A prevalent myth enveloping the writing of research papers is that they are simply reports on all the information you have gathered on a particular topic. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The research itself is guided initially by a hypothesis, an articulated point of view, or a tentative thesis; in turn, the completed research largely determines the shape of your re-formulated thesis.

A second prevalent myth is that much or most of the information is presented through quotation. One of the purposes of this handout is to demonstrate a variety of means through which you can present the information you have discovered. Most importantly, all the information you use must support a central argument that holds the paper together.

Generally, researchers gather more information than they can actually use to support the thesis. Remember that the writing of a research paper is a complex process that includes formulating a topic, framing a tentative thesis, gathering information, sorting and organizing information, outlining, drafting, and revising.

The following information will help you:

1. Develop a schedule for writing a research paper
2. Locate print and non-print sources to use in research papers
3. Choose a Research Paper Topic
4. Organize and Present your research

Developing a schedule for writing research papers:
College research assignments provide you with the opportunity to engage in a process of reasoned inquiry. The research question you pose will take you on a voyage of discovery and increase your storehouse of knowledge.

Begin by choosing a topic that genuinely interests you and that will allow you to satisfy your intellectual curiosity. The professor assigning the research paper will usually give you some latitude or choice of topic within the rubrics or guidelines of the course, so really think about what interests you the most about the general topic.

If you have been assigned a long research paper, then you will need to begin the research process early in the semester. Never wait until the last minute to begin a research paper.

Here is a schedule that will allow you to produce a research paper gradually, working in phases.

WEEK 1 Choose a possible topic
- Talk with a reference librarian and plan a research strategy
- Discuss your plans with your instructor and perhaps one other person (a tutor, classmate, and/or friend)

WEEK 2 Locate sources in library, on the Internet, or through interviews and conferences
- Investigate films and other media
- Read and take notes
- Decide on a tentative thesis

WEEK 3 Outline your argument and re-formulate your thesis
- Draft the paper
- Speak with your professor as you run into questions
WEEK 4 Seek help at the campus tutoring center in revising your paper
   ☐ Do additional research if necessary

WEEK 5 Revise the essay
   ☐ Prepare a list of works cited
   ☐ Edit the final draft

CHOOSING A RESEARCH PAPER TOPIC

1. Carefully analyze the research paper prompt to determine the task the professor has assigned you. Then determine how much leeway you have to choose your own topic.

2. With the prompt in front of you, pose some questions that seem worth researching. Below are some examples of questions that might be used to stimulate research in a variety of disciplines:
   ☐ What contributions did Angelica and Sarah Grimke make to the Abolition Movement? What connection is there between their participation in that movement and their involvement in the movement for equal rights for women?
   ☐ What are the broader connections between the Abolition Movement and the first Feminist movement?
   ☐ What were the reasons for rapid industrialization in the United States after the Civil War?
   ☐ How did residence in Europe shape the themes of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short stories and novels?

If the initial topic is too broad to treat adequately in the number of pages you have been assigned to write, then look for ways to narrow it. Frequently professors deliberately assign broad topics with the expectation that students will limit and define them to reflect their own interests. Below are three examples of broad topics followed by more limited versions:

1a. To what extent has the United States acted in accordance with the decisions of the World Court?
1b. To what extent is the detention of foreign nationals under the Patriot Act consistent with rulings of the World Court?

2a. What are the causes of homelessness in the United States?
2b. To what extent does inadequate medical treatment of the medical ill result in homelessness?

3a. What were the most important issues defining the presidency of Lyndon Johnson and how effectively did he deal with them?
3b. To what extent did President Lyndon Johnson achieve a coherent and effective policy in the area of foreign affairs?

Part 2: ORGANIZING AND PRESENTING RESEARCH

1. Keep in mind that the purpose of your research is to support a thesis or argument about a topic which you have rigorously limited and defined.
2. Select only those facts, statistics and historical or documentary material that support your argument.
3. Your thesis and purpose should be clearly articulated in your introduction; a research essay introduction is usually longer than an introduction to a general essay. Your introduction may also forecast the overall plan of your essay.
4. Throughout your research essay, provide organizational cues to remind your reader of your primary argument. These cues may be of two types: sub-headings and transitional words or phrases.
5. Throughout your essay, you should maintain a balance between generalizing, theoretical, or interpretive statements and evidence or concrete information.
6. Check to see that each paragraph contains a topic sentence that advances your argument and indicates the main point argued in the paragraph.
7. Use a variety of methods to present your evidence:
   1. Quotation
   2. Paraphrase
   3. Summary
   4. Selection of significant details and information
8. Analyze and interpret your evidence; indicate clearly which point a given piece of evidence supports.
9. Use quotations selectively; never give over your own voice to that of another writer. A quotation is only justified when you wish to analyze closely a statement or passage as if it were a piece of evidence.
10. Begin all quotations with introductory sentences or phrases and follow then with commentary; the quoted words should be contained in an "envelope" of your own language.
11. Quotations should never constitute more than 10% of a single page.
12. Use an appropriate voice, not too informal or subjective, but also not stuffy or pedantic.

A LIST OF POSSIBLE SOURCES FOR RESEARCH PAPERS

1. Books by single or two or more collaborating authors; locate these sources in the library’s online catalog.
2. Edited collections of essays containing chapters by separate authors or a selection of reprinted articles: locate these sources in the library’s online catalog.
3. Recent articles in periodicals: for work published in the last 10 or 20 years, use online databases in your university library. Your university library has some or all of the following databases:
   1. Infotrac: A collection of databases that lists specialized sources in Business, health and other fields
   2. ProQuest: Includes databases for journal articles in nursing, biology and psychology.
   4. ERIC: for articles from education journals.
   E. MLA Bibliography: indexes books, articles, and dissertations in literary criticism.
4. Less recent articles in periodicals: for print indexes for articles more than twenty years old, consult indexes and reference guides in the reference section of your library (e.g. the Art Index; New York Times Index; Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature)
5. Search Engines: Use search terms and find matches among millions of web page. Try more than one search engine among the following: AltaVista, Ask Jeeves, Google and Lycos.
6. Directories arranged by topic: Internet Scout Project is especially useful for research projects. Some additional directories include Angus Clearinghouse; Librarian’s Index to the Internet: World Wide Web Virtual Library.
7. Archives contain the texts of older books, poems, speeches, and documents.
9. General Reference Works: encyclopedias and dictionaries such as Encyclopedia Britannica and World Almanac.
11. Bibliographies: Lists of works written on a specific subject

NON-PRINT SOURCES for RESEARCH PAPERS

1. Interviewing
2. Survey of Opinions
3. Visiting and Observing Sites
4. Contacting Organizations
5. Broadcasts and Videos
6. Conferences and Lectures
EVALUATING SOURCES

As you peruse the sources, ask the following questions:

1. Does the author treat opposing views fairly?
2. Is the author associated with a special interest group that might compromise his/her objectivity?
3. Does the writer’s argument reveal unwarranted or unexamined assumptions?
4. Does the author’s language show bias?
5. What is the author’s thesis or central argument?
6. Are the statistics and facts accurate as far as you know?
7. Does the author back up his/her claim with adequate and appropriate evidence?

Evaluating Online Sources

1. Is there an author noted?
2. Is the author an acknowledged expert in her/his field?
3. Who sponsors the site?
4. Why was the site created?
5. Who is the site’s intended audience?