

# A GUIDE TO WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER IN MLA FORMAT

CTAL-10

GRANDVILLE  
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Updated 12/2011

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## Research Paper Overview

A research paper is a carefully planned essay that has been thoroughly investigated and analyzed by the writer. Research papers are written to share new information or to prove a point. What makes this different from other types of writing is the amount of information gathered and used in the writing. As a researcher, you will be gathering information from a wide variety of sources, including magazines, books, newspapers, computer files, Internet sites, interviews, surveys, etc. Because of the amount of information and time that is involved in writing a research paper, it is best to stay organized and on track using the process listed below:

1. Select a topic. Start with a general topic and then narrow it down to a workable subject.
2. Begin searching for information.
3. Highlight and take notes from sources of information.
4. Construct a working outline. Roughly organize ideas and information into a logical order.
5. Write a first draft. This should include an introduction, body paragraphs, a conclusion, and a works cited page. Include documentation within the paper.
6. Revise and edit. You should have a least one peer revision and one self revision.
7. Type and format your final copy.

We will be discussing and working through these steps in class. It is extremely important that you follow all directions and instructions during class “workshop” time so that you are clear about the expectations for this paper. Below are the basic guidelines for your research paper:

- Topic must be approved and adhere to focus area.
- You must use at least 5 credible sources of information, with a minimum of one from each of the following: a book, an e-periodical (magazine, newspaper, journal) article from a data base, and an additional source from a reliable web site (no blogs, Wikipedia, etc.).
- Final paper must use correct MLA form and documentation within paper.
- Your Works Cited page must adhere to MLA format.
- The thesis statement must be clearly written.
- The content of your paper should be clearly organized, relevant to the selected topic and thesis statement, and written in a manner that demonstrates varied language use and sentence structure, and that is mechanically sound (correct spelling, grammar, verb tenses, etc.).
- The paper must be typed and double-spaced using Times New Roman font size 12.
- The final version of your paper should be 4-5 pages in length.

Use the above checklist as we work through the process of writing research papers. Specific guidelines and instruction in MLA documentation will be given during the course of this project, and are included in this booklet.

## Selecting a Topic

The first step in writing a research paper is to select a topic that interests you and can help you to understand the world around you. Meaningful research projects start with a personal need to know or learn about something. In this unit you may choose your own topic with teacher approval or refer to the list below. Once you have selected a topic your purpose in this paper is to persuade the reader to agree with your stance. For example if your paper is about solar energy your stance may be that widespread use of solar energy is not a realistic goal in the next ten years due to three factors that you will research and explain in your body paragraphs.

- your teacher may supplement this list with other topics
- alternate energy sources (solar, wind, etc.)
- artificial intelligence: humans will design their own evolutionary successors in the form of
- bio-terrorism
- intelligent machines
- cell phone use (dangers of...)
- cloning
- e-toys (Webkins, etc.) are replacing human/animal companionship
- genetic engineering
- genetic testing during pregnancy
- “green” technology
- medical technology (artificial limbs or organs, for example)
- organic or bioengineered food
- plastic surgery: creating the perfect person
- public surveillance: safer cities or invasion of privacy?
- robotics: is it replacing humans in homes?  
in agriculture?  
in manufacturing?
- space exploration: beneficial or an unnecessary government investment?
- stem cell research
- technology is replacing human interaction in the workplace and home
- technology threatens our identity or our privacy
- transportation technology
- civil rights topics

Remember that the above are broad, general topics. Once you decide on a general topic, you will have to narrow it to a more specific and workable subject. For example, a person might know that he wants to focus on cell phone use in America, but this is much too broad of a subject. A more narrowed topic would be the rise in cell phone use in teenagers in the last ten years. **Your thesis statement will eventually be developed from this narrowed topic.**

## **Research Paper Graphic Organizer**

**Broad Topic:**

**Question to be Answered:**

**Narrowed Topic (Your Stand):**

**What do you already know?:**

**Five questions about your topic that you want to have answered. Consider: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?**

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**5.**

**What three areas will I focus on?**

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**Counterarguments I will focus on (this will be the paragraph just before your conclusion):**

## Working with Sources & Note Taking

After deciding what your research topic will be, you must begin by looking for a variety of sources for information. Ask yourself, “What kinds of sources would be most valuable to me?” Scan sources and use indexes to see if the source is really valuable to your subject. It is important not to waste time reading things that are irrelevant to your research idea.

