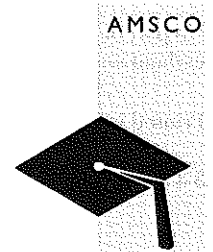


THE
RESEARCH
PAPER
A Contemporary Approach
Second Edition

SHARON SORENSON

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My new friends Terry Gish and Sarah Blaser have made a significant contribution to this book; I am indebted to them. As high school seniors, they shared their research papers as well as their research experiences. Their comments add a personal dimension to this book that other students will surely enjoy.

Preface

You have been assigned a research paper. Its due date is in what seems the distant future. The time between now and the due date will be very useful to you if you complete each necessary step, one at a time, until you have the finished product. Even the longest, most difficult task can be broken down into simple steps. All you need is time (which you have) and a good plan (which this book will give you). You will also have company as you work through each step. Terry and Sarah, two students whose research papers are included in the book, will share their experiences and help you avoid problems along the way.

In addition to their advice, Sarah and Terry share their completed papers with you. Terry's functions as a model for an assigned work of literature, Sarah's as a social issues topic of her own choice. Both papers use primary and secondary resources in their research, and both use the humanities style parenthetical form to document their research. Although both are evaluative papers, Terry's purpose is to compare and contrast, and Sarah's purpose is to show cause and effect. Each is accompanied by an analysis of content, organization, documentation, manuscript style, and formatting. In addition, Chapter 15 explains and models the science-style documentation form.

THE RESEARCH PAPER also focuses on the rapidly changing world of research. Technology affects not only how we find research materials but also how we put the information together. This book addresses the process of on-line research and also deals with documenting on-line sources. In addition, it acknowledges the role of technology in prewriting, writing, and revising while recognizing that various hardware/software combinations produce different capabilities.

In short, THE RESEARCH PAPER offers a dual approach:

1. the study and application of traditional research techniques
2. the implementation of modern technology

As you work, you will probably find that completing a research paper can be interesting (if not always fun), and you will learn a great deal about organizing your ideas and your time. These are the kinds of skills that can help you in many ways throughout your life. So, relax and enjoy the process as much as you can. (Some of it *is* fun.) After it's over, you will be left with a gratifying sense of accomplishment—and that is a very good feeling!

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1

Choosing a Topic

During your years in school, you will probably write dozens of papers. Teachers and professors have a variety of reasons for assigning them: to test your ability to find material and present it in an organized manner, to test your understanding of a specific topic, to test your ability to apply some principle or theory to a specific situation. The paper is, indeed, a kind of test. From the student's point of view, however, writing a paper also teaches a great deal: you will learn how to locate information, how to select from among the many sources those most appropriate for your topic, how to analyze that material, and how to put it together so that readers will understand what you have learned about a new subject. To learn to write a successful paper is to take a giant step toward academic success, for the grade on a paper can sometimes be half the grade for a course.

The secret of creating a successful research paper is a three-pronged commitment:

1 You must make a significant time commitment. Unfortunately, there is no way to reduce the time needed to prepare a successful paper, so plan accordingly. A good time management plan, however, will keep you from wasting hours, and using time efficiently is almost the same as reducing it. This book includes a time management section in each chapter.

2 You must make a commitment to work. The task of completing a successful research paper is not overwhelming if you follow a step-by-step

plan. This book takes you through that plan. Remember, however, that there are no shortcuts to good papers, so do not plan to skip steps—or even to slight them.

3 You must make a personal commitment. You must become personally involved in your paper, researching and writing about something that interests you. Without that interest, your paper will lack spark, vitality, spirit, life. And no one—especially teachers and instructors—enjoys reading dull, drab papers. Guess what happens when they do. So this chapter helps you choose a good topic, because a topic that interests you and brings out your best work will also interest your readers and bring out their best responses.

In order to choose a good topic, you must first understand your purpose. What is this research paper supposed to accomplish? Is its purpose to report facts and statistics, reach a conclusion, solve a problem, relate opinions, evaluate, compare or contrast, or explain how or why? Is its purpose merely to prove that you can do research, organize the information, and present it in an interesting manner and in an acceptable form? Once you clearly identify the purpose, you can better choose an appropriate topic.

KINDS OF PAPERS

The term “research paper” is sometimes used interchangeably with expressions like “report,” “library report,” “term paper,” or simply “paper.” In spite of the fact that these expressions are sometimes used interchangeably, they do not always refer to the same kind of paper. Let’s examine some of the kinds of papers you may be asked to write.

Report

A report, as the name suggests, reports what you have read or learned. It summarizes information that was usually gleaned from a single source—an article, chapter, or book. A report is objective and concerned only with facts: the training a meteorologist needs, how a radio works, the vehicles that carried people into space during the first 20 years of space exploration, what Benjamin Franklin’s political life was about, the plot Herman Wouk developed in *War and Remembrance*. In other words, a report develops a topic but not a thesis. (More on thesis later.)

