

Writing Research Essays: A Workshop Series: Step 4

Presented by The Writing Center at Trident Technical College

Step 4: Writing the Research Essay

Checklist for Step 4:

- Drafting the essay
- Incorporating quotations, paraphrases, and citations
- Revising/editing
- Proofreading tips

The first draft

- You should have created an outline that includes a working thesis statement and major points that you intend to address in your essay. Use this outline as you write or type a first draft of your essay.
- Your main goal in writing a research essay is to present, support, and explain the conclusions you've reached based on the research you've done on the topic. These conclusions form the basis of your essay.
- While writing the first draft, focus on expressing your ideas as clearly and completely as possible.
- Don't interrupt the writing of your first draft by worrying about spelling or grammar. You will go back later and make revisions and corrections.
- If you are composing the first draft on a computer, you might want to turn off the spelling and grammar checker so it does not distract you from getting the ideas expressed.

Organizing the research essay

Academic writing is *highly structured* writing, and the reader has certain expectations about how information is organized and presented in an academic essay. The *language and word choice should be formal* rather than personal (which is why you avoid using “I” and “you” and why you avoid using contractions and slang terms) and should be appropriate for a college level reading audience. Academic writing should also be *logically organized*. The following organizational pattern is common in academic writing:

First paragraph (Introduction)—The *introductory paragraph* introduces the topic of the essay and the main points you are making about the topic, which is expressed in the thesis statement. The thesis statement is often the last sentence of the introductory paragraph.

Body paragraphs (Argument and Documentation)—Body paragraphs often begin with a topic sentence, which states the point of that particular paragraph. The *body paragraphs* each deal with one idea or point that supports and/or explains the thesis statement. These body paragraphs make up the bulk of your research essay. Body paragraphs may 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 help support or illustrate your points*.

Last paragraph (Conclusion)—This paragraph usually reiterates the thesis idea and wraps up the entire essay to bring it to a meaningful close. Sometimes the conclusion will include a broader application of the main point of the essay. The conclusion is often an appropriate place to offer your own opinions, apply the research to present-day issues, or state the historic significance of the topic.

Developing body paragraphs

A “format” to use for supporting your points in the body paragraphs 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.
- An important part of developing your body paragraphs 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 (source information) supports the point/conclusion you’ve reached, as stated in your topic sentence.
- **Concluding sentence(s):** Wrap up your paragraph and create a smooth transition into the point that will be discussed in the following paragraph.

Using quotations

Examples of how to incorporate quotations into your own sentences:

Source 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).

Source author's name in parenthetical citation:

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

Alternate ways to incorporate this quotation would be:

“In the appreciation of medieval art the attitude of the observer is of primary importance” (Robertson 136), which shows how much the artist valued the audience.

Or:

Medieval artists valued their audiences and believed that “the attitude of the observer is of primary importance” in the appreciation of these art works (Robertson 136) .

As a writer, you have choices about how to incorporate quotations into your writing. The key is you want the writing to flow smoothly and to clearly convey your points, using the source info as support for your points.

Note: You should have at least some of your own words in a sentence along with a quotation. Avoid having a quotation stand as a complete sentence in your paper, as in the following example:

Robertson maintains that the attitude of the observer makes a difference. “In the appreciation of medieval art the attitude of the observer is of primary importance” (Robertson 136). This shows how much the artist valued the audience.

Avoiding Plagiarism

To avoid plagiarism, any time you use someone else's **words, ideas, or images** in your writing, you must give that person or group credit by documenting the source.

- Document sources correctly.
- MLA documentation requires a Works Cited page along with in-text parenthetical citations.
- Not including in-text citations is a form of plagiarism.
- Not including a Works Cited page is a form of plagiarism.
- Putting incorrect info into the citations is a form of plagiarism.

Tips on using source information

- Paraphrase or summarize source information as much as possible.
- Over-quoting can detract from the impact of the paper.
- Use a parenthetical in-text citation when you paraphrase, summarize, or quote information from a source.
- Quotation marks indicate to your reader that the words appeared exactly like this in the source.
- If you're in doubt about whether or not to cite information in your essay, ask yourself if you could have known the information without having found it in a source. Cite if it's not something you could have known without finding it in a source.

Editing and revising the essay

Editing/revising stage checklist:

- **Review the assignment** to be sure you've included all necessary and/or required information in your essay.