### Working with Sources

Once you select a source, there is some basic information that you will want to acquire. This will include the details that you will need later when you compile your works cited page.

#### For a book you will need:

Author’s name: record all if there is more than one  
Names of any editors or translators  
Title and subtitle  
Edition (if other than the first)  
Publishing information: city, publishing company, date  
Page numbers

#### For an e-periodical or print periodical you will need:

Author’s name: record all if there is more than one  
Names of any editors or translators  
Title and subtitle  
Title of magazine, journal, or newspaper  
Date of issue  
Volume, section, and issue numbers (if available)

#### For an internet source you will need:

Author’s name: record all if there is more than one  
Title of article or site  
Date of electronic publication (if available)  
Date accessed/printed by you

### Note Taking

Once you record your source information, you will want to take notes on each source. There are several ways to do this so that the information is collected and stored in an organized manner that is easy to manage.

1. You will keep all your information stored in a manila folder, pocket folder, or a notebook.
2. Be sure to print and/or photocopy all the information that you will need for your research paper. It is important that you print full websites. **Do not just copy and paste the information. In addition, when photocopying information from books, do not forget to also copy the cover page and title page.**
3. While working with your print outs, photo copies and notes, you may choose to organize your research by color coding, using sticky notes, highlighting, stapling, or any other organizational method that you like.

**Reminder: Your research is intended to SUPPORT your writing/views. The majority of the paper should be written in your own words. All quotes and paraphrasing should be credited and seen as a supplement to your writing.**

Once you have decided which sources and information to use, you will have to decide how to present the information within your paper by summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting. Be sure to include the exact page number for documentation in your research paper.

1. **Summarize:** reduce what you have read to a few important points using your own words. In a summary you might condense a chapter into a short paragraph or a paragraph into a single sentence. If you use key phrases from the text in your notes be sure to include them in quotation marks.

2. **Paraphrase:** restate what you have read using your own words. This is different from a summary because it does not condense the author's own ideas and words but retells the information (using your own language) in approximately the same number of words. Again, if you use key phrases from the text in your notes be sure to include them in quotation marks.

3. **Quote directly:** record the statement or idea word for word and put quotation marks around this information.

Below is a passage from an original source showing examples of summary, paraphrase, and direct quotation.

#### ORIGINAL SOURCE

Public and scientific interest in the question of apes' ability to use language first soared some 15 years ago when Washoe, a chimpanzee raised like a human child by R. Allen Gardner and Beatrice Gardner of the University of Nevada, learned to make hand signs for many words and even seemed to be making short sentences.

Since then researchers have taught many chimpanzees and a few gorillas and orangutans to "talk" using the sign language of deaf humans, plastic chips, or like Kanzi, keyboard symbols. Washoe, Sarah, a chimpanzee trained by David Premack of the University of Pennsylvania, and Koko, a gorilla trained by the psychologist Francine Patterson, became media stars.

--Eckholm, "Pygmy" 7

#### SUMMARY

The ape experiments began in the 1970's with Washoe, who learned sign language. In later experiments some apes learned to communicate using plastic chips or symbols on a keyboard (Eckholm 7).

#### PARAPHRASE

A chimpanzee named Washoe, trained in the early 1970's by U. of Nevada professors R. Allen and Beatrice Gardner, learned words in the sign language of the deaf and may even have created short sentences (Eckholm 7).

#### DIRECT QUOTE

Washoe, trained by R. Allen and Beatrice Gardner, "learned to make hand signs for many words and even seemed to be making short sentences" (Eckholm 7).

## Introduction with Thesis Statement

Try this formula when writing your thesis statement: **S + D + 3 = ☺**

**S** (subject) + **D** (direction or your stand) + **3** (3 areas you will focus on) = ☺ (a great thesis statement!)

**S:**

**D:**

**3: 1.**

**2.**

**3.**

The introduction of your research paper should do two things.

1. The first part should **gain your reader's attention** by identifying something interesting, surprising, personal, or dramatic about your subject. Below are some examples:

- \*Start out with a revealing story or quotation
- \*Give important background information
- \*Offer a series of interesting or surprising facts
- \* Provide important definitions

2. The second part should **identify the specific focus, or thesis, of your research**. An effective thesis clearly communicates your essay's main idea; it tells your readers not only what your essay's topic is but also how you will approach the topic and what you will say about it. Because the purpose of your research paper is to convey information about your topic, your thesis can present the specific points you will discuss or give an overview that suggests how the paper will be organized.

