Mastering Research and Writing Assignments

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Step 1 Decoding Your Assignment

Identify the Objective
What is the purpose of this assignment? Why is your instructor asking you to write this paper? Look for keywords or phrases like "The purpose of this assignment is...", or "The goal of the essay is...", or "Students should be able to...".

Identify the Prompt or Question
What are you being asked to do? Look for directive words like "analyze", "compare", and "discuss".

Identify Formatting Requirements
How many pages are required? What font type and size should be used? What style are you required to write in (e.g. MLA, APA, Chicago)? How many sources are you required to cite and reference?
Step 2

Pre-Writing

Write down your research topic or question.

Write down everything you already know about your topic, and where this knowledge came from (e.g. news, social media, friend, family member, journal article, teacher).

Write down what you need to know about your topic. Think like a journalist and pay close attention to the following factors: who, what, where, when, why, and how.
Finding Sources

Most instructors require students to cite and reference sources in written assignments. Here are some of the most common types of sources you may be asked to use:

Primary Sources
Original sources of information before it has been analyzed; first-hand observations and contemporary accounts of events and viewpoints at the time. Includes interviews, speeches, diaries, birth certificates, journal articles, and newspaper articles written at the time.

Secondary Sources
Sources that analyze or interpret primary data, but do not offer new evidence; interpretations of information, written after the event, that offer review or critique. Includes biographies, journal articles, textbooks, commentaries, editorials, and literary criticisms.

Tertiary Sources
Sources that compile data on a particular topic; collections or lists of primary and secondary sources, reference works, and finding tools for sources. Examples include encyclopedias, bibliographies, abstracts, indexes, literature reviews, library catalogs, and databases.

Scholarly Sources
Articles written by scholars or professionals who are experts in their fields. In the behavioral and social sciences, these individuals often publish their research results in journals.

Peer-Reviewed Sources
Articles written by scholars or professionals who are experts in their fields. These individuals often publish their research results in journals as well, but not until a panel of their peers have reviewed the article to ensure its quality. Peer-reviewed sources are more likely to be scientifically valid and reach reasonable conclusions than other sources.

You can use the CRAAP test to evaluate the information you find. To learn more about the CRAAP test, visit the Learning Commons webpage, click on the Library tab, followed by Research Support. You’ll find everything you need in the Research Guides box under the Evaluating Sources tab.
Where to Look for Sources

Google Scholar
scholar.google.com

Jurn
jurn.org

RefSeek
refseek.com

Wikipedia
wikipedia.org
(For search terms and sources)

Learning Commons Homepage
libguides.ojc.edu

Under the Library tab:

EBSCO Discovery
Books, DVDs, and Online Videos
Course Guides
Instructor Reserves (Textbooks)
Research Databases

Assistance with Citing and Referencing Sources

MLA
Purdue Owl: MLA
Citation Machine: MLA

APA
Purdue Owl: APA
Citation Machine: APA
A Quick Overview of Scholarly Articles

Reading and coding scholarly articles can be confusing and overwhelming for novice researchers. Because of this, it’s important to know that most scholarly articles include the following sections:

Abstract
The abstract provides a complete synopsis of the research paper and introduces the topic and the specific research question, along with the research methodology employed by the researchers. The abstract also includes a general statement about the results and the findings of the study.

Introduction
The introduction begins by introducing the broad overall topic and providing basic background information. It then narrows down to the specific research question relating to the topic of interest. It provides the purpose and focus for the rest of the paper and sets up the justification for the research.

Literature Review/Background Information
The purpose of the literature review is to describe past important research and it relate it specifically to the research problem. It is a synthesis of previous literature and the new idea being researched. The review examines major theories related to the topic to date and their contributors, and includes relevant findings from credible sources, such as academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles.

Methods
The methods section describes the research design and methodology used to complete to the study, and provides enough detail for readers to replicate the study.

Results
In this section, the results of the analysis are presented. How the results are presented will depend upon whether the research study was quantitative or qualitative in nature. This section focuses on results that are directly related to the research or the problem. Graphs and tables are used when there is too much data to efficiently include it within the text. This section presents the results, but does not discuss their significance.
Discussion/Conclusion
This section is a discussion of the results implications, as well as other fields. The hypothesis is answered and validated by the interpretation of the results. This section also discusses how the results relate to previous research mentioned in the literature review, along with any limitations and/or cautions about the findings.

References/Bibliography
The research paper is not complete without the list of references. This section includes an alphabetized list of all the academic sources of information utilized in the paper. The format of the references will match the format and style used in the paper. Common formats include APA, MLA, Harvard and so forth.

Important Definitions

Synthesis
A piece of writing that combines information from two or more sources to review literature on a topic, make recommendations, or connect practice to research.

Quantitative Research
The systematic empirical investigation of observable phenomena via statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques; includes surveys and structured interviews or observations that involve counting the number of times a phenomenon occurs, or coding observational data to translate it into numbers.

Qualitative Research
Exploratory research that is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research, and includes interviews, focus groups, observations, case studies, and secondary data like diaries or journals.

Implications
Something implied or suggested based on the results of a study; may include a discussion of who might be interested in the results, how different types of people may respond to the findings, what new research studies the findings might inspire, what new questions have emerged, and what are the next steps that will be taken.

