

Understanding the Research Process

The argumentative research paper is both challenging and confrontational. It requires the academic writer to form an opinion and to take a position on the subject matter presented.

All facts are presented for the purpose of supporting the central argument (your thesis statement). As you conduct your research, always ask yourself: "How does this help me make my point?" If the evidence will not work toward your thesis statement, you will need to scrap these sources, facts, and evidence and modify your research process.

The bottom line: Your research needs to support your argument, not make it for you.

To get started, it helps to break the research paper process into four distinct parts: laying the groundwork, developing a strategy, organizing and beginning to write, and finalizing.

Part 1. Laying the Groundwork for your Research Paper

Choosing a Research Paper Topic

- Your first step in the argumentative research process is to choose a topic. A good topic raises questions that have neither absolute nor simple answers. Your topic can range from the traditional to the non-traditional. The key is to find a topic that you are passionate about and that you wish to research, to argue, and to develop in a paper. Make sure to get professor approval before you get started.
- Once you have a topic, find an opinion or argument that is of interest to you. **How do you view this topic? What do you want to say about this topic?**
- All topics are good topics, but avoid basing your argumentative thesis statement solely on opinion. **Place this topic into the larger cultural conversation perspective and focus on creating a thesis statement to defend in your paper.**

Completing the Preliminary Research

- Begin with the library to help you get started with **your basic introductory reading** about your subject and gather background information. This allows you to become more familiar with prospective topics and begin to build your list of tentative sources.
- As you look through these sources, skim them. Weed out sources of little relevance. If a source is interesting to you, save it for your working bibliography.
- **Join the academic conversation:** look for a list or bibliography of further reading at the end of the encyclopedia entries or textbook chapters. What have persons of note (scholars, politicians, researchers, critics, journalists, lawmakers, scientists, etc) said about your subject? **Do any of their opinions support ("yes"), contradict ("no"), or support AND contradict ("okay, but") your thoughts on the topic?**
- Beware of issues that are too recent to find adequate research. You may have to get creative!

Forming a Hypothesis, or "Working Thesis Statement"

- As you collect your sources and brainstorm your topic, your next step is to form a "working thesis statement" early on in your drafting process. If you create a "working thesis statement," you allow yourself to remain focused in your research and raise more questions regarding your topic (to help with your discussion points).
- As you continue to draft and gather information, you will change the keywords in your thesis statement. However, always be sure to have an argumentative goal in mind. The key is to remain flexible to adapt your paper in light of new information.
- A thesis statement has two parts: the subject and the treatment. The subject is your topic. The treatment is your direction and focus (what you plan to argue, discuss, develop, or examine about your topic).

Part 2. Developing a Research Strategy for your Research Paper

Find Useful Sources

- As you put together your tentative source list, consider what sources they are and how they fit into your overall argument (it's okay if you do not have a thesis statement at this point; you just need an idea and a possible direction based on your brainstorming).
- There are two types of sources: secondary sources and primary sources. **A primary source is an original source that has not been changed in any way.** Usually, a primary source is a creative work, such as a novel, poem, or play or an original document, such as a diary, historical document, or interview. Some arguments are based upon a primary source; for instance, if a research paper's topic is Frankenstein, then the Mary Shelley novel of the same name would be a primary source.
- Another type of source is a secondary source. **A secondary source is a credible, academic source which analyzes one or more primary sources.** You may use a secondary source to support and develop your overall argument. Examples of secondary sources may include textbooks, critical anthologies, journal articles, newspaper articles, etc.
- As you search for sources, it is important to distinguish between the types of sources:
 1. **A print source is a physical print source** such as a book, textbook, or magazine/newspaper article.
 2. **An electronic web source is a credible website.** Avoid using blogs, social media posts, online journals, and most .com websites. Wikipedia cannot be used as a source, but consulting the footnotes and links listed in the bibliographical information may be used if deemed academic, relevant, and credible to your argument. Additionally, you can try periodical websites for an online archive (www.nytimes.com or www.time.com). A Google search is also helpful, but beware! Sometimes you may get more sources than you bargain for, so it is best to use Google Scholar to narrow down your search terms.
 3. **An academic database source can be found through the BCCC library database (for example, JSTOR).** The reference librarians will not only be able to direct you toward any source, but also help you determine which database will work best for you. It is important to make sure your sources are peer-reviewed and are from a credible academic journal.

