

Johnson County Community College Writing Center Guidelines to Writing a Research Paper

When an instructor assigns a research paper, he/she is asking you to go beyond what has been learned in class to expand your knowledge or to update the information with more current literature or to choose and defend a position on a contemporary issue. Make sure you clarify the purpose of the assignment with your instructor. If your purpose is to explain, you will be writing an informative or expository paper and will be concerned with presenting facts accurately, and completely. If you are defending one side of an issue or taking a stand on a point of question, you will be writing persuasively or argumentatively. Whether you present your evidence in an inductive or deductive chain of reasoning, you must show logic in how you state your supposition and the support that you choose to cite.

Every discipline has its own stylistic guidelines and documentation rules. What follows in this information sheet are the general guidelines and process for writing a paper which requires research. You will need to go to the Writing Center to pick up additional information sheets covering the specific documentation guidelines for your assignment. Handouts and exercises are also available there. The following style sheets are available: Modern Language Association (MLA), American Psychological Association (APA), and the Chicago Style (often referred to as the Turabian style or historians' style of documentation). We have additional resources (not in a handout) on the Council of Biological Editors (CBE), American Chemists Association (ACA) form, and other styles as needed by students. Because the Communications Division supports the MLA style of documentation, we encourage JCCC instructors to assign that style unless it hinders the presentation of the assignment. Generally, students are not required to learn the documentation style of a discipline until they are in upper level courses or have declared a major field of study. Since most of the courses at a community college are survey or introductory courses, learning the format of documentation is probably not the major objective of the research assignment.

Before you begin your own research project, you should examine some sample college-level papers. Samples are available in the Writing Center.

Steps of the Research Assignment:

- I. **Choose a topic.** What strongly interests you? What do you know already about the topic? What would you like to know?

Example: TV violence

- II. **Focus your topic.** Use a strategy such as clustering, listing, freewriting, or brainstorming with a friend to help you think about your topic's many possibilities.
Will you be able to find any sources on your topic?
Is there a variety of resources, not just one kind?
Is the topic manageable?
Will the topic lead to an objective assessment of the sources and defensible conclusions?
Does the topic suit the assignment in length, time, and subject?

List some possible keywords that you can use for your search. On the computer access the Internet and click on a browser such as Google or Infoseek. Then type in various combinations for your topic.

Example:

TV violence

Causes teen aggression

Children and TV and behavior

V-chip or other program blockers

Does television violence cause aggressive behavior in children?

III. List some questions you will need to answer your focus idea. Journalists' questions such as who, what, when, where, why, and how will help you get started.

Example: Thesis question—Are children under 10 affected by violence on TV?

I. Should children be allowed to watch violence on TV?

II. What are some examples of violence on TV?

III. How does violence affect children?

A. Are all effects negative?

B. Are there any positive effects?

IV. How can these effects be stopped? or How can the problem be solved? Use the questions to guide and focus your research.

V. **Develop a research strategy.** This is your plan or procedure for finding and evaluating sources.

Primary Research and Secondary Research

Primary sources are original resources, such as authentic records and materials, field research, eye witness accounts, and reviewed scholarly articles. In other words, first-hand accounting.

Secondary sources are reviews of primary sources; they are not original works.

Obviously, primary sources should be used when possible. However, when secondary sources are used, their reliability must be confirmed. Evaluate all sources based on the following criteria: author qualifications, credibility of the cited sources, publishing house credentials, objectivity of author (any biases noted), and the date of publication.

Internet Research

Your keywords listed above during your prewriting/discovery step of the research process will get you started when you access the Internet or electronic databases for your topic. Remember the more focused your wording is, the more specific your resources will be. Use bookmarks to mark your "good" sites so that you may return to them. Also, keep track of the words and phrases you use.

When you are "surfing the net" for information, you need to evaluate your sources, just as you must with any source. Anyone with a computer and access to server space can put up a web page. There are few restrictions and even fewer established guidelines as to what an author can or cannot put up

on a web page. Thus, in order to do effective research on the World Wide Web, as mentioned above in the discussion on primary and secondary research, researchers need to investigate and critically approach the author's intentions, credibility, and bias, and the reliability of the information presented.