- **Check the organization:**

Consider the overall organization of ideas (paragraphs) in your essay to be sure you've presented information in a logical order. A **thesis statement** and **topic sentences** help organize the ideas in an essay.

Check your thesis statement to be certain it reflects the overall main point you've made in the essay you've written. Sometimes as you write the first draft, ideas may emerge that change the original focus of your essay. If necessary, change your thesis statement to fit the essay.

Check each paragraph to be sure you've expressed your points in clear, complete sentences that are logically organized within the paragraphs.

You may need to **add topic sentences to your body paragraphs** to be sure you're clearly expressing the main points of the essay. Topic sentences express the conclusions you've reached based on the research you've done on the topic. These conclusions form the basis of your essay.

- **Check source information:**

Be sure you've used source information appropriately to support your points and that you've cited appropriately.

Be sure you've fully explained **HOW** the source information supports your conclusions/points.

Read each sentence to be sure it fits in the paragraph and to be sure it is grammatically correct and clearly written.

- **Check the development of ideas:**

Be sure you have fully explained your points throughout the essay. Read each paragraph as an explanation of one idea in detail. Be sure the reader can fully understand the points you were trying to make about each idea. You may need to add or remove sentences or parts of sentences to fully explain your ideas.

Transitions

While you are revising the draft, pay attention to transitions, especially between paragraphs. You can 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.

*Repetition of **keywords** and **ideas** creates transitions.*

Transitional terms can also help create smooth transitions between paragraphs. Below are lists of some common transitional terms.

List list transitions	cause/effect transitions	comparison transitions	contrast transitions
also, in addition, another, furthermore, first, second, third, finally, lastly, next, most importantly, moreover, too	so, therefore, as a result, thus, because, consequently, due to, hence, as a consequence, for this reason, in response	also, too, likewise, similarly, in a like manner, just like, just as, in the same way, similar to, in both cases, along the same line	however, but, yet, although, instead, in opposition, in spite of, despite, nevertheless, on the other hand, unlike, rather, on the contrary, unfortunately, in contrast, conversely, nonetheless, still, whereas, as opposed to, while

Proofreading tips

- Recognize that proofreading is another part of the writing process that requires time. Give yourself time after you've completed the piece of writing to proofread it carefully several times before you turn the paper in for a grade.
- **Read the writing aloud.** Your ear will hear mistakes that your eye might miss. Even if you feel silly doing it, you should always read the work aloud when proofreading.
- **Read the writing backwards, one sentence at a time.** In other words, begin with the last sentence of the piece, read it carefully for errors, then move to the next-to-last sentence, etc. This forces you to slow down and concentrate on one sentence at a time, so you can be sure the words you put on the paper are actually the words you meant to write and that each sentence is clear and smoothly written.
- **Read the writing backwards, one word at a time.** Reading the writing starting with the last word and working backwards helps you catch spelling errors.
- **Read S-L-O-W-L-Y and read exactly what you have written on the page.** Take your time when reading and read the words that are actually on the page. You can use a ruler or a sheet of paper to cover up lines below the one you are reading, which helps you clearly see the line you are reading. Read each word as it appears on the page (*Slow down!* When you read quickly, you tend to self-correct to what you wanted to write, instead of what you actually wrote.)
- **Change how the writing looks on the page.** Change the font to a larger size that is easier to read. Separate each sentence onto one line by hitting the “Enter” key after each period. *[Be sure to undo these changes before you submit a final copy of the paper for a grade.]*
- **Be prepared to proofread your writing several times.** This is the final step in the writing process, but it is important, so *don't rush it*. Find and fix as many minor mistakes in the writing as you can BEFORE you turn the paper in for a grade!

Some final tips for the research essay

- Ideally, you should give yourself enough time after you've written the first draft of the essay to put it away for a while (at least a day or two) before you come back to it to complete the editing/revising stage.
- You should also take a break from the paper between the editing/revising and the proofreading stages.
- Giving yourself these “breaks” during the writing process will help you revise and proofread the essay with fresh eyes. You are more likely to recognize places in the essay where you might need to revise wording or add information if the ideas and words you originally wrote are not very fresh in your mind.
- For the same reason, giving yourself time to put the essay aside for a while before you proofread is a good idea. You're more likely to spot typos, misspellings, and other sentence level mistakes if you are not proofreading immediately after you've written the essay.