A Brief Guide to Questions to Ask Yourself While Writing a Research Paper

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by a research paper? So overwhelmed even that you did not know where to start? Here are some tips and questions adapted from The Craft of Research to help guide you in your writing process. This guide intends to make you think actively and critically about your researching, writing, and editing process. The guide, however, is by no means comprehensive. Consult the list of additional resources at the end of this guide for more information if necessary.

Questions to ask yourself about your topic

☐ Is your topic broad enough that you can sustain an argument for the specified page limit and narrow enough that you can master and synthesize the relevant information?
☐ Does your topic fit within the framework of the course?
☐ Are you interested enough in your topic to remain engaged in your research throughout the process?
☐ Can you transform your topic into a specific, answerable research question?
  - Does your question provide new insight/a new take on existing research?
  - Are you meaningfully adding something to the scholarly debate?
  - Ask yourself WHY and SO WHAT when you transform your topic into a question, and think about how you will integrate outside academic sources into your paper.
☐ Can you reasonably find sources/evidence to support your argument/topic?
  - When you search your topic on Google Scholar or through other relevant search mechanisms do a sufficient number of sources appear?
  - What appears when you search for your topic in the Olin online catalogue?

Example topics:
- The ethics of the Japanese whaling industry
- How the legacy of apartheid affected the South African education system
- The issues and ethics of waste management in American cities

Topic that is too broad
- Violence and political turmoil in Latin America

Topic that is too narrow
- The role of the mother in 100 Years of Solitude
Things to consider while researching

- Have you spoken with your professor about the possible resources available to you?
  - Have you consulted or made an appointment with a reference librarian or help finding source material?
- What kinds of sources does your topic require you to consult?
  - Have you consulted a variety of sources?
  - Are your sources current (or relatively current depending on your topic)?
- Are the sources you have found reliable, acceptable sources?
  - Is the source published by a reputable journal/publisher?
  - Was the book/source peer-reviewed?
  - Is the source sponsored by a reputable organization?
  - Has the source been frequently cited by others?
  - What are the author’s potential biases?
  - Consult your Professor if you have any specific qualms.
- If allowed, have you revisited the material from the course to see if any of it is relevant for your research question?
- Have you extensively searched the library’s physical and online catalogue and the list of databases Wesleyan students have access to?
  - TIP: Search for books related to your topic and go into the stacks.
  - Chances are, the books around the book you found will also contain relevant information for your research paper.
  - Have you searched many different iterations of your topic/argument/subarguments? Sometimes including certain words in an online search yields more/less results than including other words.
    - EG if your topic is Political development in Chile search “Latin American development” to get books that have a “Chile” chapter
  - TIP: If you find a super helpful source, check the bibliography/works cited at the back of the book for other sources related to your topic.
- Have you taken thoughtful and detailed notes while reading your many sources?
- Are your notes organized so you can keep track of what information comes from what source?
- Have you given thoughtful consideration to all of the information you have gathered and allowed this research to mold and/or change your argument?

Note-taking and organizing tips:
- Look at the appendix and glossary of the books you have chosen for key-words and terms.
- Skim the prologue, introduction, and summary chapters.
- While researching, put post-it notes on the relevant pages so you can revisit them later.
- When taking notes MAKE SURE to put a page number and author’s name next to any quotes or paraphrases. This will make your life SO much easier in the long run.
- When pulling quotes make sure to include why you find the quote important/significant. This thought may seem obvious to you while you are reading but may not be so obvious when you revisit your notes weeks later.
  - Make sure you unambiguously differentiate your notes from the author’s words. Plagiarism is no joke!
Things to consider while editing

☐ Have you read over your entire paper at least once?
  ☐ Does your argument make sense from start to finish?
  ☐ Does your conclusion clearly restate your argument and provide some other nugget of information and/or a forward-looking statement? Does the conclusion reference the same argument you made in your introduction or have you wandered into uncharted territory?
  ☐ Do you have proper transitions between paragraphs?
  ☐ Does it make sense for your paper to have headings and/or subheadings?

☐ Have you checked your punctuation? Consult Purdue Owl’s guide if you have any qualms.

✓ Have you cited ALL of your sources properly?
  ☐ Re-visit the syllabus or the assignment sheet to make sure you are citing according to your professor’s explicitly stated guidelines.
  ☐ Did you properly format your works cited list and/or your footnotes?
    ☐ Reference the Purdue Owl website if you have any questions about this

✓ Would it be helpful/is it allowed by your professor to have another set of eyes look over your paper?
  ☐ This is what the Writing Workshop tutors are here for! Sign up for a slot through the Writing Workshop link in your ePortfolio or stop by a tutors office hours in Olin or Scii.

✓ If you are having trouble with organization/flow in your paper, have you tried doing a reverse outline?

Things to consider about the citations you have used

• Do you meaningfully engage with all of the sources you have used or do you merely accept the author’s stated positions as fact?
• Did you analyze the arguments of the sources you cited or merely restate the points made by the authors?
• Do you sufficiently explain and introduce all of the quotes you used?

EXAMPLE OF A POORLY ANALYZED CITATION:

*Power works in mysterious ways: “People criticize instances of power that are closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals” (Foucault 330).*

EXAMPLE OF A WELL ANALYZED CITATION:

*Power is an intimately relational force for Foucault. According to his diagnosis, “People criticize instances of power that are closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals” (Foucault 330). The word “close” in this sense encompasses both physical and emotional proximity.*
Things to consider before you submit

✓ Did you run one last spell check?
✓ If you used track changes, did you “accept” or reject all of the edits so no more track changes remain?
✓ Did you follow the explicit instructions provided by your professor?
  – Does your assignment require a cover page?
  – Does your assignment require you omit your name?
  – Does your professor require any other specific formatting?

Here are some more resources to consult about writing research papers.


This book is SUPER comprehensive and has information about every step of the research paper writing process. It is available as an eBook through the Wesleyan library and is worth checking out if you have even the smallest question.

Additional works consulted:
Crimm, Jeremy. "How to Write a Term Paper and Do Original Research"


Happy writing!