Limitations
Characteristics of design or methodology that impact or influence the interpretation of research findings; common limitations include sample size, demographics, researcher bias, lack of data or prior research, and data collection methods.
The secret to making sense of scholarly articles is to read with intent, and to color-code information that is relevant to your paper.

Example: Let’s say you’re writing a cause and effect paper on Type 2 Diabetes, and you’re required to discuss the causes and effects of this disease, how to prevent it, and how to treat it.

The first thing you need to do is get four highlighters, pens, or markers of different colors, and assign a category to each of your colors. For Example:

Causes
Effects
Prevention
Treatment

When you start reading, you need to highlight or underline everything in the article that’s related to these four areas. Anything that pertains to the causes of Type 2 diabetes should be highlighted or underlined in orange, effects in green, prevention in pink, and treatment in blue. When you’ve finished coding your articles, you can move on to the next step of condensing and categorizing information.

Condensing and Categorizing Information

When your articles are coded, you’re ready to extract the important information and place it in a table or Word document.

Starting with the first section/color, type or write the highlighted/underlined information from the articles directly into your document, word-for-word. Make sure you cite the article and the page number the information is found on (Author, Year of Publication, Page). Example:

Causes

“Excess of lipids decreases insulin sensitivity or activity that causes insulin resistance” (Bhattacharya & Mukherjee, 2016, p. 1).

When you’ve finish extracting and categorizing information, you should review the information in each section and move it around within the section until it flows together fluently. When you’re done with this step, you’ll be ready to start writing your paper.
Step 5

Writing Your Paper

A good practice is to write the body sections first (e.g. causes, effects, prevention, and treatment), followed by the conclusion and introduction. You will also need to include a title page and a reference page.

When it’s time to start writing, focus on one section at a time, and do your best to summarize, paraphrase, and/or synthesize the information in each section by writing it in your own words. You’ll still need to cite the reworded information in text, so make sure your citation is properly formatted in the writing style you’re using (e.g. MLA, APA, Chicago). In academic writing you need to refrain from writing in first person, and you should use direct quotes sparingly as they do not demonstrate depth of thought.

Important Writing Terminology

Summary
Summarizing information helps condense it for use in your own paper. A summary presents key ideas and information from a source concisely in your own writing without unnecessary detail that might distract readers. Summarizing is most useful when you wish to focus on the main ideas of a selection rather than specific details or steps of a process. When summarizing, be careful to use your own words, sentence structure, and phrasing to avoid plagiarism. Also, remember to cite your sources.

Paraphrase
Paraphrasing material retains the original ideas and length of a selection but allows you to restructure the information and use your own voice. Paraphrasing can be the answer when you want to incorporate detailed information in your writing without a dense or confusing question. It works well when ideas need clarification for your audience or when the style of the content isn’t consisted with your writing style. When paraphrasing, be careful to use your own words, sentence structure, and phrasing to avoid inadvertent plagiarism. Also, remember to cite your sources.
Synthesis
Synthesizing material in sources brings information together in new ways and helps you to interpret it for yourself and your audience. A synthesis can consolidate summaries of several sources and point out their relationships. It enables you to provide background information, explore causes and effects, contrast explanations, and consolidate support for your thesis. Also, remember to cite your sources.

Quotations
Quotations must be identical to the original, using a narrow segment of the source. The must match the source document word for word and must be attributed to the original author.

Examples to Compare

Original Passage
Students frequently overuse direct quotation in taking notes, and as a result they overuse quotations in the final [research] paper. Probably only about 10% of your final manuscript should appear as directly quoted matter. Therefore, you should strive to limit the amount of exact transcribing of source materials while taking notes. Lester, James D. Writing Research Papers. 2nd ed., 1976, pp. 46-47

Paraphrase
In research papers students often quote excessively, failing to keep quoted material down to a desirable level. Since the problem usually originates during note taking, it is essential to minimize the material recorded verbatim (Lester 46-47).

Summary
Students should take just a few notes in direct quotation from sources to help minimize the amount of quoted material in a research paper (Lester 46-47).

Plagiarized Version
Students often use too many direct quotations when they take notes, resulting in too many of them in the final research paper. In fact, probably only about 10% of the final copy should consist of directly quoted material. So it is important to limit the amount of source material copied while taking notes.

A Note About Plagiarism
This example has been classed as plagiarism, in part, because of its failure to deploy any citation. Plagiarism is a serious offense in the academic world. However, we acknowledge that plagiarism is a difficult term to define; that its definition may be contextually sensitive; and that not all instances of plagiarism are created equal—that is, there are varying “degrees of egregiousness” for different cases of plagiarism.
Step 6

Editing Your Paper

1. Make sure MS Word is set to check your spelling, grammar and style. You should also consider downloading Grammarly from the Internet, as it is a free program that will check your document for errors that MS Word will not catch.

2. When you’ve finished writing your paper, a good practice is to read your paper aloud into an audio recording device (e.g. phone or tablet), and listen back to the recording as you read your paper. This will help you catch additional errors and nuances in language. When you’ve finished cleaning up your paper, have a friend, family member or classmate review your work for any mistakes you may have missed.

3. Visit the Writing Center and have a tutor look over your paper before you submit your final draft.

For additional assistance, or to setup a one-on-one research appointment, visit the OJC Learning Commons or contact me at:

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