Research Writing

Research writing—whether persuasive, analytical, or informative—is the process of using sources to develop and substantiate ideas. There are many ways to conduct and communicate your research, and each field of study has its own guidelines and expectations. While this handout covers basic concepts about research writing, always work with your audience and assignment in mind.

Research Process

The research process is not linear, and the following steps can be repeated and modified according to your process, the project's developing scope, and any new ideas you encounter.

Determine a Research Topic

- **Select a topic** you find interesting. You'll be investing time and energy into research, so start with a subject that has enough material to review and write about.
- **Perform an initial search** on your topic. Familiarize yourself with the existing conversation. Consider scholarly and popular sources as you explore your topic and identify questions or gaps in knowledge.
- **Narrow toward a specific research question** to guide your process and to help you actively enter and engage with the conversation surrounding the topic.

Tip: *Plan to adjust the scope or focus of your research as your understanding of the topic develops.*

Find Sources

- **Search widely** and remain open to a range of research, even research opposing your position.
- **Rely on resources** such as library databases, research librarians, faculty, and other experts for help.

Tip: *You can find additional references in the bibliographies of other sources.*

Read Sources

- **Search for keywords** in potential sources to see if their content connects with your topic. You can often find keywords in the title, abstract, introduction, or conclusion of a source.
- **Mark or annotate useful information** such as evidence, quotes, or statistics that help you identify the author's main points. Consider how this information affects the scope of your writing project.

Tip: *Note how authors write using research and use those texts as models.*

Evaluate Sources

- **Identify reliable sources.** Not every source will effectively support your claims or contain quality information. Use sources that strengthen your credibility and help you accomplish your writing goals.
- **Use common criteria** to evaluate credibility, such as the author's credentials, the publisher's reputation, the date the source was published, and how often the source has been cited.

Tip: *Keep in mind the type of sources you are using (e.g., primary, secondary, peer-reviewed, popular) and prioritize sources appropriate for your discipline.*

Organize Sources

- **Ensure you can find your sources again.** You can do this in a variety of ways, like keeping links and summaries in another document, using a citation manager, or writing an annotated bibliography.

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Writing Process

As you write using your research, adapt the following strategies according to your disciplinary conventions, audience expectations, and personal process.

Determine a Writing Topic

- **Develop a main idea** in answer to your research question. This will be shaped by the research you conducted, your own perspective, and your assignment or genre guidelines. Depending on your area of study, this guiding statement may be called a thesis, hypothesis, claim, etc.
- **Ensure your main idea reflects the research** and conversation on the topic. This will help you determine the purpose and scope of your work, whether that is to further develop, complicate, clarify, or contest the current conversation.

Tip: *As you write and gather more information, your main idea may change and expand.*

Decide How to Use Sources

- **Organize your research** by selecting sources that support the development and structure of your ideas. You likely will not use all the sources you find in your research.
- **Determine how and where your evidence will appear** in your work as well as how much information from each source will be used.

Tip: *When including counterarguments, use sources that fairly represent those positions.*

Incorporate Sources

- **Integrate each source** by
    - Introducing the source or the idea
    - Adding the source using a quote, paraphrase, or summary
    - Citing the source using the appropriate citation style
    - Connecting the source to your ideas (e.g., analysis or synthesis)
- **Balance your work** with the work of others by limiting long quotes or block quotes and adding sufficient commentary.

Evaluate Source Use

- **Assess each source for accuracy and appropriate representation.** Honor what the author intended to communicate without taking information out of context.
- **Double-check sources and citations** during revision, and ensure everything connects to your ideas.
- **Seek feedback** from experienced professionals in your field, as research writing differs by discipline.