

Writing Research Papers

The purpose of a research paper in literary criticism or literary theory is to convince your reader of your opinion on one or more particular texts, authors, movements, periods, theories etc. Summarizing the work of other critics or giving biographical background information on a particular author may occasionally be useful, but this can never be the main purpose of a research paper. What is most important is your own critical approach to a topic and the persuasive presentation of your own argument, along with proof for the validity of that argument. The opinion or argument that you prove in a research paper is called your thesis. This thesis is usually presented at the end of your introduction. It should consist of a fairly specific and precise announcement of what it is that you will prove/demonstrate/argue in your paper. A statement like "In the speeches of John Winthrop and Jonathan Edwards there are many similarities but also some differences," for example, is too vague. A better thesis would be: "While John Winthrop's speeches use religious doctrines in order to justify a democratic social model, Jonathan Edwards employs Scripture primarily in order to reprimand his listeners and to insist on the necessity of strict religious codes of behavior. Where one concentrates on the common good, the other focuses on individual salvation." Remember: it is not enough to summarize background information or plot elements! What is crucial is for you to give convincing proof for the point of view that you present in your thesis statement.

I. Before you start writing the paper:

1. Read the primary text(s). While you read the text(s), mark passages that you could quote later on.
2. Think of a thesis for your paper and make an outline for how you are going to convince your reader of the validity of your thesis.
3. Using bibliographies and other tools, find secondary material on your topic. Do not use secondary sources as any kind of "ultimate" or "absolute" truth, though. Instead, evaluate them critically. In your research paper you may argue that a critic is right about a particular point or that he/she is wrong about a particular point. Demonstrate that you are familiar with other opinions/arguments/critical assessments and evaluate those, rather than adopting them uncritically. The most useful bibliography to consult is the *MLA INTERNATIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY* (available via the university library homepage; click on "Datenbanken" -> "Anglistik" -> "MLA"). Materials not available at our library can be ordered via inter-library loan. For finding internet materials the search engine "Google" is recommended. Be aware, however, that internet sources are often unreliable or inaccurate.

II. Parts of a research paper:

Research papers generally consist of: - title page, - table of contents, - main text, - notes, - works cited.

1. **Title page.** Other than the title of your paper, its first page should also contain the name of the university, the seminar title, the name of the professor or instructor, the semester, and your own name.

2. **Table of contents.** The title page is followed by a table of contents. Use either the outline format A.I.1.a. or 1.1.1.1. For each section of your paper, the table of contents lists the page number on which that section starts. For short papers (of under ten pages) a table of contents and a division into sections may not be necessary. If you decide to use sections, make sure that there is a logical progression from one section to the next. Never use sections to write a series of loosely related "mini papers."
3. **Main text.** The three principal parts of a research paper's main text are:
 1. Introduction (with the paper's thesis)
 2. Body (containing support or proof for the thesis) and
 3. Conclusion (summing up results, mentioning what aspects you were unable to address in more detail, or pointing the way for further research on this or a related topic)

The body of your paper is by far the longest part.

4. **Notes.** You may use footnotes or endnotes. If you use endnotes, start a "Notes" section on a new page after the conclusion of your paper. Use notes sparingly. The main purpose of notes is to give related information that would be distracting in the paper's main text. Notes are also often used to evaluate secondary sources critically. It is not the purpose of footnotes or endnotes to indicate the source of a quotation you used in your main text!
5. **Works Cited.** It is now common practice to give your reader not a bibliography of selected books and articles on the topic of your research paper but instead to list only those books and articles from which you quoted in your paper or which you mentioned. The last section of your paper should therefore be entitled "Works Cited." Start a new page for the "Works Cited." Put the citations in alphabetical order (by last name of the author); indent the second line of a citation and all lines thereafter. There is no need to have separate listings for primary and secondary sources. In titles of books, articles, poems, etc. it is customary to start nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs with capital letters. Here are some examples:
 - a. citation of a book:
 Elliott, Emory, ed. *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.
 Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980.
 Hagenbüchle, Roland, and Josef Raab, eds. *Negotiations of America's National Identity*. Tübingen Stauffenburg Verlag, 2000.
 Kant, Immanuel. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. 1764. Trans. John T. Goldstein. Berkeley: U of California P, 1960.
 Klarer, Mario. *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
 - b. citation of an article, chapter, story or poem in a book collection:
 Cisneros, Sandra. "Woman Hollering Creek." *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. 1991. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. 43-56.
 Hagenbüchle, Roland. "Sumptuous Destitution: The Function of Desire in Emily

