A Guide to Writing an Undergraduate Research Paper

In this course, you are required to produce an original research paper. I will expect you to find, at a bare minimum, 8 sources for your paper. I will expect it to be written in font 12 of Times New Roman (exactly like this), spaced 1.5 in Microsoft Word, and be no less than 12 pages, no more than 20. You will choose your own topic to write about, get me to approve that topic (it will obviously have to be related to the material in the course), and you will then research that topic and discover some the current academic debates that are issues in that area. Once you have done that you can narrow your topic down, and choose one that you are interested in. I will expect you to make a central argument, and then to go on to support that central argument with evidence from your sources. I will expect you to write well, and argue coherently and convincingly.

This may cause you some stress and anxiety. That is a good thing! It will motivate you to get started early, and work hard to produce the best paper you can. Here is some advice I will give you that should help you with this task, and hopefully minimize (but not eliminate) your anxiety.

Make a Plan of Attack!

The most important thing to remember when tackling a large writing assignment like a research paper is that time can be your best friend or it can be your worst enemy.  If you know that you have a research paper due at the end of the semester, don't wait until one week before it is due to begin your research. You should put together a "Research Itinerary" at the very beginning of the semester. This will help you organize all the tasks that you will need to complete in a timely, more organized manner. A Research Itinerary will also help you create a more well developed paper because you will have put in the time necessary to find the information that you will need, read the material, create an outline, and then write the paper.  The difference between an average research paper and a great research paper is the amount of time that you give yourself to accomplish the project.  Make time your friend! Start as early as possible and create a weekly schedule in which you can devote a certain amount of time to do your research. Decide how much time you will need to spend in the library, on the computer, writing an outline, writing a first draft, writing a final draft, etc. It doesn't have to be a timetable set in stone, but it should be realistic.

For instance, expect to spend around two hours finding each source that you use for your paper. This time includes narrowing your search for articles, journals, books, etc., on the computer, and then locating the physical material in the library. Once you have located what you need, you will have to briefly read through the material to make sure it contains information that you can use, and if you have to make copies, that will require even more time. So, you know that you will need at least 8 sources, so you will need at least 16 hours of research over the course of the term to find that many sources. Therefore a realistic timeframe to complete this task could be 3 hours once a week for five weeks (keep in mind how long you may check out material), or if you find that you want to locate your sources quicker, set-up a timeframe for 2 hours twice a week for four weeks, or maybe two visits to the library for the entire afternoon each time. The point is that you must be realistic as to how much time it will take just to locate your sources and to stick to your timeframe. If you wait to the last minute, you have made time your enemy, and you will become anxious about the project because you will realize that you will not be able to do all the work required of a research paper in a week, or even two weeks. Give yourself time and start early!

To prepare for writing, go over once more the requirements of the assignment to make sure you focus your writing efforts on what's expected. Consider the purpose of the paper as stated in your thesis—are you trying to persuade, to inform, to evaluate, to summarize?

1. Who is your audience and how will that affect your paper?
2. What prior knowledge can you assume the audience has on the topic?
3. What style and tone of writing are required by the audience and the assignment—informal, scholarly, first-person reporting, dramatized?

 Another important thing to do with every large writing assignment that you need to complete is putting together a "calendar." By looking at a calendar and noting exactly when the assignment is due, you will have a much clearer idea of what important things that you need to accomplish at specific times so you don't find yourself in a time crunch that leaves no time to write a well thought out and organized paper. The following is an example of an itinerary for writing a research paper. You should review it but don't think that you must follow it to the letter. You may take some ideas that you like and incorporate them into your own "research writing" calendar. You know yourself better than anyone else. If you are not a morning person, schedule out time to do most of your research and writing at night. You need to be awake and motivated to write, so be your own best friend and write when writing is most comfortable for you. The process of research may, however, be something very new to you and will require self discipline to go to the library and spend the time necessary to do research correctly. Remember, all the time and effort that you put into organizing and following a plan will pay off big dividends as you begin the writing process!

This is an example Research Itinerary designed for the student who has multiple classes and cannot spend two weeks exclusively working on one paper.

Time management is the key!

