and model, then you will only search for information that supports the decision you have already made. The “research” will have been a waste of time and effort. On the other hand, if you start by asking, “Which car has the features that I want for a price that I can afford,” you are likely to uncover information that you were unaware of before you began researching vehicle options.

Background research is beneficial. It will help you answer preliminary questions like the ones below, and such answers will help you zero in on an even more specific research question.

- Why is the topic significant? Who or what is affected?
- To whom is the topic important?
- Why is the topic controversial?
- What issues do people raise as they debate the topic?
- What proposals have been made in response to the issues?
- What arguments have been raised for the proposals?
- What arguments have been raised against the proposals?

Imagine a biology class in which one module is on stem cell research. As a topic, stem cell research is huge — much too big a subject for a 5-7 page paper! But, if you do some background research, you will discover information about techniques for creating stem cells, current attempts to use stem cells to treat disease, and the people who may benefit from stem cell therapy. Having learned these facts, you can formulate a research question such as, “How have researchers responded to federal restrictions on the use of fetal stem cells?”

Ideally, you will formulate a number of possible research questions and ask yourself which question allows you to explore the aspect of the topic you personally find most interesting.
Drafting a Thesis

Your research should guide your argument, not the other way around. If you go into research with a closed mind, you will likely cherry pick your sources and ignore valid counterclaims that you might need to consider in your essay. For this reason, you should wait until after you have conducted a fair amount of research before drafting a thesis.

Your thesis for an argumentative essay, as for any other kind of essay, should clearly state your overall claim and preview your essay’s organization. Since argumentative essays can rely on either Toulmin or Rogerian structures, it can be helpful to consider your essay’s structure before finalizing your thesis.

Organizing Your Essay

Once you’ve settled on an overall claim and thoroughly conducted research, you need to decide how to structure your argument. The kind of organizational structure you use depends largely on how easily you’re able to understand the opposition’s side and how much you’re willing to concede to them. If you feel like you need to talk and concede points to the opposition, you should opt for a Rogerian structure, which focuses on talking directly to a resistant audience. If not, you should use a Toulmin structure, which focuses on addressing the underlying assumptions that are made in each of your arguments.

Rogerian arguments all follow the same general structure:

1. Introduction: Describe the issue at hand. Be sure to illustrate that you understand and appreciate all valid alternative positions.
2. Opposition’s Position: Take the time to outline the ways in which the opposition’s positions are valid and worthwhile.
3. Your Position: State your own position on the issue. Take the same care to explain why your position is valid as you did in the above section.
4. Benefits to Opposition: Conclude your essay by discussing the ways in which the opposition would benefit by adopting your position.

Here is a quick look at the basic structure of a Toulmin argument:

2. Conditions: Describe the limits you impose on your claim.
3. Reasons/Evidence: Provide support for your claim.
4. Warrants: Explain the underlying assumptions that support your claim.
5. Backing: Provide evidence that supports your warrant(s).

Once you’ve settled on your structure, you should see where your research best fits by writing an outline. You should also revisit your thesis claim to ensure that it previews your essay’s overall structure.

Reflect Poll: Get Excited!

Which aspect of the writing process are you most excited about for this essay?

- Developing a research question
- Conducting research
- Organizing your paper
- Revising your paper
Expand: Revising and Editing Your Research Essay

Overview

Now that you have a draft of your essay, you’re almost done! Taking the time to revise and edit your paper can go a long way in improving your essay.

Revising Your Essay

Once you’ve written your essay, it’s time to engage in revision. As you read back through your essay, give special thought to the ways in which you appeal to your audience. Remember the audience for whom you are writing the essay. Which of your claims might they take issue with? How can you make sure not to alienate them or push them away with any of your claims? If you are using a Rogerian model of argument, this step is especially important.

Now, read carefully back through your paper, as if you’re reading it for the first time as a member of your target audience. Does your argument make sense to a reader examining it for the first time? Is there anything that will require additional explanation?

Keep in mind the level of knowledge and understanding your audience has. Is the topic completely new to them? If so, make sure that you take the time to explain important terminology and key concepts. If, however, your audience generally has expertise in the subject, don’t waste time explaining things they already know. Either way, make sure that your research is incorporated correctly and does the work of fully convincing your audience.

Finally, as you reread your essay, consider what kind of ethos you are projecting for your readers. Do you come across as knowledgeable? Do you come across as trustworthy? Do you support all of your claims with reasonable and reliable evidence? Is your language professional and courteous?

Revision is also the time for you to review your essay’s structure. Did you choose a method of organization that makes sense for your claim? Does everything flow logically together? If not, consider revising your essay to another method of organization or incorporating more transitions in your writing.

Editing Your Essay

Now you should carefully read back through your revised essay for any proofreading or editing errors. This is also a good time to make sure that all quote attributions are done correctly and include the right information. Also, double check your works cited page at this time. While editing your paper, use methods like reading aloud or reading sentences backward to catch mistakes you might otherwise miss. You should also consider handing your essay over to a friend at this point in time, as a fresh pair of eyes can catch things you might miss after looking at your own paper for too long.
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A worksheet to guide students through the revision process

A step-by-step guide for writing research papers

A Crash Course video giving guidelines for writing a research paper
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlgR1q3UQZE&t=123s

Lesson Glossary
research question: a focused, clear, and arguable question that will be at the center of your research essay

Check Your Knowledge

1. Your position should not change throughout the course of your research.
   a. True
   b. False

2. You should develop your thesis before you develop a research question.
   a. True
   b. False

3. You should always use a Rogerian structure for a research essay.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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