Dickinson's Poetry." *Circumference and Center: Contemporary American Poetics*. Ed. Hagenbüchle. Austin: U of Texas P, 1977. 151-89.

Hagenbüchle, Roland. "Sumptuous Destitution: The Function of Desire in Emily Dickinson's Poetry." *Circumference and Center: Contemporary American Poetics*. Ed. Jacqueline Ollier. Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1987. 151-89.

Hagenbüchle, Roland. "Sumptuous Destitution: The Function of Desire in Emily Dickinson's Poetry." *Circumference and Center: Contemporary American Poetics*. Ed. Hagenbüchle, and Jacqueline Ollier. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1997. 151-89.

c. citation of an article, story or poem in a journal:

Miller, Pete, and John Doe. "Excellent Article: All We Have to Say." *Journal for Learned People* 49.3 (1994): 32-40.

Smith, Joseph. "Leftist Liberators: American Literary Criticism in the Thirties." *Ilha do Desterro* 23.1 (1990): 43-73.

d. citation of an internet source:

Raab, Josef. "El gran viejo: Walt Whitman in Latin America." *Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal*. 3.2; June 2001. URL:

<http://clwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clweb01-2/raab01.html>. (Visited on Feb. 14, 2006.)

III. Stylistic aspects of a research paper:

1. Write primarily in the present tense. If you refer to plot elements, do so in the present tense. Example: "Gatsby tries to win Daisy's affection by putting his wealth on display for her."
2. In the body of your paper, do not give (only) general impressions but be specific. For example, don't only write "Edwards scares his audience," but tell your reader what means he uses to scare his listeners. For example: "Edwards scares his audience through a variety of tropes. One of these is the image of God holding people over the fiery pit of hell the way one might hold a spider over a flame."
3. Avoid very short paragraphs. Paragraphs of one or two sentences are frequent in journalistic writing but not in academic papers. Avoid sentence fragments. Avoid colloquialisms. Vary your sentence structure, e.g. don't start every sentence with "She writes ...," or "He observes ...," or "She notices ..." Use the passive voice rarely, if at all. Statements in the active voice are much clearer and stylistically more elegant.
4. A paper that contains numerous grammar and spelling errors just doesn't make a good impression. Corrections in handwriting on your final typed/printed paper are much better than no corrections at all.

IV. Formal aspects of a research paper:

1. Use a one-and-a-half line spacing when you type/print your paper. On a computer, use a 12-point font.
2. In your text as well as in your "Works Cited" list and notes, underline book titles like The Scarlet Letter or put them in italics (*The Scarlet Letter*). Titles of stories, poems, essays, articles, and book chapters are indicated by quotation marks (see above).

V. Quotations:

1. **General.** Use quotations from primary and secondary sources in order to illustrate your statements or to give additional support for your argument. But do not overuse quotations. As a rule of thumb, quotations should not constitute more than about twenty per cent of your paper. Especially when you use longer quotations, it is not enough to just give the quotation; you also need to explain to your reader how that quotation illustrates or proves a point you are trying to make.
2. **Indicating the source of a quotation.** Always give the page number of your quotation. This is done in brackets after closing the quotation marks, not in a footnote. When the source of your quotation is apparent from your text, only indicate the page number; otherwise indicate both the source and the page number.

a. If your text makes it clear from which text by which author your quotation is taken, then you put only the page number of the quotation in brackets.