### Checklist for Identifying an Effective Thesis

- Does your thesis express your main idea?
- Does your thesis communicate your paper's purpose?
- Is your thesis more than a title or statement of fact?
- Is your thesis clearly and concisely worded?
- Does your thesis use specific, concrete language?
- Does your thesis give a realistic indication of your essay's content and emphasis?

The following thesis statement clearly communicates the writer's main ideas and gives readers an accurate sense of the essay to follow.

*Americans of Japanese ancestry have been discriminated against through the use of internment camps, educational tracking, and educational quotas.*

Once you have written your thesis statement, the rest of your paper should relate back to the ideas you have presented. Use the thesis as a check after each paragraph to make sure that your research paper is on the right track and you are not shifting your focus.

## Seven Deadly Errors to Avoid When Composing a Thesis Statement

1. A thesis cannot be a fragment; it must be expressed as a sentence.  
***NOT:** How life is in a world of clones.*
2. A thesis must not be in the form of a question.  
***NOT:** Should mothers have the right to genetically test their babies?*
3. A thesis must not contain phrases such as “I think” because they weaken the statement.  
***NOT:** In my opinion, plastic surgery is ridiculous.*
4. A thesis must not contain elements that are not clearly related.  
***NOT:** All computers are not helpful; therefore internet use should be banned in elementary schools.*
5. A thesis must not be expressed in vague language.  
***NOT:** Bad things have resulted from humans using text messages to communicate.*
6. A thesis must not be expressed in muddled or incoherent language.  
***NOT:** Stem cell research is a status offense because the participants are not willing so that the relationship is on volunteer basis and the donors are more like victims.*
7. A thesis should not be written in figurative language.  
***NOT:** Bio-Engineered food is the phoenix bird of civilization.*

## **A Sample Outline**

Title or topic is centered

### **I. Introduction**

Sample thesis sentence: A technologically advanced society will eventually destroy itself due to fear, increased use of weapons of mass destruction, and advances in military intelligence.

### **II. Background Information**

### **III. Thesis Topic #1**

You may write more than one paragraph for this topic.

### **IV. Thesis Topic #2**

You may write more than one paragraph for this topic.

### **V. Thesis Topic #3**

You may write more than one paragraph for this topic.

### **VI. Counter-Argument**

### **VII. Conclusion**

It is always a good idea to refer to your thesis sentence here, and to restate the idea in similar but not identical words. Then, summarize a response. Your conclusion should be one paragraph only.

## Citing Sources in Your Research Paper: Documenting

When writing your research paper, you must document every bit of information that you borrow—this includes direct quotations, paraphrases, information and ideas. Information such as familiar proverbs (“The early bird gets the worm”) or common knowledge (“George Washington was the first president of the United States”) does NOT need to be documented. Yet you must indicate that source of any information that you have “borrowed” so that readers will not mistake it for your own.

### Avoiding Plagiarism

**Plagiarism** is the act of intentionally or unintentionally presenting work done by someone else as though it were your own. In most schools, including middle schools, high schools, and universities, plagiarism is considered a serious offense and can result in severe penalties, such as failing grades, loss of course credit, or even expulsion.

Because plagiarism is so serious, it is important to know exactly what it is and what you can do to avoid it. Here is a simple test to determine whether something is plagiarized:

- Is this information, idea, or statement common knowledge? If no, then ask yourself:
- Did this information, idea, statement come from a source outside myself, or did it come from my own experience or as a result of my own creative activity?

If the information, idea, or statement is NOT common knowledge, and if it came from an outside source, then YOU MUST CREDIT that source. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism.

Source: *Writing Research Papers*. 2001 ed. Boston: McDougall Littell, 2001.

### Parenthetical Documentation

The Works Cited at the end of your paper plays an important role in acknowledging sources, but it alone is not sufficient. You must indicate exactly what information you have derived from each source and exactly where you found the material. The simplest way to supply this information is to insert brief parenthetical acknowledgments in your paper wherever you incorporate someone else’s words, facts, or ideas. This acknowledgment usually includes an author’s last name and a page number, but with the increasing variety of sources, this does have variations.

