The Research Paper
(compiled from OWL Purdue)

There will come a time in most students' careers when they are assigned a research paper. Such an assignment often creates a great deal of unneeded anxiety in the student, which may result in procrastination and a feeling of confusion and inadequacy. This anxiety frequently stems from the fact that many students are unfamiliar and inexperienced with this genre of writing. Never fear—inexperience and unfamiliarity are situations you can change through practice! Writing a research paper is an essential aspect of academics, and should not be avoided on account of one's anxiety. In fact, the process of writing a research paper can be one of the more rewarding experiences one may encounter in academics. What is more, many students will continue to do research throughout their careers, which is one of the reasons this topic is so important.

Becoming an experienced researcher and writer in any field or discipline takes a great deal of practice. There are few individuals for whom this process comes naturally; remember, even the most seasoned academic veterans have had to learn how to write a research paper at some point in their career. Therefore, with diligence, organization, practice, a willingness to learn (and to make mistakes!), and, perhaps most important of all, patience, a student will find that she can achieve great things through her research and writing.

This handout will include the following sections related to the process of writing a research paper:

**Choosing a Topic**- this section will guide the student through the process of choosing topics, whether the topic be one that is assigned or one that the student chooses himself.

**Identifying an Audience**- this section will help the student understand the often times confusing topic of audience by offering some basic guidelines for the process.

**Where Do I Begin**- this section concludes the handout by offering several links to resources at Purdue, and also provides an overview of the final stages of writing a research paper.

**Research: What it is.**
A research paper is the culmination and final product of an involved process of research, critical thinking, source evaluation, organization, and composition. It is, perhaps, helpful to think of the research paper as a living thing, which grows and changes as the student explores, interprets, and evaluates sources related to a specific topic. Primary and secondary sources are the heart of a research paper, and provide its nourishment; without the support of and interaction with these sources, the research paper would morph into a different genre of writing (e.g., an encyclopedic article). The research paper serves not only to further the field in
which it is written, but also to provide the student with an exceptional opportunity to increase her knowledge in that field.

**Research: What it is not.**
A research paper is not simply an informed summary of a topic by means of primary and secondary sources. It is neither a book report nor an opinion piece nor an expository essay consisting solely of one’s interpretation of a text nor an overview of a particular topic. Instead, it is a genre that requires one to spend time investigating and evaluating sources with the intent to offer interpretations of the texts, and not unconscious regurgitations of those sources. The goal of a research paper is not to inform the reader what others have to say about a topic, but to draw on what others have to say about a topic and engage the sources in order to thoughtfully offer a unique perspective on the issue at hand. This is accomplished through two major types of research papers. Analytical and Argumentative. We will compose an Argumentative paper.

**Argumentative research paper:**
The argumentative research paper consists of an introduction in which the writer clearly introduces the topic and informs his audience exactly which stance he intends to take; this stance is often identified as the thesis statement. An important goal of the argumentative research paper is persuasion, which means the topic chosen should be debatable or controversial. For example, it would be difficult for a student to successfully argue in favor of the following stance.

Cigarette smoking poses medical dangers and may lead to cancer for both the smoker and those who experience secondhand smoke.

Perhaps 25 years ago this topic would have been debatable; however, today, it is assumed that smoking cigarettes is, indeed, harmful to one's health. A better thesis would be the following.

Although it has been proven that cigarette smoking may lead to sundry health problems in the smoker, the social acceptance of smoking in public places demonstrates that many still do not consider secondhand smoke as dangerous to one's health as firsthand smoke.

In this sentence, the writer is not challenging the current accepted stance that both firsthand and secondhand cigarette smoke is dangerous; rather, she is positing that the social acceptance of the latter over the former is indicative of a cultural double-standard of sorts. The student would support this thesis throughout her paper by means of both primary and secondary sources, with the intent to persuade her audience that her particular interpretation of the situation is viable.

**Methods for choosing a topic**
Thinking early leads to starting early. If the student begins thinking about possible
topics when the assignment is given, she has already begun the arduous, yet rewarding, task of planning and organization. Once she has made the assignment a priority in her mind, she may begin to have ideas throughout the day.

