

CHAPTER 1

Before You Begin

Whether you have seldom had to deal with research papers during your academic career or have been writing them for a while, there are a few important things to consider before diving into the writing process. Research papers come in all shapes and sizes, so understanding exactly what you are getting yourself into when starting a paper is crucial. The following sections offer basic information to consider as you begin the process of writing a research paper.

What is a Research Paper?

The majority of papers you will write in an academic setting will be research papers. Any paper requiring the writer to research a particular topic is a research paper. Unlike essays, which are often based largely on opinion and are written from the author's point of view, research papers are based in fact. Anecdotes and creative storytelling have no place inside a research paper. This is not to say research papers cannot be creative or contain the author's opinion. They should be, and they do. The big difference between a research paper and many other forms of writing is research papers force the writer to back up their opinions and assertions with facts found

through thorough research on a given topic. They force students to form an opinion on a topic, research that topic, and then showcase that knowledge by writing about it. Because of this, they are a staple in almost every subject within the academic world.

Tip No. 1 Research papers force you to form an opinion on a topic and then back it up with facts.

You can try to be creative in your presentation, but research papers rely on facts found through research to construct a logical and compelling argument.

Types of Research Papers

There are several types of research papers. Some research papers are short, and some are in-depth. Everything from a three-page literary analysis to a 40-page senior analysis is a research paper. The beauty of research papers is they all follow the same basic structure whether you are writing a summary of scientific research conducted over the course of a semester, analyzing a novel, or drawing conclusions from several psychological studies. The tips found in this book can apply to any research paper you write.

Tip No. 2 Research papers of all types have almost identical structures at their core.

There will be some basic differences, but if you can write one type of research paper, you can write another. Do not let literary criticism intimidate you if you are a chemistry major or scientific research scare you if you are an English major.

Although you can apply the same basic structure and tips to just about any research paper, some stylistic rules will vary from subject to subject. Familiarity with MLA format will help you with that English paper, but

it might not help with a chemistry analysis. *Chapter 7 will provide more information on formatting your paper and using different styles for various types of research papers.*

Tip No. 3 Familiarize yourself with different formats for writing papers.

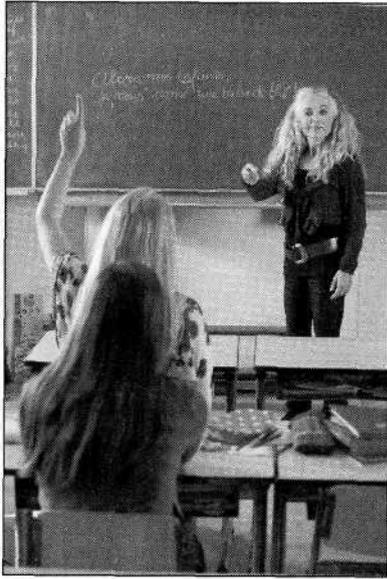
Having a passing knowledge of multiple styles will make them much less intimidating if you happen to run across them at a later date.

Questions to Ask Before Starting a Paper

Now you have a solid understanding of what a research paper is, make sure you have all the information you need to write the best possible paper for a given assignment. Often, professors will give out a rubric or assignment sheet with all the information you need to know about an assignment, but this is not always the case.

Tip No. 4 Do not put off reading over assignments for research papers.

Few things are worse than ignoring a huge project until the last minute and then realizing you do not understand part of it. It often is too late to get clarification at that point, so read those assignment sheets immediately upon receiving them.



Sometimes you do not receive a clear list of instructions. This can be especially frustrating for students as they flounder through an assignment because they aren't sure of what is expected of them or whether they are doing the assignment correctly. Asking your professor for clarification on specific points before starting an assignment will save you a lot of fuss and headache later during the writing process. If your professor is unavailable, your classmates can often help. Many schools also have tutors or

writing centers available to help students with papers, so use these resources. Always check the class syllabus or website, if possible, to determine whether any additional information is there.

Tip No.

