

Student's Guide to Writing College Papers

FIFTH EDITION

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Introduction

Writing, Argument, and Research

What Is a College Paper?

How to Think about Writing

How to Think about Argument

How to Think about Research

Why You Should Learn to Do Research Now

Our Promise to You

If you are reading this book, chances are you are a college student, or soon will be. Our goal in writing it is to help you do three things that are crucial to most college-level work: to write, to argue, and to research. You probably do these things every day already. But they have special meanings in college, meanings you must understand to get the most out of your college education. This book shows you how to bring these activities together so that you can write a successful college paper.

What Is a College Paper?

So just what *is* a *college paper*? That question is not as simple as it seems, and in fact, it has several good answers. From one perspective, a college paper is simply a piece of writing you produce in college. Understood in this sense, it might be almost anything: a report, a critical essay, a response paper, a project proposal, a white paper, a personal narrative, a story. Some of this writing will be printed out on paper. A small bit of it may be handwritten. But increasingly, much of it will be submitted electronically or even published on the web, for your class or for the world. This understanding is valuable, for it requires students and teachers—at both the high school and college levels—to acknowledge the incredible breadth of writing that twenty-first-century college students do. But this understanding, for our purposes, is too broad. For if we take a college paper to mean *any* kind of writing, we could offer you only the most general advice about how to write one.

Some students and even some teachers have a much narrower understanding: they think a college paper is a particular kind of assignment—a paper with five paragraphs, each with a topic sentence and an example—that they imagine students doing in an old-fashioned first-year English or composition class. This understanding is less valuable, but it is not entirely wrong: there is a long tradition of teaching college students to do just this sort of writing. But that tradition

is fading, and to pretend that it is sufficient for today's students would be to do them a grave disservice.

We take up the middle ground between these two views. For the purposes of this book, we understand a college paper to be any piece of writing done in college (or in a college-preparatory curriculum in high school) that uses the products of research to make an argument addressing a question its readers care about. This notion of a college paper includes much of the writing that students do in college, but not all of it. That limitation, though, is valuable. We can't tell you how to do *every* kind of writing you could possibly be asked to do in college. But we can show you how to do research that addresses real questions, how to make arguments that not only assert your point but also consider the views of others, and how to communicate these arguments in writing that your readers will recognize not only as clear and coherent but also as contributing to their own knowledge.

We said that college-level work requires writing, argument, and research, and we will have much to say about each of these throughout the book. But to get started, we'll just introduce some basic principles.

How to Think about Writing

As a college student, or almost one, you have already been writing for years: if you are like most students, writing more than any other activity, except perhaps reading, has defined your education. It will continue to be at the center of your education in college, and it will be even more important in your career and the rest of your adult life.

In fact, the further you advance in almost every profession, the more writing you will do and the more important your ability to write will become. Newly hired engineers, for example, work on technical problems. Advanced engineers may do that too, but they will also draft proposals for prospective clients; write emails, progress updates, and performance reviews for coworkers, bosses, and subordinates; and produce reports on their projects for colleagues, shareholders, and perhaps even the general public. Similar observations could be made about law enforcement officers, health care providers, teachers, or people working in almost any profession. And don't forget about all the writing you will need to do in your daily life, whether posting about your vacation on social media or explaining your car accident to an insurance company.

Here are some things to keep in mind when you think about writing as a college student:

- *Write to discover ideas.* Writing is a complex process involving many different activities: everything from jotting down your first notes to proofreading your final draft is part of your writing process. We say *your* process because nobody's way of writing is exactly like anyone else's, and a big part of being a student is figuring out what works for you: Do you write best in short bursts

or in longer sessions? Do you make detailed outlines or loose plans? Do you craft your sentences slowly and deliberately or dump words onto the page or screen to refine later? But whatever the specifics of their processes, all accomplished writers know that writing and thinking are intimately connected. They understand that writing is not just a matter of capturing in words ideas that have already crystallized in their minds and that their ideas will inevitably grow and change *as* they write. Student writers, who are often working to tight deadlines and who can be uncomfortable with the uncertainty of not knowing their final thoughts before they start, can be tempted to deny this basic truth. That's a mistake that leads not to efficiency but to frustration. If you accept that your thoughts will evolve as you write, you'll write better and smarter papers.

- *Write for readers other than your teacher.* All writers need readers to tell them how well they are doing: you may think your paper is brilliant, but only your readers can tell you if it actually is. As a student, you write as a novice for a reader—your teacher—who knows more about your subject than you do and who reads your writing less out of interest than because it's her job. But outside of school, the situation is exactly the reverse: you will almost always write as an expert for readers who know *less* about your subject than you do and who read your writing because it helps them in some way. If you write only as a student, you will never learn to serve these readers. So you have to try now to write for readers—real or imagined—other than your teacher, even when you are doing assignments for your class. Many teachers understand this and will help you by defining a reader for you to write for. The advice in this book will also help you.
- *Write consistently and widely.* Everyone knows that the way to get and stay in shape is to exercise regularly by doing not just one activity but a whole range of them. Writing works the same way. The more you write, and the more ways in which you write, the better your writing will get. Don't just do the assignments you are given: keep a journal, write a blog, contribute to a school publication, craft a short story. In fact, the most productive writers commit themselves to writing *something* every day. So should you.

The final thing we have to say may not make you happy, but it is true. Students often hope they will eventually get to a point where writing becomes easy. Probably not. For a lucky few, writing is a pleasure, as natural as taking a walk on a sunny spring day. For most of us, though, writing will always remain a challenge. We get better through instruction, reading, and practice, but the writing tasks we face get harder too. The good news is that if you stick with it, you'll learn to manage this difficulty, as we all have. We can't guarantee that you'll enjoy writing, but we can guarantee that if you follow and practice our advice, you can learn to do it well.