Keep in mind:

- References in the text must clearly point to specific sources in the list of works cited. Information in the parenthetical reference must match the corresponding information in the list.
- Identify the location of the borrowed information as specifically as possible.
- Keep parenthetical references as brief as clarity and accuracy permit.
- If you incorporate an author’s name in a sentence, you do not need to repeat it in the parenthetical citation that follows.
- Punctuation always follows the parenthetical citation.
- To avoid interrupting the flow of your paper, place the parenthetical citation where a pause would naturally occur (preferably at the end of a sentence).
- **Long quotes (four lines or more) must be indented ten spaces. In the case you do NOT use quotation marks, and the parenthetical citation comes AFTER the end punctuation mark.**

# Citation Examples

## AUTHOR'S NAME IN TEXT

It may be true, as Robertson maintains, that “in the appreciation of medieval art the attitude of the observer is of primary importance...” (136).

In his *Autobiography*, Ben Franklin states that he prepared a list of thirteen virtues (135-37).

## AUTHOR'S NAME NOT IN TEXT

It may be true that “in the appreciation of medieval art the attitude of the observer is of primary importance...” (Robertson 136).

In *Autobiography*, thirteen virtues are listed (Franklin 135-37).

## CITING INDIRECT SOURCES

Samuel Johnson admitted that Edmund Burke was an “extraordinary man” (qtd in Boswell 450).

## CITING A “LONG” QUOTE

**\* notice that the end punctuation is placed before the parenthetical citation on a long quote ONLY!**

John K. Mahon offers this comment on the War of 1812:

Financing the war was very difficult at the time. Baring Brothers, a banking firm of the enemy country, handled routine accounts for the United States overseas, but the firm would take on no loans. The loans were in the end absorbed by wealthy Americans at great hazard—also, as it turned out, at great profit to them. (385)

## Integrating Information Using Signal Phrases

A **signal phrase** is used to tell the reader that information is being used from an outside source. One thing to remember when using signal phrases is to vary them as much as possible; your paper will seem repetitive if you continually reuse the same phrasing such as, *Jane Doe said*, *Tiger Woods said*, etc. See some possible variations below:

- In the words of President Clinton, “...” (29).
- As Oprah Winfrey has noted, “...” (2).
- Dr. James T. Kirk points out that “...” (11).
- “...” claims Mr. John Doe (2).
- Al Gore offers the argument that “...” (111).

### SIGNAL PHRASE VERBS

(these are just a sampling of verbs you may use to introduce quotes)

|              |           |            |             |          |
|--------------|-----------|------------|-------------|----------|
| acknowledges | comments  | emphasizes | illustrates | responds |
| adds         | compares  | endorses   | implies     | states   |
| admits       | confirms  | declares   | insists     | suggests |
| agrees       | contends  | denies     | notes       | supports |
| argues       | declares  | disputes   | observes    | thinks   |
| asserts      | denies    | emphasizes | proves      | writes   |
| believes     | discusses | endorses   | rejects     |          |
| claims       | disputes  | grants     | reports     |          |

## Preparing the List of Works Cited

**\*[www.knightcite.com](http://www.knightcite.com) has the ability to help you create your works cited page**

Rules of thumb:

1. Double-space entire Works Cited list.
2. List entries in alphabetical order according to the first word in the entry.
3. Begin the first line of each entry flush left and indent successive lines ½ inch.

What a Works Cited looks like:

### Works Cited

Atwan, Robert, Donald McQuade, and John W. Wright. *Edsels, Luckies, and Frigidaires:*

*Advertising the American Way*. New York: Dell, 1979. Print.

“Bicycles.” *World Book Encyclopedia*. 2005 ed.

Diamond, Carol. Telephone Interview. 27 Dec. 2007.

*MLA on the Web*. 25 November 1997. Modern Language Association of America. Web. 25

Mar. 1998.

Trillin, Calvin. “Culture Shopping” *New Yorker*. 15 Feb. 1993. 48-51.

United States Department of Energy. “Solar Power.” (1 October, 2008) Web (30 December, 2009).

**Book Example: See Atwan**

**Encyclopedia Example: See “Bicycles”**

**E-Periodical: See MLA on the Web**

**Internet Source: See United States**

**Magazine: See Trillin**

**Interview: Diamond**

## Page One Format

**A research paper does not need a title page.** Instead, on the first page of your paper, type your name, the instructor's name, the course name, and the due date on separate lines, you should also double space between the lines which will be on the LEFT side of the page (even with the left margin).

Double space again and center the title, making sure that it is in the same size font as your name. **DO NOT** underline your title, put in quotation marks, put in bold, or type in all capital letters. **DO** italicize the title.