Research Itinerary

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| Week  1 | |  | | Organize a plan of attack!  Make an  Itinerary | |  | | Talk to instructor about ideas. | |  | | Begin research! Search for sources at library.  (3 hrs) | |  |
| Week  2 | | Begin reading & taking notes.  (1 hr. each night) | | Start planning the paper.  Freewriting or clustering your ideas is a good way to begin this process. | | | | | | | | Search for sources at library.  (3 hrs) | |  |
| Week  3 | | Read & take notes.  (1 hr. each night) | |  | |  | | Talk to instructor about research progress. | |  | | Last day to search for sources at library. | |  |
| Week  4 | | Read & take notes.  (1 hr. each night) | | Finish initial planning. | | | | | | | | Finish any reading of material, notes, and outline. | | Begin writing first draft of paper. |
| Week  5 | It is a good idea to go back and do even more research at this step. Use your first draft to find weak spots that need even more explanation or examples. RESEARCH YOUR TOPIC MORE! | | | | | | | | | | Draft and revise. | |  | |
| Week  6 | Draft and revise. | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Week  7 | \*\*\* Leave the last week before paper is due open for any unexpected problems in case you do not finish on schedule or for editing your final draft. | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Week  8 |  | |  | |  | | Turn in an excellent Research Paper! | |  | |  | |  | |

Taking Notes

It is important to take good notes when reading the material that you have checked-out or made copies of.  If you are using a Research Itinerary and gather research every week (as suggested by the Research Itinerary calendar), you should not wait until you have all the material that you will need to write your paper before you start reading. There are two reasons for this. One, you may not be able to keep the reading material that you need for the entire time that it will take you to write your paper, and two, good research has an interesting way of opening up whole new ideas that you may not have thought of when you wrote your original outline. As you read day to day, and week to week, you will undoubtedly find material that will take you into other possible directions with your thesis. By reading as you go along with the research that you have gathered, you give yourself more time to explore different ways of approaching your paper. However, if you wait to look at all the material that you have gathered at one time, you will find that you may read something, or find a an idea that seems very interesting, but you have used up all of your "finding sources" time. You have to use what time you have left to actually read and formulate a first draft only. In short, you have limited your options because you have used up your time for that part of your project.

 Read as you go and take good notes!

 As you read the material, write down specific passages or quotations that you feel will support your main points. You can create a table for each source:

Source: America Now (Robert Atwan)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Quote | Page # | Support Point |
| "women are schooled to listen to men; men are schooled to impart their wisdom to women." | 133 | Psychological reasons women do not speak up in class. |
| "men use language to compete, and women use language to make emotional connections." | 133 | Psychological reasons women do not speak up in class. |
| "[Men have an] unearned fringe benefit of having a Y chromosome in class." | 134 | Men's feelings of entitlement to speak up in class. |

Obviously, these notes would pertain to a paper dealing with gender differences in the classroom. As long as the support points deal specifically with the main points of the paper, the quotes chosen could be used to analyze and support the papers thesis.

Some students prefer the traditional "index card" method of writing important information or quotes on one side, and the source name, author and page number on the back:

Front

Psychological reasons women do not speak up in class.

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“Many women do not want to give a wrong answer for fear they will be embarrassed”

Back

Source: America Now –

Robert Atwan

Article: Classroom Gender Balance –

Kate Epstein

By compiling your "support points" or "listings," you may begin to see a structure for the paper develop depending on how you arrange them. This is why it is important to begin reading the material as early as possible. You will find that as you read, you are not only learning important information for your paper, but you beginning to write down paraphrases or direct quotes to support your main ideas, and you are constructing a possible plan for the direction that your paper will begin to take.

Planning to Write

Talk with someone about your paper -this is a good way to make sure that you're on track. Your friend will be able to see what your topics is and what points that you are planning on emphasizing in your paper and can advise you on whether or not you are staying focused with the assignment. Spending a long period of time doing research can have some negative effects. One thing that can happen to students is that they start to have what is known as "tunnel vision" with their paper. In other words, they begin to lose sight of the "bigger" picture, which is their main arguments, and start to become preoccupied with unimportant details.

The time you take to do this will pay big dividends when you start writing your paper. Remember, your research topic and plan is not "set in stone" this early in the process. As you read more and more material, your plan will become fluid, and you will add and delete things as you go along, and maybe even change topics entirely.

Developing Central Arguments

Your central argument (or arguments) provide a sense of focus and purpose to your research. Your central argument can be an explicit argument OR it can be an "implied" thesis or an "exploratory hypothesis" which doesn't yet present a definitive point of view.

 Don't get caught up in the idea that your central arguments must be boiled down to a simple one- sentence "thesis statement." There are many types of academic arguments and research papers that ask for more than just a simple thesis statement.