Evaluating a Web Site

Listed below are questions to assist you in your evaluation of web sites. Many of these questions will also help you to evaluate any of the primary and/or secondary sources that you plan to use in your research.

AUTHOR/CREDIBILITY

Who is the author or producer?

What is the authority or expertise of the individual or group that created this site?

With what organization is the author of the web site affiliated?

What is the bias of the author/producer/organization?

What are the reasons to assume that the author is an authority on the subject?

Is there a way to contact the author or supply feedback?

RELIABILITY OF INFORMATION

Who is the expected audience? Are the content and the links clearly described and suitable for the expected audience?

What is the primary purpose of the site (e.g., advertising, information)?

Is a date of publication provided? When was the web site last revised?

How complete and accurate are the information and the links provided?

Are excerpts from texts provided or are entire texts available on the site?

Does the information contradict something you already know or have learned from another source?

Is a bibliography of print or web resources included? (This may provide more resources for you to pursue in your research.)

Has the site been reviewed or ranked by an on-line reviewing agency?

Library Research

Whatever library you use, you need to find out what resources are available to you. Most of our area libraries are electronic; in other words, you are provided access to on-line catalogs, databases for journals and other periodicals, CD-ROM, and microfiche. Ask for help if you are not sure of the technology you want to use. Remember the print resources like the Reader's Guide to Periodicals are still located in the library and a good resource for you. Consult the Library of Congress Subject Heading for keywords and related topics.

Again, you will use the key words listed above for your search. Use current and reliable resources.

Evaluate your resources as above considering the source's authenticity, the reliability of the resource (compare several resources—are they giving similar facts?), the evidence supporting the resource's assertions, the tone of the source (is it logical and unbiased?), and the currency of the information in the source.

Field Research

Often labeled as primary research, field research provides first-hand accounting of information. Field research may be conducting an interview, sending out a survey, personal experiments or observations, historical documents, or other original data or information.

If you are conducting an interview, schedule an appointment, reflect on and write down your questions beforehand, take notes during the appointment or ask to tape record the session, and if using quotes, be sure to get approval from the interviewee. Following the interview ask the interviewee if he/she would like to see the finished document and send a written thank-you note.

If you are conducting a survey, before sending it out, get some feedback from peers, instructors, or the Writing Center to make sure your questions are clear and logical.

Plagiarism

Misrepresenting another's work as your own is a serious offense and can result in failure for an assignment or even dismissal from class. Refer to the college catalog for the Student Code of Conduct. Regrettably, plagiarism has become a major concern to instructors. While technology has made the retrieval of information easy, it has, at the same time, made cheating more commonplace. Students would be wise to remember that the technology available to them is also used by their instructors. Google may be able to find a paper on the right subject for you; Google will find the same paper for the instructor. Synthesizing gathered information and documenting the information correctly is crucial to the researched paper.

You must cite someone else's	You do not have to cite your own
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• words you quote• words you summarize• idea (interpretation, opinion, conclusion)• data graph• photograph• drawing• table of information• experiment• example• unique concept• apt phrase• expression of common knowledge• solution to a problem• speech• video source (film, TV program)• the structure or sequencing of facts, ideas, or arguments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• words• idea (interpretation, opinion, conclusion)• data• graph• photograph• drawing• table of information• experiment• example• unique concept• apt phrase• expression of common knowledge• solution to a problem

Synthesis of Gathered Information

Regardless of the type of information you gather, you will need to take notes. As you skim the article or information initially, you will need to decide if the information is related to your topic. If it is, then you will need to make sure you have the necessary bibliographic information for the documentation style that you will be using. Next, read the article carefully. If you have printed (downloaded) or photocopied the article, you might want to highlight or underline text which clearly meets the criteria for your paper. You may annotate in the margins when the information pertains or connects to the points in your outline. As you take notes, eliminate unnecessary information and stick to major information that applies to your topic. Learn to look for key words, pertinent information, and ample support examples. If your topic is still rather broad, reading the resources should help you to focus and to gain a perspective or angle on which you will write.