Be sure to also double space between the title and the first line of text.

Number the following pages consecutively throughout the research paper in the upper, right-hand corner, one-half inch from the top and flush with the right margin. To do this in a Word program, follow the instructions below:

1. Go to the "View" menu and select "Header and Footer."
2. Align your header on the right. (This is the button at the top of your Word document next to the one where you click to center the page.)
3. Type in your last name and leave one space after it; on the Header toolbar, click on the "#" button to insert the page number.

Your first page should look like this:

Header has last name and page number → Genius 1

Ima Genius  
Mrs. Waldie  
Composition through American Literature 10  
15 December 2009

} double spaced

Keys to Successful Formatting for Research Papers in English Class ← Title is centered

It is important to follow all formatting directions for a research paper because it  
not only is something that you must know in order to be prepared for college, but also a simple  
way of earning points for your overall grade (and it makes your teacher happy!).

## GENERAL PAPER CHECKLIST

Once you're close to polishing your final draft, go through the following checklist to make sure you have met all the requirements.

### Paper Format

- Does your paper include your name, teacher name, the course name, and the due date all in the upper, left hand corner of your first page? Is this information double spaced, but with no extra spaces?
- Is your title centered? Your title should NOT be underlined, italicized, put in quotation marks, in bold, or in all capital letters. Does your title fit this description? Are the important words in the title capitalized?
- Does your paper have your last name with the corresponding page number in the upper right hand corner?
- Is your paper *at least* 4 pages long?

### Citations

- Do you have at least five of your sources cited within your paper?
- Do you have at least five sources included in your Works Cited page?
- Have you cited all of the information that is not your own?
- When you have a quotation that is longer than four lines, did you indent the entire quotation? The long quotations should NOT be in quotation marks. Is yours?
- Are your parenthetical citations in the correct location? Do they interrupt the flow of the paper?

### Introduction

- Does your introduction gain your reader's attention and introduce your topic?
- Do you show your reader the importance and/or relevance of your topic?
- Does your introduction end with a specific focus or thesis of your research?
- Does your thesis state specifically what you are going to prove in your essay?

### Body

- Before beginning your three main arguments do you provide at least one paragraph of information about your topic?
- Do all of your body paragraphs prove your thesis?
- Do you use transition words like *however*, *furthermore*, *in addition to*, *next*, *another*, etc. at the beginning or in the beginning of each new paragraph?
- Do you use a variety of signal words to introduce your quotations or citations?
- Are your points in a specific order? Chronological? Least important to most important? Weakest point to strongest point? What organization will benefit your paper the most?
- Do you address or acknowledge the counterargument of your topic?

## Conclusion

- Do you restate your thesis again in order to suggest to your reader that you have accomplished what you set out to prove?
- Do you include a brief summary of the paper's main points?
- Do you use one of the following to wrap up your paper?
  - ask a provocative question.
  - use a quotation.
  - evoke a vivid image.
  - call for some sort of action.
  - end with a warning.
  - suggest results or consequences.

## Editing and Proofreading

- Does the overall tone of the paper match your audience and the subject you're writing about? Have you avoided slang and being overly casual; at the other extreme, have you avoided sounding pretentious and stuffy?
- Have you checked for the following mistakes common to high school writers?
  - capitalization
  - spelling
  - fragments
  - run-on sentences
  - subject-verb agreement
  - pronoun usage
  - using numbers
    - most people spell out numbers that can be expressed in one or two words and use figures for other numbers:
      - over two pounds v. after 126 days
      - after thirty-one years v. only \$31.50
  - comma usage
    - Use a comma + a little conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so) to connect two independent clauses, as in "He hit the ball well, but he ran toward third base."

Have you read your paper out loud and listened to how it sounds?

### **Final Research Paper Checklist:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Graphic Organizer
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. 5 sources minimum
  - \_\_\_\_\_ at least one book
  - \_\_\_\_\_ at least one e-periodical article from a data base
  - \_\_\_\_\_ at least one additional source from a reliable web site
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Outline
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Introduction with thesis
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Background information paragraph
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Body paragraph (s) – first topic in thesis
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Body paragraph (s) – second topic in thesis
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Body paragraph (s) –third topic in thesis
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Counter-Argument
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Conclusion with thesis
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Works Cited page
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Sources packet
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Parenthetical documentation used for all five (or more) sources