

# Writing Research Essays: A Workshop Series: Part 1

Presented by The Writing Center at Trident Technical College

# Step 1: Getting Started

## Checklist for Step 1

- Understand the writing assignment
- Choose a topic
- Do some preliminary research on your chosen topic
- Begin putting together a bibliography of sources
- Develop a working thesis statement. The thesis statement includes the topic plus the point you are making about or the stance you are taking on the topic.

# Understand the writing assignment

- Many college classes require that students write argumentative essays based on research.
- An argumentative essay argues a stance the author takes on a particular topic.
- The stance should be debatable (meaning a reasonable person might disagree with the author's stance).
- Read the assignment carefully. If you have questions about the assignment, ask your instructor **NOW**. Be sure you understand all the requirements of the essay you are supposed to be writing.

# Choose a topic

- Sometimes you are given a choice of topics about which to write. You may need to do some preliminary research about one or more of the choices in order to decide which topic you'd like to research further.
- If you are choosing your own topic, choose something you're interested in and would like to investigate in depth.
- Be flexible as you do the preliminary research on your chosen topic or topics. The research itself will help you narrow the topic into an arguable thesis idea.

# Do some preliminary research

- Ask librarians for assistance
- Use the online databases. Advantages of using TTC's online databases for research:
  - TTC pays for subscriptions to these databases, which gives TTC students access to sources they might otherwise have to pay for or not be able to access.
  - Articles in databases have already been published in reliable sources, so you can trust that the information is accurate.
  - You can easily search for sources using keywords.
  - You can limit searches to full-text sources which are immediately available to you.
  - Most databases will allow you to generate an easily copied MLA works cited page citation.

# Preliminary research: finding sources

- *Wikipedia* can be a starting point. Many *Wikipedia* articles include bibliographies of sources, sometimes with direct links to these sources. However, most instructors don't want you to use *Wikipedia* articles as sources for your essay.
- Try using Google Scholar rather than doing a general Google search.
- Skim potential sources to see if they will provide you with useful information on your topic. Eliminate sources that are not helpful to supporting your topic/stance.
- Use keywords or ideas from sources you've already found to help you find additional sources.
- Always know what type and variety of sources the assignment requires. Try not to use all sources of the same type. For example, don't only use books as sources, unless that is appropriate to your topic and your instructor has specified that using only one type of source is acceptable for the assignment.

# Evaluating sources

- Evaluate any possible source to be sure it is appropriate for your research.
- Avoid using books or other sources intended for a reading audience below the level of what you are writing. For instance, don't choose a book intended for children. While these sources tend to present broad overviews of topics, they usually aren't specific and/or detailed enough to be considered a college appropriate source.
- You should evaluate any online information carefully:
  - Locate an author or group who claims responsibility for the information. Consider possible biases or slants based on the author's purpose for providing the information. Consider the currency of the information to be sure it is not outdated.
- Consider each source in terms of how the information in that source can be used to support the points you will be making in your essay.
- **Primary sources** are original documents or items (ex. a poem, short story, or photograph) or first hand accounts of events (such as newspaper articles written soon after the event occurs).
- **Secondary sources** are interpretations of primary sources and are created after an event (ex. a history textbook, a literary analysis, a movie about a historical event or time period). Secondary sources express the author's opinion or beliefs about the event.

# Creating a list of sources

- A **bibliography** is a list of sources you've consulted during the research process.
- Creating a bibliography as you go through the research process helps you choose sources and helps you prepare the works cited page for the finished essay.
- An **annotated bibliography** includes a brief annotation for each source. The annotation should briefly identify the type of source and its significance to your research. Annotations are usually only a few sentences long.
- A **bibliography** lists all sources you consulted during your research process, whether or not you cite the source in your essay. A **works cited page** is a list of the sources you've actually cited within your essay.
- Any source listed on your **works cited page** should have at least one in-text parenthetical citation within the text of your essay.
- As you locate each source, create an **MLA citation** for each source by locating all necessary information required in a citation. The following slide shows the core elements of MLA citations.



# Core elements of MLA citations

To be able to create an **MLA citation**, you should try to locate as much of the following basic info about a source as possible:

- Author. *May be a person, persons, or a group. Determine who is claiming responsibility for the information in the source.*
- Title of source.
- Title of container, *These are the larger whole works in which the source is located* ○ Other contributors, *May be editors, translators, etc.*
- Version, *If the source is an edition or a version*
- Number, *If the source is part of a series or located in a journal with volume and issue numbers, include these numbers in your citation. Use vol. and no. abbreviations before the volume and issue numbers. Example: vol. 12, no. 16*
- Publisher, *The entity that makes the work available* ○ Publication date, *When a source has more than one publication date, such as an online version of an original source, use the date that is most relevant to your use of the source*
- Location. *The location might include page numbers for an essay in a book or a URL for online sources.*
- Optional elements (*for example, a date of access for online sources, DOIs for journal articles, etc.*)

# Basic MLA citation format:

**Information to include:** Author's name (reversed for alphabetizing). "Title of source." (in quotation marks).

*Title of Container* (italicized), Other contributors, Version, Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location. Optional elements

## **Sample citation:**

Jones, David S. "The Leadership Debate." *Newsday*, vol. 12, no. 16, Jan. 2015, pp. 45-52, [www.newsday.com/jan15/leadership.123678](http://www.newsday.com/jan15/leadership.123678). Accessed 15 Feb. 2016

# Narrowing the topic

- As you research a topic, you will begin to reach some conclusions about the topic and to develop a stance on the topic. These conclusions are what you will be presenting in the research essay you write.
- In other words, a majority of your writing will be your presentation of the conclusions you've reached about the topic. The source information (quotes, paraphrases, and/or summaries of information from your sources) is used to help support the conclusions you present in your essay. The conclusions you present in your essay will add to the body of knowledge on the topic.
- As you are researching your chosen topic, you should be thinking about how you will narrow the topic to a workable thesis.
- The more focused your topic/thesis idea becomes, the more you can narrow the scope of additional research.

# The act of research

- It's not enough to locate sources; you must also read and understand the sources you intend to use as support in your research essay.
- Be aware that the research is usually the most time consuming part of completing a research essay.
- You don't always have to read every source fully. You can focus on the information you want to use in your essay.
- If an article has an abstract, you can read that to get an overview of what information is included in the article. However, an abstract itself is not usually an appropriate source. The same goes for book reviews and editorials. Try to locate the complete original source if you really want to use the information.
- If you don't put adequate effort into locating, choosing, reading, and understanding sources that are appropriate for your essay, you will have a very difficult time actually trying to write the essay.

# Develop a working thesis statement

- Create a working thesis statement based on your preliminary research.
- The thesis statement contains the topic plus the point you are making about the topic or the stance you are taking on the topic.
- The thesis statement should be argumentative. This means that a reasonable person might disagree with the point or stance of your thesis.
- The goal of an argumentative research essay is to convince your reader, through specific evidence, that your point or stance on the topic is correct. The “specific evidence” is your presentation of the conclusions you’ve reached in doing the research combined with the supporting information from your sources.