Note taking comes in three forms:

Summarizing

A summary is a shortened version of a paragraph, chapter, article, and the like. A summary should highlight or relate the main facts of the reference. Only major facts are given and the writer uses his/her own words, not those of the author.

Paraphrasing

A paraphrase reflects the same meaning of the reference but does not use the same wording. The length is the same as the original source and only technical terms and proper nouns (names) may be retained.

Quoting

A quote is the exact wording of the reference and must reflect left-out information with the ellipsis (...) and include quotation marks. The writer carefully chooses the material to quote and provides a lead-in which connects the quote to the rest of the paper. Generally, direct quotations are only used when the wording is so powerful or appropriate that to summarize or paraphrase the passage would result in a loss of impact.

Because the information that you have gathered must be organized according to the outline you developed earlier, revise the outline first to reflect additional points or any other changes you may want to make. If you have made note cards and notated on each the focus or topic of the information or data, you can arrange the cards in the order of the outline. To avoid plagiarism, make sure all information used is acknowledged with parenthetical citations (see documentation style) and the source included in the Works Cited or Bibliography at the end of the paper.

The introduction should acknowledge purpose and audience, include your thesis, and provide background for your reader.

The points you want to develop are presented in topic sentences in the body paragraphs. The research is your support for these points. Transitional devices connect your ideas and keep your writing coherent.

The conclusion should pull the paper together through summarization, restatement of the thesis, or a call to action.

The rough draft(s) of the paper should be revised. Get feedback from a friend, peers, an instructor, or the Writing Center. Use the checklist (Nine Things to Check in Your Rough Draft) provided at the end of this handout.

Proofread the final copy carefully for mechanical errors and spelling.

The research paper should include the following parts:

- (1) A title page with the paper's title, your name, the course, the instructor, and the date centered in the middle of the paper or according to your instructor's specifications.
- (2) The outline in parallel form (all sentences, phrases, or words).
- (3) The paper.
- (4) The works cited or bibliography in the correct documentation style.
- (5) The appendix if any.

NINE THINGS TO CHECK IN YOUR ROUGH DRAFT

At this stage you should have an outline and a draft of your paper, with all quotations properly inserted, all acknowledgments for facts and opinions (either quoted or summarized) indicated in parenthetical citations and a works cited attached for all works actually referred to in your notes. Now is the time to check carefully to see if there is any need for revision. Try to answer the following questions:

- ___ 1. Does my paper have a guiding purpose? That is, is there a subject properly fixed and limited? Have I stated it clearly?
- ___ 2. Is my paper really a discussion of the subject and not a mere cataloging of quotations and summaries? Does it go somewhere? What is my own contribution to the discussion of the subject? Have I offered evidence and support for my point of view? Have I indicated how my point of view differs from the points of view held by other writers? If my paper is primarily exposition, have I added new facts to the discussion, or have I made the pattern of facts clearer than before? If my paper is persuasive, does my argument show logic and consider my audience's view?
- ___ 3. Is my paper well organized and proportioned? Is there a clear introduction? Does the discussion really constitute the main body of the paper? Is my conclusion an accurate statement of what I have accomplished? Is it brief and pointed? Are my transitions clear? Have I introduced irrelevant material?
- ___ 4. Is my style clear and grammatical? Are my paragraphs well organized? Is my punctuation correct?
- ___ 5. Is my outline a satisfactory one for my paper as it now stands?
- ___ 6. Am I sure that all my quotations, paraphrases, and summaries are accurate?
- ___ 7. Am I sure that my references are accurate?
- ___ 8. Is my final bibliography, references, or works cited accurate?
- ___ 9. Is my documentation in the proper form, the one my instructor assigned?
Is the form I have used consistent?

If your paper is deficient on any of these counts, revise it. In checking on the paper or in making revisions, don't try to do everything at once. Take one question and follow it through the whole paper. You will get your best results by concentrating on one point at a time.