

Writing Research Papers

A NORTON GUIDE

MELISSA WALKER

WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS

A Norton Guide

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PREFACE

Writing Research Papers: A Norton Guide provides all the necessary guidance and information for students to do research and produce satisfactory research papers, but it goes beyond that. To counter the notion some students bring with them to college that research is a senseless exercise having to do with footnotes and index cards, this book tries to teach the spirit and value of independent learning. It helps students appreciate that learning to do research on their own can be an exciting part of their college experience and that the skills acquired can serve them in other academic endeavors and throughout their lives.

This text contains instruction in basic research skills: narrowing a topic, using library sources, recording information, and organizing material. It provides guidance in the process of writing and documenting a research paper: writing rough drafts, revising, preparing a bibliography, integrating sources, and producing a final accurate copy. In addition to general instruction appropriate to research in all disciplines, there are clear examples for reporting and documenting according to three styles commonly used in undergraduate assignments: the styles of the Modern Language Association (1984), the American Psychological Association (1983), and the scientific number system used in many technical and scientific papers.

Because the library is such an important part of the student's life and because recent technological advances have made libraries increasingly complex, I have included two chapters on library sources. One describes the kinds of materials and services typically available in an academic library; the other, how to use these sources. In these two chapters students can find comprehensive treatment of both traditional library materials and new computer-based research tools.

This text is appropriate for students doing research based on library sources alone, but it also can be adapted to broader projects. As a comprehensive guide to research across the curriculum, it expands the concept of research to include activities beyond the library. It provides instruction in

skills such as listening, interviewing, and exploring community resources; and it encourages students to consider all possible sources of information.

I have found that students learn best by example, so I have illustrated the hows and whys of research by periodically following the process of four student research projects from the selection of a topic through gathering material, organizing, writing a first draft, revising, and producing a final paper. Each of the student papers is on a different kind of topic: Michael Gold researches the film *Rebel without a Cause* by combining a study of the impact of the film on society with a consideration of how the film was made; Sara Maxfield writes on a literary topic based both on outside sources and on a careful examination of two novels, Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*; David Wilson explores how the concept of maturity has been defined in various cultures and by various contemporary psychologists; and Carol Garcia pursues a technical topic, the design of passive solar homes. Beginning with the second chapter, examples from the work of these four students are used from time to time to illustrate the various stages of research. Students thus learn how to do their own research and to write research papers by learning general principles and studying examples of actual research in progress. For example, the discussion of the general principles of revision is followed by excerpts from revised rough drafts of the student papers. The completed student papers constitute the last four chapters of the text.

Not only different students but also the same student at different times will face varied research tasks; this text can help with different kinds of research assignments. In addition to the four featured student papers—ranging in length from 1,500 to 3,000 words—a short paper of only 800 words on Eleanor Roosevelt's work for women serves as a model for short assignments used either as preparation for a longer project or for courses that require a series of short papers rather than a single long one. Michael Gold's paper is documented by a bibliography with references cited in parentheses in the text, the preferred style of the Modern Language Association; Sara Maxfield's paper, a documented essay on a literary topic, uses the more traditional form—also endorsed by the MLA—of documentary notes and a bibliography; David Wilson's paper on a psychological topic illustrates the American Psychological Association (APA) style of documentation as well as the use of an abstract; and Carol Garcia's paper on a technical topic is documented with the simple number system widely used in science and technology and recommended by the American Chemical Society.

The annotated list of selected reference works in the appendix introduces some of the most valuable works in the library. With the help of experts in various disciplines, I have chosen works that are likely to be useful, as well as those thought to be indispensable. I have tried to include only works that are usable by undergraduate students, however, and to describe in a con-

cise note the main features of each. There are, of course, many other useful reference works in all fields, but this list should serve as a beginning, leading students to the shelves of the reference room where they will find other works appropriate to specific projects.

While this book is specifically designed as a textbook for that part of the freshman composition sequence that includes instruction in the methods and tools of research, it is also intended to act as an easy-to-use guide that students will consult whenever they undertake a research project. Students who keep this text on their desks will have easy access to authoritative, up-to-date information about planning and carrying through a research project. Since learning to do research is a central activity in learning to learn, *Writing Research Papers: A Norton Guide*, kept as a ready reference, may prove useful throughout the college years and beyond.

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1

UNDERSTANDING WHAT RESEARCH IS

An Introduction to Research

You may think of research as something you do in laboratories and libraries, usually as a requirement for a college course. But think for a minute. When you or your parents or friends are in the market for a new car, what do you do? You probably read consumer guides, visit car dealers, and talk to other people about their cars. When you look for a job, you may study the want ads, check bulletin boards, and ask around among your friends. Choosing a college or academic major or graduate school, deciding on a career, settling on a place to live, buying a house—all these activities require research.

While the word *research* has come to mean a serious, systematic activity, one requiring hard work, dedication, and perseverance, it once referred to a man's effort to win a woman in love or marriage, rarely a systematic business. The common element, however, in a lover's suit and a scholarly inquiry is found in the first two letters of the word. The prefix *re-* has the general sense of "back" or "again" and suggests repetition. The struggle to obtain what is personally desirable, socially good, or intellectually true is usually a matter of searching again and again.

To try again and again to understand other people, the natural world, and social and political structures is a significant step toward living consciously and deliberately. Researching has probably already played an important part in determining what you think and what you do. The skill with which you conduct research in the future can have a significant impact on the quality of your life, influencing how you perceive the world and what choices you make.

EXPLORING

Before setting out to investigate a subject systematically, it is helpful to recall that you are a natural investigator. You have been conducting informal research all your life. As an infant you conducted research primarily through your hands and mouth, often grasping, dropping, and grasping the same object again and again, until one day you were able to hold it and make it your own. As a two-year-old you probably discovered the nature of a dog by feeling it; perhaps you learned an unforgettable lesson about canine behavior by examining its teeth or pulling its tail.

As soon as you could talk, you discovered that there are shortcuts to knowledge, and so you began to ask questions: Does that dog bite? Is the stove hot? What is that thing? You probably never stopped asking questions, although the nature of those questions may have changed: What is inflation? How does a camera work? What did Martin Luther King accomplish? What are genes?

By the time you have enrolled in college, your success as a student depends on how much responsibility you take for your own learning, particularly on how you try to answer questions. Following through on questions can help develop habits that will make learning a part of your daily life, not just as a student, but in the years to come. Questions have a way of leading both to answers and to other questions, and the search for answers can help you keep alive—or recapture—the curiosity that comes so naturally to a child.

As an adult—particularly as a student and researcher—it is important that you learn to discriminate, to choose which questions seem the most important. It is not a good idea to look up every word you do not recognize in a difficult text, to ask professors to clarify every statement that you do not understand in a long lecture, or to go to the library for more information on every subject about which you would like to know more. Rather, it is more productive to look up those definitions that you need to understand an author's main ideas, to ask a professor for clarification when independent study of the text still leaves you baffled, and to select topics of particular interest to explore in the library.

The issue is not *whether* you will need to conduct research, but *how well* you want to do it. The success you will have in finding information is dependent on both your attitude and your skills.

The first step in good research is gathering the available facts. Whether you are trying to discover the best way to go from one place to another on public transportation or a politician's stand on particular issues, you want to begin with the facts. If you consult a published bus schedule or a campaign brochure, you may only have just begun. To verify the reliability of the bus schedule and the campaign brochure, you may need to talk with