



Academic Research Papers--Helpful Hints

Handout courtesy of Dr. Lori Williams

Introduction

Writing an academic research paper is a task that virtually every college student will encounter. Many first-time research paper writers find the task to be overwhelming, at least initially. The goal of this handout is to help you understand that writing a research paper is a process.

1. Break the assignment down into parts.

It's helpful to remember that the writing process takes place in several stages.

- A. In the first stage, you should gather information. Start by gathering all the information about the assignment. Ask questions of your instructor so that you understand what is required of you. Begin to collect your own ideas about your topic as well as your research data.
- B. In the second stage, you begin to shape your material. Continue to gather your own ideas as well as research data, but also begin to decide how your material will fit together. What will you focus on as your main idea (or thesis)? How can you organize your data and ideas to support your main idea throughout your paper?
- C. Once you begin the drafting stage, you will probably already be shaping the material in your mind, but drafting will also allow you to continue the earlier parts of the process.
- D. Writing a series of drafts will involve you in the next stage, revision. Think about re-seeing (re-visioning) the paper each time you write a new draft. Have you met your purpose? Are you paying attention to the needs of your audience? Have you incorporated your research data coherently? Answer these questions to help you know what you should revise.
- E. As you move toward a final draft, pay even closer attention to the sentence level clarity of the paper. Think of this stage as editing, making sure that your sentences are clear and that your source information is clearly and correctly cited.
- F. As you can see, these stages involve far more than the activities that immediately come to mind in writing a research paper: collecting data and typing up the paper. To write a strong paper, you need to devote time to each stage of the writing process. Completing the paper one step at a time will give you the best chance of success, and it also allows you to take advantage of the next helpful hint.

2. Ask for help.

- A. Your instructor is always the best person to guide you in working on your paper. Take advantage of her (or his) office hours to ask questions about your paper. If you do your paper in stages, you can ask the instructor at an earlier stage if you are headed in the right direction. Most instructors are happy to look at a brief (1-page) research proposal, in which you explain your main idea, give a brief overview of what you will do in your paper, and list your sources.

- B. Another place to find help with the writing process is at the Writing Lab, located in D133. The Writing Lab is staffed by English instructors, and it provides help, on a walk-in basis, with any stage of the writing process. It is most effective to come with specific questions to the Writing Lab. The instructors want to help you learn about writing, so we don't proofread your paper (which would teach you nothing), but we are glad to show you how to proofread by going over a paragraph in detail. We can answer questions about grammar, punctuation, organization, focus, and any other writing concern. We can also help you look up questions about citation format. As a walk-in service, we don't usually have time to read a long research paper in a single session, but we can look at a portion of the paper and help you see what to look for as you edit.
- C. When you reach the final stages of your paper, ask others to read it. Ask them which areas are clear and which ones are not. Comments from others will give you valuable perspectives on your paper.
- D. Don't forget to take advantage of the Parkland Library and the Library staff. Librarians can help you find research material and sift through it to decide which sources are useful. Even when it seems that no research material exists on a particular topic, the librarians can often help you find that such material does exist.

3. Use what you already know from previous writing classes.

Many of you have already taken English 101 and English 102 at Parkland. Apply what you have learned from those courses to your papers in other classes. Use the same careful editing and citation techniques for all your writing assignments, whatever the class.

4. Follow the instructions.

Research papers usually involve the use of a particular citation format--a way of telling the reader where you found your research information. To use the citation format correctly, simply follow the rules. If you used a different format in another class, then take the time to read and follow the rules of the format required for this paper. It is helpful to look at a sample paper using the required format. Most grammar handbooks contain samples of papers using popular citation formats. Your instructor may also have a sample paper to show you.

5. Be confident.

By following the hints above, your research paper will become an interesting assignment rather than a desperate late-night typing session. When you take the time to work through the paper in stages, you will feel more confident about exploring your own analytical position on the topic--an important component in a good paper.

