Learning Café Quick Study Tips

COMMON ERRORS IN RESEARCH ESSAY WRITING

For many students, the prospect of writing a research essay is daunting. Where to begin? What to write? What to include? How to document it? The questions seem endless. There are a number of pitfalls to avoid when writing a research essay. Being aware of these dangers & knowing where to get help are the first steps in writing a successful paper.

Pitfalls to Avoid When Writing a Research Essay

• **Not planning the process**
  Use the ¼ time plan: ¼ of time to research & prepare, ¼ of time for drafting, ¼ of time for revising, & ¼ of time for editing & presenting

• **Leaving it too late**
  Start the process several weeks in advance.

• **Collecting research material too early**
  Before collecting a lot of research material, it is valuable to do a bit of background reading in order to define & refine your topic.

• **Choosing too large a topic**
  Choose as small a topic as you can for the length of the paper required.

• **Failing to define your thesis & make a plan**
  Before you start using your research materials, define your thesis. This will help to establish structure, organization, & focus. A standard 3 part thesis contains:
  - statement of topic
  - your position on it
  - basic parts of your argument (blueprint or plan of development)

  Once you have a thesis, creating even a basic outline will help you stay on topic & adequately develop your ideas.

• **Trying to use all the sources you found**
  - Select only those sources that directly apply to your paper.
  - How many? Usually a minimum of 5 or 1 per page of paper length
  - Magazines and journal articles are easier to use than full length books.
  - Not all sources are credible; select your information carefully.

• **Not following instructors’ specifications**
  - Conforming to instructor specifications is good!
  - Use the marking key or written instructions as checklist.
  - If little or no guidelines are provided, use standard APA document format.
• Using quotes or paraphrases to make your points
  o You make the point: use quotes and paraphrases to support your ideas.
  o Avoid the “necklace” paper: don’t string together a series of direct quotations. Your paper will lack flow & the your writer’s voice will be lost.

• Plagiarizing and other forms of academic dishonesty
  o All information you got from your sources except common knowledge in the field must be credited – in text and on your reference page.
  o Direct quotes cannot be passed off as paraphrases.
  o If you can find it on the Internet, so can your instructor!
  o The work must be your own and must be the first time it’s submitted for grading.

• Using too many quotes
  o Only use quotes when a paraphrase will corrupt or lessen the idea.
  o Use quotes for authority, eloquence, & control.
  o How many quotes? Only 1-2 per page. The remaining information should be paraphrased or summarized.

• Skipping the revising process
  o If the idea doesn’t fit, take it out.
  o If you have a hole in your ideas, fill it.

• Not checking your documentation
  o Follow the APA manual – down to spacing, periods, brackets, … the works!

• Skipping the editing process
  o Look for and fix your common grammar & mechanics errors.
    – use your grammar checker, but make your own decisions
  o Run the spell checker -- this is a no-brainer!
    – Double-check for homonyms which the spell checker won’t locate as errors.
  o Make sure your final version is a clean copy.

• Not backing up your documents
  o We all learn this one sooner or later – failure to back up your documents in more than one place can mean you may lose all evidence of your work.

• Not asking for advice
  o Ask a friend with strong writing skills for feedback on your draft.
  o Make an appointment with a writing instructor in the Learning Café for some advice during the organizational or draft phases of your work.

Other Valuable Writing Resources
  o Lethbridge College’s APA Student Guide (available in the Bookstore or online)
  o Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association 5th edition
  o “OWLS” http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/index2.html
  o The Learning Café writing instructors (in the library or call 382-6952)