Take Stock of your Sources

It is important to organize your sources. To do this, create a list (some scholars use index cards) that contains all of the important information for each possible source. Include the author's name (last, first), the article and/or book title, the publication information, and any library call numbers or URL information. This way, when you are ready to use a source in your paper, you can quickly refer to your bibliographic notes.

Example: Tentative Source Entry

Author: O'Banion, Terry

Title: A Learning College for the 21st Century

Publisher: American Council on the Education series on Higher Education/Oryx Press

City: Phoenix, Arizona

Year: 1997

From: BCCC Library

Library Call Number: 578.052.011 c.3

Create Concept Cards

- Note cards (4x6 index cards) are a great way to manage and to organize your information - especially as you begin to assemble your "quote sandwiches" (please refer to the Tutoring Center's "Embedded Quotes" handout). The main advantage of note cards is that information can be easily grouped, displayed, and rearranged to fit the best organization for your paper. Additionally, space restrictions of the note cards will force you to be succinct with your note-taking.
- Begin by establishing a consistent format. If you prefer, concept card information can be documented as a spreadsheet or word processing document (the key is to work with your writing style).
- Include the tentative source information (see above) and then record keywords, powerful quotations, and main ideas. Include the page numbers, the direct quote (to avoid plagiarism), and how you would explain and incorporate this quote into your paper.

How to Manage Information

Try to use sources that tackle your subject in-depth rather than looking at it superficially, as sources that use generalities will be less useful than ones that use detailed language.

There are three ways for a scholar to organize his/her sources:

- Paraphrasing takes an idea and puts it into your own words, giving your ideas both brevity and clarity. Paraphrasing can be tricky, so proceed with caution. To avoid plagiarism or to avoid weakening the credibility of your paper, check out the Tutoring Center handout on "Avoiding Plagiarism" and the Purdue OWL's "Paraphrase: In Your Own Words." (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/619/>)
- Summarizing takes a larger amount of information and reduces it down to a few concise sentences (please refer to the Summary/Reaction handout).
- Quotations can serve as evidence or support for your main ideas. For this particular assignment, direct quotations should be restricted to no more than 30% of your paper (70% of your paper should be your own ideas). Your quotations should strengthen your point, not make it for you.

It is important to note that an effective research paper blends all three of these tools together to support your objective, which is outlined in your argumentative goal or thesis statement.

Know When to Quote

Using direct quotation is a great way to develop your thesis statement and work with your sources. However, too many direct quotes may cause the research paper to lose YOUR voice. To keep a healthy balance, only use a direct quotation for the following reasons:

- **Concision:** When you cannot paraphrase an idea without using much of the same language as the original notion. This often occurs when trying to introduce a specialized term, such as a literary movement or a philosophical theory.
- **Accuracy:** When you cannot paraphrase an idea without manipulating the original meaning.
- **Memorable Language:** When a source expresses an idea so vividly or eloquently that the effect is lost in paraphrasing. It is important not to overuse this method because you feel you cannot say something as well as it was originally written. Save memorable language for instances when it is sure to create an emotional resonance within the paper.
- **Authority:** When you wish to support an idea by referencing an expert in the field.

When you create a preliminary outline, you will be able to fit each group of “quote sandwiches” into its appropriate place in the overall framework of your paper.

Part 3. Organizing and Beginning to Write the Research Paper

Begin to develop your thesis statement and argument

The best way to begin your paper is to arrive at the thesis statement. Your thesis statement may not be perfect, but by creating a “working thesis statement,” you will be able to set the argumentative goal for your paper. Use the hypothesis to create a preliminary outline in order to begin your first draft.