**Brainstorming** is often a successful way for students to get some of these ideas down on paper. Seeing one’s ideas in writing is often an impetus for the writing process. Though brainstorming is particularly effective when a topic has been chosen, it can also benefit the student who is unable to narrow a topic. It consists of a timed writing session during which the student jots down—often in list or bulleted form—any ideas that come to his mind. At the end of the timed period, the student will peruse his list for patterns of consistency. If it appears that something seems to be standing out in his mind more than others, it may be wise to pursue this as a topic possibility.

It is important for the student to keep in mind that an initial topic may not be the exact topic about which he ends up writing. Research topics are often fluid, and dictated more by the student’s ongoing research than by the original chosen topic. Such fluidity is common in research, and should be embraced as one of its many characteristics.

**Identifying an Audience**

The concept of audience can be very confusing for novice researchers. Should the student’s audience be her instructor only, or should her paper attempt to reach a larger academic crowd? These are two extremes on the pendulum-course that is audience; the former is too narrow of an audience, while the latter is too broad. Therefore, it is important for the student to articulate an audience that falls somewhere in between.

It is perhaps helpful to approach the audience of a research paper in the same way one would when preparing for an oral presentation. Often, one changes her style, tone, diction, etc., when presenting to different audiences. So it is with writing a research paper (In fact, you may need to transform your written work into an oral work if you find yourself presenting at a conference someday).

The instructor should be considered only one member of the paper’s audience; he is part of the academic audience that desires students to investigate, research, and evaluate a topic. Try to imagine an audience that would be interested in and benefit from your research.

For example: if the student is writing a twelve page research paper about ethanol and its importance as an energy source of the future, would she write with an audience of elementary students in mind? This would be unlikely. Instead, she would tailor her writing to be accessible to an audience of fellow engineers and perhaps to the scientific community in general. What is more, she would assume the audience to be at a certain educational level; therefore, she would not spend time in such a short research paper defining terms and concepts already familiar to those in
the field. However, she should also avoid the type of esoteric discussion that condescends to her audience. Again, the student must articulate a middle-ground.

The following are questions that may help the student discern further her audience:

- Who is the general audience I want to reach?
- Who is most likely to be interested in the research I am doing?
- What is it about my topic that interests the general audience I have discerned?
- If the audience I am writing for is not particularly interested in my topic, what should I do to pique its interest?
- Will each member of the broadly conceived audience agree with what I have to say?
- If not (which will likely be the case!) what counter-arguments should I be prepared to answer?

Remember, one of the purposes of a research paper is to add something new to the academic community, and the first-time researcher should understand her role as an initiate into a particular community of scholars. As the student increases her involvement in the field, her understanding of her audience will grow as well. Once again, practice lies at the heart of the thing.

**Research: Where do I begin?**

We live in an age overflowing with sources of information. With so many information sources at our fingertips, knowing where to start, sorting through it all and finding what we want can be overwhelming! This handout provides answers to the following research-related questions: Where do I begin? Where should I look for information? What types of sources are available?

Before you begin your research, you should ask yourself some questions. These will help narrow your search parameters.

**What kind of information are you looking for?**


**Where would be a likely place to look?**

Which sources are likely to be most useful to you? Libraries? The Internet? Academic periodicals? Newspapers? Government records?

If, for example, you searching for information on some current event, a reliable newspaper like the NY Times will be a useful source. Are you searching for statistics on some aspect of the U.S. population? Then, start with documents such as United
States census reports. Do you want some scholarly interpretations of literature? If so, academic periodicals and books are likely to have what you’re looking for. Want to know about commercial products? Will those companies have Web sites with information? Are you searching for local history? Then a county library, government office, or local newspaper archive is likely to be the most useful.

**Online vs. Print Publications**
An important distinction when doing research is the difference between traditional publications and Internet resources. The Internet may be the most convenient place to begin your research, but it is not always the best.

**Internet Sources:** Anything published exclusively online in a variety of digital formats. Material includes: web pages, PDF documents, ebooks, multimedia.

**Traditional Publications:** This includes anything that has been published in print form and is widely available at libraries and bookstores. Material includes: books, textbooks, newspapers, popular and scholarly journals, and magazines.

With the advent of new technologies, many traditional resources are now available online (including newspaper articles, magazines, book chapters, and journal articles). Pay careful attention to whether the source you have found is an online-only source or if it has a print component as well.