Example: Thoreau believes that most governments are a burden. As he writes in "Civil Disobedience," he considers them to be as useless as "a sort of wooden gun" (713).

b. If it is not clear from which source your quotation is taken, you need to indicate that source either through the name of the author or through a word from the source's title or through both. The first method is used when only one text by that particular author appears in your "Works Cited."

Example: Several Transcendentalists believe that most governments are a burden. One of them writes that governments are as useless as "a sort of wooden gun" (Thoreau 713).

The second method is used when it is clear from your text who the author of the source is, while the title of the source is not clear.

Example: Several Transcendentalists believe that most governments are a burden. Thoreau, for example, considers them to be as useless as "a sort of wooden gun" ("Civil" 713).

The third method is used when neither the author nor the title of your quotation's source are apparent from your text.

Example: Several Transcendentalists believe that most governments are a burden. One of them considers governments to be as useless as "a sort of wooden gun" (Thoreau, "Civil" 713).

3. **Indirect quotations.** When you quote a passage not from its original source but from someone else who is quoting it in his or her text, you give the latter source after indicating "qtd. in" (for "quoted in").
Example: As Toni Morrison once said, "a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis" (qtd. in Harrington 421).
4. **Block quotations.** If your quotation is longer than three lines, set it off from the rest of the text by indenting it about 1 cm (either only on the left or on both sides) and omit the quotations marks. You may change to single-spacing for block quotations or continue using the one-and-a-half line spacing that you use in the rest of your text. Be consistent.
5. **Omissions.** If you leave one or more words out from your quotation, indicate this through three periods with one space in between each period.
Example: Thoreau complains that "this government never of itself furthered any

enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. . . . The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished" (714).

6. **Additions.** If you add anything to your quotation, indicate this by putting the words which you are adding and which are not in the original text inside square brackets. Example: Thoreau complains that "this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. . . . [Not the government but only] The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished" (714).
7. **Emphasis.** If individual words in a quotation are emphasized (by being put in italics), indicate whether you added this emphasis (cf. Example 1 below) or whether it already appears in the text you are quoting (cf. Example 2 below).
Example 1: Emily Dickinson admonishes her readers to "Tell all the Truth but tell it *slant*," thus stressing her belief in the need for an indirect approach (P 1129; my emphasis).
[The "P 1129" here refers to Dickinson's untitled poem number 1129.]
Example 2: Benjamin Franklin admits that he "took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances of the contrary*" (*Autobiography* 266; Franklin's emphasis).
8. **Poetry quotations.** If you quote from a poem, indicate the end of a line in the original through a slash (i.e. /) in your quotation.
Example: Phillis Wheatley writes that "'T'was mercy brought me from my pagan land,
/ Taught my benighted soul to understand / That there's a God" (325).
Indicate the end of a stanza through a double slash (i.e. //).

VI. Paraphrases and Citations:

When you refer to a source by mentioning or paraphrasing it but do not quote from the source directly, indicate the source the way you do with quotations but precede it with a "cf." (for "confer" – similar to the German "vgl."). Example: "While it has been argued that Faulkner's disruption of chronology is aimed at disorienting the reader (cf. Brooks 121), one can also see them as illustrations of his narrator's mental state."

VII. Your audience:

Assume that your reader has also read the primary text(s) about which you are writing. Plot summaries are therefore unnecessary. Some students of literary studies tend to give biographical introductions to the primary authors about whom they are writing. This should only be done if that biographical information is directly relevant for your thesis.

VIII. Further information:

If you have any questions about formal aspects of research papers, consult Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 2003.
or take a look at any article in a recent issue of the journal *PMLA* (Publications of the Modern

Language Association of America) and follow the format it uses. The MLA style is the standard format for research papers in English or American literary or cultural studies. Other disciplines prefer other formats, however.