Factual Research Paper

A factual research paper is a more complicated kind of report. It summarizes information gleaned not just from one source, but from a series of resources, perhaps both print and nonprint, and both primary sources (firsthand materials, including someone’s original words, like novels, interviews, and letters) and secondary sources (secondhand materials, including words about someone, like books and magazine and newspaper articles). The writer must merge the information from the various sources into one smooth, coherent product. It, too, deals with the facts about a given topic; it, too, develops a topic but not a thesis.

Evaluative Research Paper

An evaluative research paper relies on numerous references, often both primary and secondary sources, print and nonprint. Again, the writer must merge the information from the various sources into a smooth, coherent product; however, its content differs dramatically from that of a factual research paper. The evaluative paper goes beyond mere reporting. It may address solutions to a problem, determine causes or effects, formulate evidence to prove or disprove, compare or contrast, assess, analyze, or interpret. By presenting facts, figures, and opinions from both primary and secondary resources, the evaluative paper supports both a topic and a thesis statement. The result is that the reader gains a new point of view or sees information in a new light. Instead of reporting on the training a meteorologist needs, an evaluative research paper may compare the training a meteorologist needed in 1940 with what he or she needs many years later. Instead of reporting on the vehicles that carried people into space during the first 20 years of space exploration, an evaluative paper may attempt to prove the superiority of one vehicle over another. Instead of reporting what Benjamin Franklin’s political life was about, an evaluative paper may analyze his writing style and how it may have affected his political career. Instead of reporting the plot Herman Wouk developed in *War and Remembrance*, an evaluative paper may compare the treatment of war in this novel with that in Wouk’s earlier *Winds of War*.

An evaluative paper, as opposed to the objective report or factual paper, may also reach a conclusion that expresses an opinion. That point of view may explain support for a certain position or solution or declare a conclusion about some controversy. Obviously any support or concluding opinions must stem from research reported in the text.

Term Paper

The label “term paper” is a generic name for a paper written for a specific course during a specific semester—or term. “Term paper” can refer to a wide variety of papers. For instance, a term paper may be a writer’s response to a piece of literature, a paper that presents the writer’s opinion and uses no outside resources for support. For example, it could be an analysis of how F. Scott Fitzgerald develops the themes in *The Great Gatsby*. On the other hand, a term paper may be a full-blown factual or evaluative research paper requiring numerous resources. An example would be a comparison of what the critics have said about Fitzgerald’s use of symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* followed by your own conclusions about the critics’ analyses.

In other words, if you are assigned a “term paper,” be sure to find out if you are to write a report, a factual or evaluative research paper, or a critical essay.

TECH TIP

A fair warning is in order: The world of research is fraught with danger. The most serious danger rests in a commonly mistaken idea: Some students think you just sit down at the computer, type in a few words, and all the information spills across your screen. Hardly. In fact, a major part of your work takes place before you ever turn on the machine.

But there’s more danger. The Internet is filled with temptations to copy whole passages, string them together, and turn them in as your research paper. That’s theft. It’s called plagiarism. If you do this, you will certainly get an F on your paper, you may flunk the course, and you may even be expelled from school. That’s *really* bad news. So be warned.

KINDS OF ASSIGNMENTS

When the time comes to write a research paper, you will be asked to meet certain criteria. One is length. Most assignments call for something between 1,000 and 2,000 words (a double-spaced printed page is about 250

words and Sarah’s model paper, found in Chapter 14, runs about 1,700 words). You will also face one of three situations: the topic will be assigned, the general subject area will be assigned, or neither will be assigned—you will be given free rein to select a topic. In any case, your work should show original thought. Completing the assignment is more than just researching and writing; it is also an exercise in independent thinking.

Topic Assigned

If the topic is assigned, chances are that you are being evaluated on your ability to do thorough research on a specific topic and to put the resulting information together into a clearly organized, accurately presented paper. Part of the “test” is to see whether you can develop a paper that distinguishes you from the rest of your classmates. Thus, even with an assigned topic, you must still narrow the focus or determine the approach you will take. For instance, if your assigned topic is “The Effects of Sun on Humans,” you may decide to focus on research supporting the theory that harmful sun rays can cause skin cancer. You may decide to focus on research that suggests the sun ages skin and makes wrinkles form early in life. You may take the approach that, given the sun’s harmful effects, people can follow certain steps to protect themselves.

General Subject Area Assigned

If the general subject area is assigned, you still have other decisions to make about a topic. Within the general subject area assigned, you must select a specific, narrowed topic as well as a specific focus. For instance, if your social science teacher asks for a research paper dealing with some aspect of the Vietnam War, you must determine a specific emphasis. Will you limit your research to the media’s treatment of the first year of the war? To the antiwar demonstrations? To the still-missing prisoners of war? To the role of the war during a presidential election campaign? To the after-war conditions of Vietnamese civilians? To Vietnam veterans’ current reactions to the war?

