HOW TO WRITE A RESEARCH PAPER Of all the skills you must learn during your time in college, mastering the research and writing skills necessary to do the term paper is certainly among the most important. Writing a well-researched and fully documented term paper has been called the

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

How to write a research paper• setting up a timetable choosing a topic looking for sources avoiding plagiarism by careful note-taking incorporating sources into the research paper avoiding plagiarism by direct quotation and indirect quotation avoiding plagiarism by paraphrasing avoiding plagiarism by summarizing documenting sources (using MLA guidelines) within the body of the paper at the end of the paper How to take an essay exam• coming to the exam well prepared forming a strategy for success recognizing frequently used terms composing a thesis statement

Note: For two examples of the college research paper, see Appendix A of the Resource Manual.

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single most useful skill a student can acquire in college. Writing a successful term paper calls for a number of closely related skills; therefore, it is not an easy task. These integrated skills are explained in the pages that follow.

SETTING UP A TIMETABLE In school or work situations, effective use of time is critical to success. The writer of a college research paper is working under very real time pressures. The paper is due by a certain date, and the grade may well suffer if that deadline is not met. Given that the student is also taking several other courses and must also pay attention to the requirements of these courses, the demands of producing a research paper may easily overwhelm a student. Therefore, as soon as a research paper assignment is given, a student should begin to plan a work schedule. Keeping on target during each stage is a key element in completing a research paper on time. The following schedule is intended as a general guide for a student who has been given a typical fi ve-week period to produce a fi nished paper. The breakdown that follows is not a rigid week-by-week prescription but a series of pointers that may be adapted to individual circumstances and specifi c needs. Week 1. Make sure that you understand the instructor's requirements and that the topic you have chosen is one you will be able to control. Make any modifi cations needed to the topic, obtaining approval for any individual changes to the assignment. Start gathering relevant information. Week 2. Gather materials that are immediately available, including standard books and articles and information that can be downloaded. Highlight the important sections in these sources, write summaries of material, and take notes. Week 3. Continue to look for additional sources of material. Write an outline containing your thesis and main points. If you are in doubt regarding these points, talk to your instructor immediately. Changing direction after this point could be disastrous. Write a fi rst draft to give yourself an overview of your entire paper. Week 4. Continue to review your collected materials, revising summaries and refi ning your choices of quotes. Review the fi rst draft of your paper, adding sections as needed and inserting quoted material. Week 5. Place a halt on looking for new sources. Work on the fi nal draft and make a complete bibliography of

sources (works cited). Edit all of the written parts and do a fi nal review of the bibliography. Check quotations for accuracy. Do a fi nal editing.

CHOOSING A TOPIC If your English instructor does not assign a specifi c topic, and you are free to choose your own, you may wish to use subject matter from another course you are taking— sociology, history, or psychology, for example. Your work on the term paper for your English class would then be based on material you are already covering in another course. It is an advantage to be dealing with subject matter that is already somewhat familiar. Whether you are free to choose your own topic or the topic is assigned, ask yourself what you hope to gain from researching and writing on a particular topic. Will your paper deepen your understanding of an area of study? Could your research help you explore some aspect of your own life that you have not examined before? The work you do needs to feel meaningful if you are to do your best work!

No matter what topic you choose, be sure you have your instructor's clear approval before you proceed. As soon as the topics are being decided, pay immediate attention to your choice of topic. If for any reason you fi nd that your topic is inappropriate, or you sense that the material on the subject is too narrow (you cannot fi nd enough information), too broad (too much information), or overwhelming (the information is too technical and hard to understand), be sure to change your focus—and change it early in the course. If you lose time by not making a needed change, you could easily lessen the quality of your work and damage your fi nal grade.

LOOKING FOR SOURCES Once your topic has been decided, you will want to begin gathering information for the writing of your paper. For this you will need to become familiar with the available research tools. The best way to begin is to visit your library. If you haven't already done so, ask for a tour of the library to become familiar with the general system. Then do not hesitate to fi nd a librarian to direct you to the best places to look for information on your particular topic. Advice from a librarian can save you from wasting countless hours looking in the wrong places.

Catalog of Library Holdings This catalog will tell you all the information that is readily available on the open library shelves. It will include encyclopedias and other reference works, books, magazines, journals, and newspapers. In the past, libraries depended on printed (and even handwritten) card catalogs to document their holdings, but today we have all the advantages of the computer. Libraries now use the resources of the electronic age and have their catalog online. The Catalog of Library Holdings will allow you to search for information by subject, author, or key words. What once took researchers weeks and even months can now be accomplished in only minutes! If you are somewhat unfamiliar with your topic, it may be good to begin with general background information that can be found in reference books. These reference books may even help sharpen your focus on the topic you have already chosen. Other books and articles will contain more in-depth and specialized information, which will require your judgment as to their usefulness.

Selected Databases College and local libraries subscribe to various databases. With these services, users will more easily fi nd bibliographic sources, abstracts, full texts of articles, and other published materials. These databases change from one library to the next, so always consult with the librarian where you are working to determine what databases your library

carries and, most importantly, which databases would be most useful for fi nding information on your topic. One very useful database is InfoTrac College Edition. You may want to ask your instructor how to access it. This database contains information in more than 6,000 newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals.

Gateways to the Resources of Other Libraries If your own library does not have a book you need, ask your librarian how to fi nd the book or material at another library. Most libraries have a system of cooperative lending, and a librarian can show you how to access that system to search for what you need.

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Accessing the Library Resources from Home Most students today have home computers with access to the Internet. This makes it possible to do much of your research at home. Once you have the right connections, fi nd out which library systems you will be able to access from outside the library.

The Internet and Search Engines With the help of powerful search engines, (such as Google, Google Scholar, and Yahoo), you can supplement your library research. For instance, Google Scholar will search academic sources. By typing in a key word or phrase, a search engine will explore its databases to fi nd all the matches to your word or phrase. If you fi nd too many hits, try to refi ne or add a detail to your key word or phrase. If there are not enough hits, try a more general term or phrase. A word of caution: Not everything on the Internet is to be thought of as having equal value for the researcher. Many articles and other pieces of writing have not been carefully edited or even reviewed. Remember, anybody can put a page on the Internet. Often material is biased or inaccurate. For example, Wikipedia is widely considered to be unreliable. Students are advised not to rely on information from Wikipedia for their research. Most instructors will want you to use a variety of sources. Some will specify the number of books and articles that must be used; others will allow you to choose your own combination of sources. No matter how many sources are called for, it is always a good idea to seek out a variety of research materials. A term paper containing material from an array of sources always gains strength and authority from the rich combination of information, and such a paper will almost certainly obtain a higher grade for you. Now you need to gather all your sources for review. You will want to download articles from Internet-related sources and have those articles in printed form. For this material, you should underline or highlight paragraphs and larger sections of material that contain information that may be useful to you. For materials that are diffi cult or impossible to duplicate (such as entire books, reference works, other full-length sources, or interviews), you will have to rely completely on careful note-taking. Writers of research papers today should know how seriously the academic community considers plagiarism. In the past, proving a charge of plagiarism was a long and tedious process, one that involved reviewing many books and articles to match original sources with the suspected material. Today software programs such as Turnitin, with their databases of millions of items, make these matches a much simpler matter, with technology providing the kind of support that could not have been imagined years ago.