

The Writing Center

How to Write a Research Essay for History

STEP 1: Focusing your topic:

- Choose a topic you are interested in and that you want to learn more about.
- Formulate a working thesis idea to use as a starting point to find source information.
- After doing some preliminary research, create a more specific working thesis statement that expresses the main point you want to make about the topic.
- For history essays, you should *reach some conclusions about the topic* based on your research. *The conclusions are what your thesis statement should convey.*

STEP 2: Research: Librarians can help you find appropriate sources. Some types of sources are NOT appropriate to use for a college level essay, including encyclopedias (including Wikipedia), and textbooks, etc. (These are places to start if you have *no* information about the topic, but they are not always reliable sources of research info).

- Use sources that contain information that supports the thesis statement of your essay.
- *Don't* use sources that you do not understand.
- **Evaluate** any source (especially Internet sources) you plan to use to be sure it is accurate, objective, current, balanced and unbiased, and legitimately authored (i.e. Who claims responsibility for the information?)

Record documentation information at the time you find sources, so you don't have to relocate the sources when you are doing your Works Cited page. See the Writing Center handout on MLA documentation for specific citation information you'll need for each source.

Do not procrastinate about doing your research! The research essay is a time consuming project. You must do the research before you can write the essay, and the writing will take some time. If you are not familiar with research writing and documenting research writing, it will take you even longer to complete the essay. Give yourself enough time to do everything that is required of you before the essay is due.

STEP 3: Preparing to write the essay:

- Taking notes while doing your research should help you create an outline of your essay.
- Create an outline of the information you want to include in your essay. (Decide if you want to present the information chronologically or topically.)
- Assemble your sources and the assignment handout before you start writing the first draft.

Footnotes or Endnotes? Footnotes and endnotes are used to provide extra information to the reader that you don't want to include in the text of your paper. They are not the same as in-text citations, which give documentation information about sources, although sometimes footnotes/endnotes will include specific publication information about sources. Footnotes are positioned at the bottom of each page of the text, with a corresponding superscript number in the text to direct the reader to the correct footnote. Endnotes are listed on a separate page at the end of the text, just before the Works Cited page. *The Modern Language Association (MLA) prefers endnotes over footnotes.* However, if your instructor asks you to use footnotes, use footnotes.

STEP 4: Writing the essay:

★ **Introduction:** This section of the essay introduces the reader to the topic and to your particular historical take on the topic. You might "set the scene" with an anecdote that illustrates something important or interesting, or which catches the interest of the reader and focuses it on the essay's topic. Or you might state vital data and background to the topic (for example, a biographical essay might start with information about when and where the subject person was born, etc.) Many find it easier to write the introduction after they have written the body of the essay. **Thesis Statement:** This commonly appears *within the introduction*, usually as the last sentence of the first paragraph. Your thesis should be clear and straightforward, and it should succinctly *state the overall point of your essay*.

★ **Argument and Documentation:** The bulk of your research essay will be your support of the thesis statement. This will be several paragraphs/pages long and should contain the *topic sentences* that provide supporting points for your thesis statement, *examples from sources* that illustrate your supporting points, and *explanations of HOW the examples illustrate your points*.

A "format" to use for supporting your thesis might be as follows:

MAKE A POINT, *in your own words, that supports your thesis idea.* (the topic sentence of a paragraph).

PROVIDE AN EXAMPLE from a source. This might be in the form of a *quote* (using the exact words the source uses and quotation marks-- ex. "quote") or a *paraphrase* (restating the idea in your own words—when you paraphrase, you don't put quotation marks around the information).

Whether you quote or paraphrase, you need to **CITE** any information you obtain from a source, by inserting an in-text parenthetical note that includes the author of the source's last name and the page number(s) where the information appeared in the source. For MLA format, the information that goes into the parenthetical note—**ex. (Smith 64)**---is the first bit of information about that source that your reader will see on your Works Cited page, so it is usually the author's last name.

If you do not have an author's name, use keywords from the title—ex. The title of the article is "Joan of Arc: Heroine or Heretic," with no named author. Your citation might be ("Joan" 86). If there are no page numbers, as is often the case with Internet sources, the same citation would be ("Joan"). An important part of developing your research writing is to **EXPLAIN how the EXAMPLE you have used makes your POINT**. This explanation is written in your own words and should clearly indicate how the example conveys the point/conclusion you've reached, as stated in your topic sentence.

★ **Conclusion:** The conclusion wraps up your essay and is an appropriate place to offer your own opinions, apply the research to present-day issues, or state the historic significance of the topic.

Transitions: Create smooth transitions between paragraphs by repeating keywords from the thesis and/or by introducing the topic of the following paragraph in the last sentence of the preceding paragraph. Transitional terms, such as "In addition," "Similarly," and "However," also help create smooth transitions. *Repetition of **keywords** and **ideas** creates transitions.* 01/10