Many professors require a statement of purpose, which displays an initial understanding of information relevant to the topic at hand. This includes research, working thesis, scope, and quality of sources. A statement of purpose is a good way to make the transition from reading to writing. You can bring your ideas together in a paragraph and state directly what you plan to accomplish with the paper.

Developing a Preliminary Outline

Much like a “working thesis,” a preliminary outline can help you stay focused on your paper’s organization, while still allowing the writer to alter different parts of the research paper. **To create a preliminary outline**, begin with your thesis statement and move on to the list of questions you have for your paper or the list of points you’ve already decided to address in your paper. Move on to the essential definitions/explanations the reader will need to know in order to understand more sophisticated ideas, opinions, and observations made later in the paper.

Begin to write the paper

Using your working thesis statement and preliminary outline as your guide, allow yourself time to develop a rough draft carefully and thoroughly. **You will likely revise it several times before you are satisfied with the finished product. At this point in the process, make an appointment with a tutor at the Tutoring Center and submit a draft to your instructor for feedback.**

While a clear thesis statement is essential to a well-organized paper, be aware that your thesis may change as you develop ideas for your paper. If your research takes you in a slightly different direction, it is important to be flexible with a working thesis statement.

As you draft, revise, and revise again, remember that **writing is a recursive process**. You will have a few drafts before you reach the final draft of the research paper. **The “Revision” Handout and “Glossing the Paper” Handout are great resources for this part of the process.**

Part 4. Finalizing the Paper

Finalize documents/sources

- In-text citation is necessary for all research papers. Crediting sources properly can be facilitated by keeping accurate and detailed note cards. Follow the rules for proper citation depending on the format style you are required to use (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc).
- In-text citations are based on the entries as they appear in your Works Cited/Reference/Bibliography list at the end of the paper.
- Academic writing often calls for quoted material and requires the writer to reference the ideas of others and provide support through the use of quotations from experts. Your research paper should include your own ideas and discussion of the topic, supported by evidence of material written by others. The “Embedded Quotes” handout can help you incorporate your sources into the research paper.
- When writing a literary analysis/criticism research paper, be cautious of how much biographical information you include. While an author’s history may well inform their literary content, the focus of an analysis/criticism must be on the literary work itself. For further information, refer to the BCCC Tutoring Center handout “How to Write a Literary Analysis.”

Prepare the Final Version

One of the best tools in a writer’s toolbox is a revision plan. Understanding your revision process will help you feel more in control of your paper as you finalize your ideas. Similar to the drafting process, there are a few steps you can take for revision:

1. Make an appointment with a tutor.
2. Stop by and pick up handouts from the Tutoring Center.
3. Make an appointment with your professor or review old papers for comments and suggestions.
4. Read aloud (you can find missing ideas, details, and sentence-level errors this way).
5. Check for coherence and paragraph unity (“Glossing the Paper” handout).

The Last Word

In the case of any major research paper assignment, the key is to pace yourself. Start early, ask questions often, and develop a schedule to keep you on track. Allow sufficient time for each part of the process: researching, writing the rough draft, making revisions, composing your Works Cited/Reference/Bibliography list, and adding the proper in-text citation. Working with the Tutoring Center and your professor regularly during the process will help you feel more confident about the research process and your own writing process.

Research Process Checklist

Completed	Research Task to be Done
	Choose a topic that does not have a simple or absolute answer.
	Create a working thesis statement for that topic.
	Research your topic, being mindful of your focus for the topic.
	Review your research closely to weed out any sources not relevant.
	Organize your research, including all information needed for documentation.
	Write a thesis statement based on your thoughts about what you learned with your research.
	Write an outline to help you organize your points and evidence.
	Write the first draft of your essay.
	Revise your essay for structure, content, and clarity.
	Proofread your paper for any final errors or typos.