 The central arguments of your paper (like the topic itself) will be neither too broad nor too narrow for the compass of your essay. Clearly a 3000-word essay will have a more complex argument than an essay of 600 words. One of the most common problems with essays is that they are based on an argument that is too obvious to be worth arguing--a truism.

 The writing process is a fluid one. As you do your research, you will come across material that you did not expect to find, but may work well with your paper, and possibly change the topic or tone of it. That is O.K.! That is what research is supposed to do! As you read the material that you have gathered, you may uncover information that you did not expect to find. It fits your topic, but may take your paper into a different direction. That is O.K. too! In fact, if you are really trying to do "research" for your paper, and not just splicing together facts, figures, and quotes in order to finish the assignment, you will find that you are slowly becoming an expert on the subject you are researching. Genuine research will enable you to have the tools that you will need to write confidently on your topic.

 When constructing arguments, you want to ask yourself what is the objective or purpose of the paper. What exactly is the point (or points) that you are making? Are you analyzing a piece of literature? Arguing a hypothesis? Explaining the cause and effect of an historical event?

In addition to finding a purpose for your paper, you must know who will be the most likely reader of your paper. Your audience will determine how you want to present the paper. In other words, if your instructor is going to be the only person reading your paper, you can make a fair assumption that he or she is going to be an expert on the subject that you are writing about. However, it is important that you meet with the instructor and actually ask how much that you, as the writer, can assume of the reader. Does your instructor want you to give detailed background information on every point that you are writing about before you can give any analysis? You will find that many instructors do not want detailed background, but you should give reasonable context when you present any kind of information. Obviously historical figures, major events, and widely known works of art and literature will not need a substantial amount of background context as a more obscure, but not any less important, person, place, or thing that you need to present in your paper.  Once you know the purpose and the audience of your paper, you can begin to think about arguments you will make in your paper. If we take the Note Taking example about female students not speaking up in the classroom, we can form a purpose for our paper that will present the issue and offer a basis of reasoning in which we can then support in our paper.

Argument #1:

In order to understand why female students statistically are less aggressive and do not speak up in class room environments in which male students are present, it is important to recognize both the psychological conditioning and social stereotypes that have influenced both genders behavior.

Or

Argument #2:

Certain psychological conditions and social stereotyping are why female students are less aggressive than male students, and do not speak up in the classroom.

Or

Argument #3:

Female students have been socially trained to not be overly aggressive in the classroom due to psychological conditioning and stereotyping.

Our arguments tell the reader that there are two important reasons in order to understand the issue.  If you put yourself in the reader's perspective, you will expect to read a paper that will support the assertion that female students do not speak up in the classroom due to psychological conditions and social stereotypes. As the writer, it is your job to write a paper that explains those conditions and stereotypes by incorporating statistical information, scientific studies, journal articles, quotes, and possibly personal examples that will support the thesis. You are not going to write a paper on the history of the U.S. education system, or a paper dealing with why female students do not generally enroll in male dominated courses such as science and math. Although you can give a general overview about the U.S. education system and when females were allowed to legally obtain education and the circumstances behind it, it would be a mistake to make it a central point in your paper because it does not deal specifically with your central argument. The same can be said for making a central point out of the fact that more males than females enroll in science and math classes. It may be an effect due to the social stereotypes and the psychological conditions in our culture as to why female students don't enroll in male dominated classes, but it is not the cause as to why female students are less aggressive and do not speak up in the classroom. In that respect, you can use this information to give some historical perspective and an example of the effects of female insecurity in the classroom, but you must still give clear and solid information that supports your arguments.  This is the purpose of your paper.

Once you have decided on the initial direction of your paper, your research will help dictate what you will include and what will not work for you. It is important to understand that even after your first draft, you should go back and do even more research on ideas that need more clarification. The process of writing will naturally create more interesting questions and directions that you may want to explore. Research these ideas and see where it takes your paper you might be very surprised and very pleased with the results.

Remember... all of the anxiety that you are having about your research paper, your classmates are also experiencing. As did every student who ever took a course and wrote a paper. By staying focused and giving yourself plenty of time to do your research, reading, and writing in an organized way, you will find that the experience of doing research well is just as rewarding as handing in a good paper. You will use the skills that you have learned, as well as the mistakes that you will make along the way, to write better papers the next time you have to do research.