

For more information on research papers, use the following link: <https://www.southwesterncc.edu/wac/style-guide>

Writing: Performing Research

Why do research?

College instructors often assign research as an opportunity for students to learn deeply about a narrow subject area. By searching for sources and reading what experts and scholars have to say about a particular topic, students have a chance to engage with class content in a way that simply isn't possible through lecture or classroom discussion.

Furthermore, if you do not have credible source material to support your ideas, your writing may be nice to read, but it will have little value to a professional or academic community. In an effective research paper, the writer's main idea will be supported through the material used from the sources found on that topic. This builds credibility, helping the reader trust your conclusions and claims.

An effective research paper makes a claim about a topic. For example, if I am interested in writing a paper on John Adams, it isn't enough to simply write a biography. Instead, I would want to make some sort of claim about Adams. Why is he important enough to research? What do I want to say about him? Perhaps I want to show his importance in writing the Declaration of Independence and shaping the United States of America. That topic may certainly include some biographical notes, but the paper will go beyond simply stating facts about Adams' life. Instead, it will make a claim about him that will need support from other sources in order to prove my point.

How to do research?

Research takes time. When given a research project, work backwards from the due date in order to set goals for yourself throughout the process. For example, if the final draft is due on March 25, you may want to finish your rough draft by March 20 to give yourself time to revise and edit. This means, too, that you'll need to read and understand your sources prior to March 20, so you may want to have all your sources found by March 15. You should give yourself several days to find quality, credible, reputable sources, so the search should begin around March 11. In order to search for sources, you need a narrow, specific topic to use, so topic choice should be done no later than March 8. In working backwards from the due date, we have now created nearly a month-long timeline in order to complete one research project.

In searching for sources, you want to make sure that you use credible, reputable sources to back up your claims. This means that you want to know who the author is, when the source was published, who published it, what its purpose is, etc. This means you'll typically avoid sources such as Wikipedia, popular magazines (People, Vogue, Sports Illustrated), and websites that have not been produced for scholarly purposes. If you are not sure if a source would be considered appropriate for your project, ask your instructor.

How to write research?

Simply having sources does not create your paper. You will need to read those sources carefully, determining what passages or ideas may help support the claim you're making in your paper.

When writing your paper, you will undoubtedly be asked to use a particular documentation style in order to show your reader what portions of your paper were taken from source materials. This is where many writers grow frustrated about research, simply because there are many details to remember.

A documentation style – no matter if it's APA, MLA, or Chicago – is simply a way of showing your reader where certain pieces of information came from. Ideally, your reader should be able to look at your documentation, and then go find the exact same source that you used. It's much like a road map or scavenger hunt.



Each discipline you encounter in college may use a different documentation style. This is true because individual disciplines value different aspects of the source material. For example, the date of publication is very important in the sciences; therefore, many science-based courses may ask you to use APA style which emphasizes the year of publication. Navigating these different styles involves knowing where to look up the details on using them. Note that this style guide includes sections on APA, MLA, and Chicago. These correspond with the handbook we use in our English classes, *A Writer's Reference*, by Diana Hacker.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Anytime we discuss research in the college classroom, we also need to discuss the topic of plagiarism.

Plagiarism is the use of source material without proper documentation. In effect, it is stealing the words or ideas of another author and passing them off as your own. Intentional plagiarism is blatant copying of another text. Unintentional plagiarism, though, is also unacceptable. Therefore, it is imperative that you understand HOW to use the material from your sources and how to document where that material came from.

Using Source Material: When you find a passage from a source that helps you make your claim in your paper, you have options as to how you should integrate that information into your paper. First, realize that the proper use of source material builds your credibility. To maintain this credibility, you have to give credit to the original author whenever you use source material. One of the most effective ways to do this is to introduce a source before you quote or paraphrase from it. This indicates to the reader where your assertions stop and another writer's assertions begin. With proper documentation, this method aids in avoiding unintentional plagiarism.

Direct Quotations: One method of integrating source material is to quote from the source word-for-word. If you use another author's exact words, it is a quotation, even if you used just a small phrase. A quotation requires both quotation marks and correct documentation. In general, use direct quotes sparingly. They should only make up about 10% of any research paper.

Don't "isolate" quotations in your paper. Integrate quotations into your own words by introducing the author or beginning the sentence with an introductory phrase. Use small pieces of the source material in verbatim quotations rather than large blocks of information.

Paraphrasing and Summarizing: Paraphrasing a source involves taking information and ideas from another author and completely restating them in your own words. A good paraphrase is not made up of simple, cosmetic changes. In other words, you can't simply substitute occasional synonyms for words in the original. If your paraphrase is too close to the original, even if it has correct documentation it is still considered plagiarism because you have stolen the words and structure of the original text. Make sure any paraphrase is radically different in words and structure from the original.

Summarizing is stating the main idea of an entire source in a sentence or two of your own words. This works well for short sources – some newspaper articles or magazine articles may be used in this way in research papers. A summary also requires documentation in order for your reader to understand where the summary came from.

Avoid overuse of sources: A general rule of thumb in creating research papers is that no more than 10-15% of the paper should come from outside sources. Remember, this is your paper, your idea, your claim that you're making about your topic. Don't let your sources make your point for you. Instead, source material is there simply to back up and support the points you want to make in the first place.

Do not procrastinate: Do not put off writing your paper until the last minute. Many students are guilty of plagiarism, both deliberate and accidental, when they feel forced to hurry the process. Give yourself the gift of time!