5 Ask questions about an assignment until you are sure you have a handle on it.

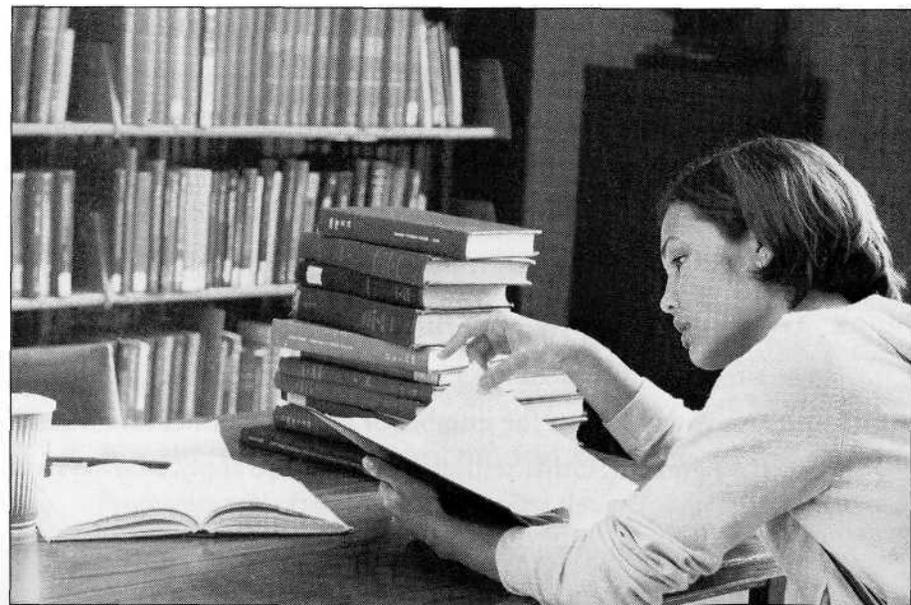
Many students needlessly lose points on assignments because they did not understand every aspect of it. Ask questions, get clarification, and do not wait until the last minute to do so. You might find help is unavailable later but would have been earlier.

The following is a list of questions you should ask either yourself or your professor before beginning any paper:

- **Are there any requirements for the topic of the paper?** Professors will often provide a general theme for an assignment and expect students to pick a topic relating to that theme.

- **Are any subjects off-limits for this paper?** A professor might say one or two topics covered within the class should not be included in any papers. They might also have a list of topics that they see too often and recommend students avoid.
- **How long should the paper be?** This is important because the length of a paper will change which topics you can adequately cover within the assignment. Some professors will not give a set length for an assignment, but most will at least recommend a page or word count. Make sure you have this information so you can plan the paper accordingly.
- **Which format should the paper be in?** There are several different styles or formats in which to write a paper. *Chapter 7 will give more information about a paper's format.* Be sure you know in which format your professor is expecting to receive the paper so you can brush up on that format.
- **Is a number of sources required?** Professors could set a minimum number of sources for a paper or have a rough expectation of how many sources are appropriate for a research paper. Not having the proper number of sources is a petty thing to lose points over, so make sure you are aware of any requirements. Choose a topic that lets you meet any requirements in this department.
- **Are any types of sources restricted?** Professors might restrict certain types of sources for a given assignment. Most commonly, professors will restrict the number or type of Internet sources used in an assignment. Other restrictions might also apply, so always ask.

- **Should you turn in any additional materials with the paper?** Some assignments might require you to turn in multiple drafts of the same paper, turn in a cover page or an outline, or include a certain number of charts or graphs with your paper. Most professors will make this clear when this is the case, but always ask for clarification if you have any questions so you know you are turning in the correct materials.
- **Does the professor have any other specific requirements for the paper?** Every professor is different, and they often have their own requirements for how they want things done. They might require you to print your paper in a specific font or print your pages double-sided. When professors have odd or specific, nonstandard expectations for papers, they make them clear in the class syllabus or on an assignment sheet, but always ask for clarification if you have any doubt or are confused.



Study Guide

- Research papers are a staple of any academic discipline.
- Research papers require students to form an opinion on a topic and then back up their assertions about the subject with facts found through research.
- Although different types of research papers might require different formats and will cover varying subjects, much of the basic structure and the tips for improvement are universal.
- Because there are many things to consider when writing a research paper, do not be afraid to ask questions and get all of the important information you need before you begin writing and researching.
- Use all the resources your campus has available if you have trouble understanding an assignment and your professor is unavailable.