Wherever possible, turn an assigned general topic into an opportunity to pursue personal interests. For instance, a student interested in the protection of rain forests may choose to turn a paper about the Vietnam War into an analysis of the long-term effects of the wartime defoliation of forests. Another student, concerned about abandoned children, may turn the paper into an examination of what happened to the Amerasian children fathered by American soldiers during the war.

Topic Unassigned

If you have free rein in choosing your topic, you must select not only the general subject but must also narrow the topic. Where do you look for ideas?

TECH TIP

Certain CD-ROM writing tutorials include inspirations, graphic organizers, and other topic-generating tools. Use them!

If you do not have access to such tools, use your word processing software to write lists. Write as fast as you can, letting ideas flow. Print a copy and put it away for 24 hours. Then, reread your lists and let your mind add new ideas, new reactions, new relationships. The exercise should help you narrow your topic.

WARNING: Always make backup files. To risk a malfunctioning computer or the mysterious loss of material to the airwaves is to risk hours of time lost.

CRITICAL THINKING HINT

When you are struggling to think of topics, put your brain in gear and let go. Think of relationships, causes, effects, comparisons, contrasts, results, and solutions. Think about why, how, and when. Let ideas flow.

SOURCES FOR TOPICS

Sources for topics are limitless, but let's consider several of the most likely.

Daily Media

Newspapers and magazines print or publish electronically articles of current concern. Radio and television have no shortage of newscasts, news analyses, and news commentaries. While you must avoid a topic too new

to have adequate resources available, other issues are ongoing and have been for many years. Read or listen "between the lines." Assume a questioning attitude. What issues or problems underlie the present news item? For instance, if a television commentary deals with urban crime, you may wonder which cities have the highest crime rates and how they are trying to deal with the problem. That may lead you to think about urban poverty, the judicial system, and drug rehabilitation programs. Think. Make the mental connections.

General Schoolwork

Class work or reading assignments often suggest suitable research topics. For instance, after studying in physics class the effect of the moon on tides, you may decide to investigate the probability that the moon exerts enough pull on the earth to have other effects. You wonder what they are. Think critically. Ask yourself the underlying questions.

General Conversation

As you talk on a daily basis with friends, neighbors, and family, keep your ears open for issues that pop into conversations. When your friend complains about his working hours, maybe you decide to check into laws affecting conditions for workers under age 18. When your neighbor talks about her lawn mower never wanting to start, maybe you decide to examine what consumer protection groups do and their results. When your father talks about the potential for an upcoming labor strike, maybe you decide to research the role of unions on consumer prices. Be an active thinker. Look for causes, effects, conditions, and results.

Personal Interests

Since your topic should be interesting to you, think about a personal fascination that might suggest a topic. If your interest is music, consider the impact one composer has had on another or the role one musician has played in the development of jazz. If your current job is in the produce section of the local grocery, consider the problems with imported produce: it is not grown under the same stringent laws restricting toxic pesticides and herbicides as the produce grown in the United States. If you plan to be an electrical engineer, consider the rapidly changing field of electronics and what that means to career planning. Think about how and why. Think about connections.

Your Own Mind

The best source of topics is your own active mind. As you read and listen, become an active thinker. Make connections. Ask yourself questions. Wonder why or how. Think in comparisons or contrasts. Question causes or effects. Suppose changes. Consider alternatives. Contemplate the past or the future. Seek answers.

TECH TIP

Once you have determined a general area of interest for your topic, with your teacher's permission, try a *keyword search* on the World Wide Web to help you find a topic. Later, you'll learn more about keyword searches and how to get the best results.

If you do a keyword search at this point, look only at the resulting list of Web *sites*. Just *surf*, or browse; don't search. Don't waste time going to the sites themselves. Instead, use the results to stimulate your thinking.

Once you've seen the list of sites that a basic keyword search turns up, you'll find subtopics and related ideas that will help you brainstorm. In other words, you're using the Web only as a tool to put your brain in gear!

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD TOPICS

When choosing a topic for a research paper, select one that has the following characteristics:

1 *Interesting* You will be working closely with this topic for an extended time, so choosing a topic that interests you will make your task more palatable. On the other hand, avoid a topic with which you are already thoroughly knowledgeable. It is no fun researching the distinguishing characteristics of Confederate notes if you already know all about the currency. Choose a subject that so interests you that you want to learn more about it.

2 *Manageable* A topic is unmanageable when: (a) you must wade through hundreds of periodical and book references to find information and (b) you cannot develop adequate support within the assigned length of the paper.

