

## Writing the Online Research Paper: 13 Guidelines to Getting It Right

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*There are many facets of teaching students in a “landline” setting that cross over to an online one. Certainly, nearly all of these must be tweaked and honed somewhat to work effectively in the online learning environment. Some assignments need no adjustment and work extremely well whether the students are in a traditional or an online classroom. Among these is the research paper: the topic of this month’s column.*

The research paper is an important staple of teaching whether one teaches law, biology, English, criminal justice, American literature, math, or whatever. So here, for you to share with your students, is a comprehensive guide to writing an effective research paper, no matter what the subject (and with a bit of a nod to our online teaching environment!):

### Introduction

Unless you are asked to write an editorial (which is opinion alone) or a paper in which research is really not necessary (such as a descriptive essay) or your instructor specifically indicates doing an essay based on your experience, knowledge, and opinions alone, research will always enter into your writing. And it can help you in several ways:

- **Research allows you to substantiate and give credibility to an opinion you hold or a conclusion you’ve made and helps you come to a conclusion or decision.**
- **Research can offer a variety of sources to add “meat” to your primary thesis.**

- **Research can make your writing more sophisticated.**
- **Research can introduce you to other thoughts or approaches to your primary thesis that you hadn’t previously considered.**
- **Research allows you to open your mind to additional ideas and information, thus expanding your overall education.**

Virtually any grammar and composition book as well as numerous Internet sites can help you know what resources to use for research, how research should be cited in an essay, and the specifics of integrating research into a paper. But the basics of how to write a research paper that not only is effective but also takes into consideration the online learning environment is not so easy to find, and thus the 13 points that follow.

### The guide

**(1) Decide whether research is needed.** Doing research just for the sake of saying you did research is stupid. Period. But if you need to bolster an argument, give credibility to an opinion, or substantiate a proposal, then yes, you definitely need to do research.

**(2) Develop a research master resource list and add to it.** You will have several papers in college that need research; you will find research needed for various projects, assignments, and presentations in your career. To save time on these, keep a master research list (preferably on a flash drive or a CD) that you can continually refer to as each project comes along. (For Internet resources, keep them always available and organized in

various folders under favorites.) And as you discover new research resources you find helpful, add these to the master list (as well as to your favorites).

**(3) Never use only one source for research.** You want to offer your readers balance in the research you choose; if you do not, they might get a slanted or weakened view.

**(4) Decide how your research will be used.** Do you intend to simply draw a conclusion based on the research available, or do you have a strong opinion on something but need research to add weight to your belief? Do you intend to do research to better understand where to market a product or service or to decide if an idea is unique? Knowing how you intend to use your research will allow you to better focus on the types of resources you will use and how you will use those resources.

**(5) Never let research take over your paper.** Research is secondary to your thesis and the overall writing that ties together your thoughts and the research. Never throw in so much research that your paper simply reads as other people’s ideas and information. You are the author of your paper, and thus it should have the feel, look, and sound of you.

**(6) Never toss in research simply for the sake of being able to say, “I did research.”** All substantive (solid) research you do in your paper MUST relate to your thesis. But if your thesis is, for example, stem cell research, and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7 >>

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<< FROM PAGE 6

you cite a bill that was introduced in Congress in 2002, in Washington, D.C., and then insert a bit of research material on the origin of the name “Washington,” yes, you did research—but no, it has nothing to do with your thesis on stem cell research.

**(7) Consider readers’ possible questions, and answer them with research.** When the reader takes in your words, he or she will certainly have questions based on what you have written. The smart research paper will have taken into consideration the primary questions or objections the paper’s points will probably raise, “answering” and “responding to” these with a combination of research and the writer tying this research into the thesis and main points. Obviously, you cannot anticipate all reader questions and/or objections, but meeting some major ones head-on in the paper will make for a more contented reader.

**(8) Use research that is as fresh as possible.** Research that is too old might no longer be valid, having been surpassed, revised, or negated by more recent research. (Of course, if the only research available is older than three years, indicate as much in your paper so the reader can put the research in perspective: you want the reader to know that in your research efforts this was the most recent you could find, not that you were lazy and simply stopped looking.)

**(9) Don’t over-research.** Research “Mark Twain’s humor” through a search engine and you’ll find nearly 300 hits; there are dozens of books and hundreds of journal articles that have also appeared on this topic. Obviously, you can’t use it all. What you want is a sufficient number of varied

resources to make your case: 10 different resources in an eight- to 10-page paper should be tops, with a good average at about five to eight.

**(10) Make certain your resources are credible.** This perhaps applies most to the Internet, where anyone can publish a website or blog, and just about everyone does. More often than not, these sites contain personal opinions, but little of the information is based on scholarly research, thus raising the question: how much of it is credible? The same question must be asked of interviewees not very familiar with a subject, an article that appears in an obscure periodical, and a subject discussed in a fictional TV program or movie. All your hard work in writing a paper can be weakened by one or more resources that are not credible.

**(11) Have all your research right in front of you and cited.** This simply makes better use of your time. Gather your research, put little notes on each indicating the citation info you need for the paper, and then begin writing your paper (based on the outline you’ve developed). This also helps you focus more on your writing project rather than breaking from your writing to hunt down another resource.

**(12) Always remember to footnote and cite.** This is a no-brainer: without footnoting and/or citing all your research, you are plagiarizing; and if you do, you can forget about seeing yourself on a Wheaties box! Be sure you use the correct format—MLA, APA, etc.—that your instructor has designated.

**(13) Remember that the research paper must fit the online environment.** Always send a copy of your research paper to

yourself as well as to your instructor, just to be sure you remembered to attach it (whether e-mail or dropbox). Check for any limitations—either at your or your instructor’s end—that may limit the size of the file you are sending. “Cut and paste” into an e-mail as a last resort: this plays havoc with the layout on a Works Cited or References page, as well as with bullets and other formatting. Always include your name (and other pertinent information) both on the first page of your paper and in the subject line of the e-mail. Save each copy of your research paper returned to you: you may need them all for a final grade, and instructors’ comments on your paper can prove helpful for future assignments.

**REMEMBER: It’s the spices that add taste, character, and personality to any food; without them, blandness and “ho-hum” quickly set in.**

*Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at [errol-craigsull@aol.com](mailto:errol-craigsull@aol.com). And as always, with each of my columns I will be offering a sampling of whatever subject I’ve discussed; for this column, if you’d like a guide to writing the research paper in either APA or MLA format—including nearly two dozen very helpful websites—please drop me an e-mail.*

Errol Craig Sull teaches English Composition online for Excelsior College (Albany, NY); he is currently at work on a book of his online teaching activities titled *Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing*.@

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