

Writing a Research Paper

Overview

The writer of a research paper begins with a question to which he or she wants to find an answer. The research paper itself is an attempt to answer this question by presenting a thesis (an answer to the question in the form of a general statement) supported by an argument (a series of subordinate supporting propositions), which is supported by evidence drawn from scholarly sources.

The thesis should be persuasive and offer the best possible answer, in the light of available scholarly sources, to the question that gave rise to the paper in the first place. The thesis appears in the introductory paragraph or in the introductory section.

In the body of the paper the writer demonstrates the validity of the thesis by presenting an argument in the form of a set of supporting propositions, each proposition typically being the opening sentence of a paragraph. Each proposition is shown to be true by presenting relevant evidence available in the scholarly sources. The propositions, to constitute an argument, must not only be supported by the evidence but must also be logically consistent with each other and supportive of the thesis.

In the conclusion the writer summarizes the thesis, shows how its validity has been supported by the scholarly evidence presented, and suggests some of the implications of the findings of the research paper for other issues or for additional research.

Selecting a Topic and Formulating a Research Question and Thesis

The best way to select first a topic and then a thesis for a research paper is to begin reading the scholarly materials in the field of study in which you have an interest. As you read and try to gain a deeper understanding of the issues important to the field, you should be asking yourself questions to try to structure your understanding of what you are reading. As you read more, when you find a question that you think is important and interesting, formulate a tentative answer, or hypothesis, to the question. If you find your hypothesis to be supported by what you are reading, you might select it as the thesis of your paper. If as you get more deeply into the scholarly materials, you find your hypothesis is not correct, try another hypothesis and see if it works. Your thesis is the hypothesis that you think provides the best interpretation of the factual information found in the scholarly sources.

Formulating an Argument

An argument consists of a series of propositions that support the thesis of the research paper. The propositions meet three criteria. First, they provide persuasive support for the thesis. Second, they are consistent with (that is, they do not contradict) other propositions. Third, they are supported by the evidence you present from the scholarly sources.

Scholarly Sources

At the heart of the research paper is the information presented from scholarly sources in support of the argument and, by extension, of the thesis. If the scholarly sources are not reliable or the information coming from these sources is not correct, the research paper itself loses its value. Equally important is the writer's responsible handling of the information coming from the scholarly sources. Not only should the information introduced into the paper be the same as that appearing in the scholarly sources, all information coming from scholarly sources must be identified. That means that all information coming from scholarly sources must be cited. Proper citation is necessary in order to give credit to the scholar who authored the document you are using and is at the core of academic, scholarly, and intellectual honesty. Citation of scholarly sources can take two forms. One of these is direct quotation. The other is indirect reference. In the first, the words are repeated exactly as they appear in the scholarly source and are enclosed in quotation marks or, if longer than a phrase, indented as a separate section. In indirect reference, the writer uses his or her own words to express the idea appearing in the original source. In all cases, the cited materials must be identified with footnotes, endnotes, or in-text citations and must contain the author's name, the title of the source, and the page where the information is coming from.

Citations for your Research Paper

Proper citations are required. If you quote text or paraphrase ideas from the book or from any other source, you must identify the sources and the page number(s) from which the quotations or ideas were taken. For this paper, please provide in-text citations noting author's last name, year of publication, and page number (e.g. Smith, 1993:45). If you quote from a journal article, please note the issue number (Jones, *China Quarterly*, no. 5, 1999:35).

Your paper should be typed and doubled-spaced. You should proofread and spell-check your work so that there are no typos or other errors in the text. You should use default margins and regular font, i.e., Times Roman 12-point font.

Students interested in obtaining further information about citations are encouraged to consult:

Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.