3 *Available* You must choose a topic that is available for research, for which resources are obtainable. If you cannot find material on your topic, either because available resources are limited or because the topic is too narrow, you cannot successfully complete a paper.

4 *Worthwhile* Whether or not a paper is worthwhile is, of course, a value judgment; but a topic of doubtful worth will likely earn a doubtful grade. So what do we mean by worthwhile? Your paper must say something of substance. To write a research paper that merely outlines the history of space exploration lacks the impact of a paper that analyzes the struggle for success in space exploration. Do yourself—and your reader—a favor by dealing with a subject that matters.

5 *Original* Recounting Abraham Lincoln's biography lacks original thought, but you can show original ideas by focusing on how a single aspect of his life, like the books he read as a boy, seems to have influenced his later political decisions.

Finally, a good topic does not have the following characteristics of poor topics.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POOR TOPICS

As you strive for the ideal topic, keep in mind the following characteristics of poor research topics. In general, avoid topics that fall into one of the following categories:

1 *Too broad* Students' most common mistake is choosing a topic that is too broad. Perhaps they are afraid they cannot find adequate material. Perhaps 1,000 or 1,500 words sounds like an impossible length (really only about six or seven typewritten pages). Whatever the cause, avoid that trap

yourself. If your subject is too broad, you will be unable to develop the topic adequately.

How will you know if a topic is too broad? You may find entire books on your subject, a sure indication that you have tackled too much. You may find dozens of subheadings in online searches or catalogs, another sure sign of a too-broad topic.

Consider these broad topics: the Great Wall of China, Salem Witchcraft Trials, the Ice Age, Hieroglyphics—all much too broad for an average 1,500-word paper. All, however, can be narrowed: what tourists experience when they visit the Great Wall of China, the effect of the Salem witchcraft trials on present-day Salem, the role of the Ice Age in the formation of the Great Lakes, how original Egyptian hieroglyphics are protected.

CRITICAL THINKING HINT

To narrow a topic, ask yourself questions that help you think critically. Start with the 5 W's: who? what? why? when? and where? If those questions do not help you narrow your topic sufficiently, ask the analytical questions: How did this come to be? What are the causes? What are the results? What happens next? How does this compare? How does this contrast? What is the value? These questions will help you think through your topic. Then let your mind make connections.

2 *Too narrow* If your subject is too narrow, you will be unable to find adequate sources for your research. Unfortunately, when some students say they “can’t find anything” about a subject, the problem may not be a too-narrow topic but the students’ lack of experience in digging up references. To use research facilities effectively, you probably will not look up your specific topic, but rather you will look up a general topic and find specifics in subheadings or in chapter or index entries.

How do you know if a topic is too narrow? Consider these topics: the queen honeybee’s role in the hive, metric cooking conversions, temperature extremes in the United States, and foreign car sales are all too narrow for a reasonable paper. Most of these topics can be reported in a few sentences or even in a single chart. On the other hand, the topics can be easily expanded: how honeybees’ division of labor works, the complexity of national metric conversion, causes for temperature variations, the impact of foreign car sales on domestic production.

3 *Too trivial* A topic that is too trivial lacks worth. Too trivial is not the same as too narrow. For instance, if you decide to write about the process of developing photographic prints from a CD file, you have chosen a topic that is broad enough, but it is trivial. How will you know? Every source you pick up will explain the process in the same way. Likewise, if you write about how to obey the laws of the road, every driver’s manual you read will say the same thing. Remember, a good research paper cannot come from a single source.

4 *Too subjective* A subjective topic is one that is biased or personal and, because of that bias, it also lacks the objectivity of a so-called “disinterested party.” Preferably, you should choose a topic in which you can be a disinterested party. Every writer, of course, has personal opinions, and they often show through an otherwise objective piece of writing. However, choosing a research topic that reflects primarily personal opinion may result in a paper that you are unable to support with facts and statistics. Ideally, the process of writing a research paper—especially the research process itself—may help formulate an opinion. It is unwise, however, to begin with a prejudice you hope to prove. For instance, if you set out to write a research paper about congressional terms in office and you are already firmly convinced that terms should be limited to six years, your opinion will influence your selection of materials for your paper and cause you to lose objectivity. Unless your assigned purpose is to write a persuasive paper, avoid such subjective choices. Remember, a research paper cannot rely on personal opinion alone. Your supporting details must come from your research, primary or secondary, and those details should be used objectively.

5 *Too controversial* While many topics deal with some degree of controversy, to address a topic whose issues are hotly contested is to risk the chance of getting bogged down in the arguments. Most research papers are objective, not subjective; so to write about a highly controversial topic usually results in becoming personally involved in the controversy. Objectivity vanishes.

6 *Too familiar* While you may choose a topic that already interests you, avoid a topic about which you are so knowledgeable that you will gain no further insights as you do your research. Boredom results. Choose a topic that maintains your curiosity.