How to Think about Argument

When we hear the word *argument* we typically imagine some sort of heated discussion between parties at odds. In disputes of this kind, the parties tend to talk past one another, shout over one another, or otherwise try to knock down their opponents' arguments.

We think of argument in a different way: not as something people *have* but as something people *make*. Most importantly, we think of arguments as something people make *together*. In this sense, arguments are at the core of university life. In this book (and in our wider experience) we understand argument as intellectual conversation, at times intense conversation, but conversation nonetheless. In writing arguments, we join ongoing conversations and we invite our readers to converse with us.

It's true that writing can seem a *one-sided* conversation in which we do all the talking and our readers all the listening. But as you will discover, the great thing about writing, especially writing as a product of research, is that the arguments we make are always an opportunity to connect with others, to imagine our readers' beliefs and interests, to anticipate their questions and concerns. When you think of your readers as allies, not as adversaries, you enter into an intellectual community with a proper spirit of humility.

How to Think about Research

In this opening discussion of writing, argument, and research, we saved research for last because it is the one that students are least likely to appreciate and most likely to misunderstand. When you think of a researcher, what do you imagine? If you're like most people, you probably picture someone in a lab coat peering into a microscope or a solitary figure taking notes in a library. Those pictures aren't wrong. But you might also have pictured NBC's Hoda Kotb, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, or the New England Patriots' Tom Brady: anyone who prepares extensively to do his or her job. Like just about every successful person, they are experts not only in doing research but in using the research of others. In fact, that's part of what makes them successful. More than ever, knowing how to find, evaluate, and use information is essential for success in any profession. If you know a lawyer, a doctor, a business executive, a marketer, an event planner, a construction manager, or any other professional, then you know someone whose job depends on research. These days the key to most jobs is not just how much you know but how good you are at finding out what you don't.

But do you also think of yourself as a researcher? The fact is you do research almost every day. You are a researcher whenever you dig up the information you need to accomplish a goal—from selecting the most popular chemistry teacher, to finding an affordable apartment that allows pets, to figuring out which new phone to buy. Typically these searches are too quick to feel like a research

“project,” but you are doing what good researchers always do: collecting information to solve a problem or answer a question.

Do you think of your teachers as researchers? You should. We college teachers teach, but most of us also do research. That research begins in our areas of expertise, with what we know, but what gets us excited are the things we *don't* know but wish that we did: *What's the connection between morality and the biology of the brain? Will knowing grammar rules make you a better writer? Can we reduce climate change by removing the greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere? Did the Neanderthals die out naturally, or did our human ancestors kill them off?* We teachers spend much of our working lives with research questions like those, either asking and answering our own or studying the questions and answers of our colleagues.

Why should the research experience of teachers matter to you? For one thing, it's good to know that we practice what we teach. More importantly, our commitment to a life of research colors the kind of learning that we value most—and that we expect from you. New college students are often surprised to discover that just knowing the facts is not enough for most teachers. It's not enough in our own work: more than knowing things, what energizes us is our habit of seeking out new questions, the cast of mind that drives all research. And it's not enough in yours: more than checking that you know the facts, we want to see what you can *do* with the facts, what new questions, combinations, possibilities, or puzzles you discover—or invent. We value and reward good answers, but we reward good questions more. That's a perspective we invite you to embrace as well.

YOUR FIRST RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

Researching Research in the Workplace

Here's a useful way to start thinking about research: Professionals do research because they need the answer to a question in order to accomplish some goal. Let's suppose that you have a goal—to motivate yourself to care enough about your research assignments that you will do good work on them. And to achieve that goal, you need the answer to a question: *is research really that important in the workplace?*

So your first mini-assignment is to research the answer. Find five people you know with jobs that you might like to have—not your perfect job but work that you can imagine doing. Ask them about research on their job. Don't just stop with those activities they call research. Ask about any tasks that require them to find out something they didn't know in order to accomplish some goal. Also ask how much those skills matter in their evaluations of their colleagues. Share your results with your classmates.

Why You Should Learn to Do Research Now

What this book teaches you about research is relevant to your future profession and your adult life generally. But our focus is on academic research, the kind of research your teachers do and the kind of research you will do as a college student. Research is at the heart of every college curriculum, and it will show up in your classes in both obvious and hidden forms. Colleges have been this way for centuries, but it's not just tradition that explains why we expect you to learn research.

The first reason is practical: it concerns your economic future more than your current education. You may not yet be a practicing professional who depends on research, but the chances are good that you will be. The research you do now will prepare you for the day when your job depends on your ability to find answers for yourself or to evaluate and use the answers of others. It will also prepare you to *get* that job in the first place: although potential employers care about what you know, the workplace changes so quickly these days that they care more about how prepared you are to find out what you don't yet know.

The second reason has to do with your education, now and for a lifetime of learning. When you understand research, you are better able to avoid the trap of passive learning, where your only choices are to absorb, or not, what some textbook or teacher says. Doing research, you'll discover how the knowledge we all rely on is only as good as the research that supports it. You'll also discover that what you learn from the research of others depends on what questions you ask—and don't ask. And doing your own research will let you experience the messy reality behind what is so smoothly and confidently presented by experts on the job or in the media. As you learn to do research, you'll learn to distinguish biased and unsupported assertions from reliable research reported clearly, accurately, and with appropriate qualification.

Our third reason you might think idealistic. We teachers ask you to do research because it is the most intellectually exciting part of any education. We hope you too will experience the sheer pleasure of solving a research puzzle and the pride and self-confidence that come from discovering something that no one else knows.

We must be candid, though: doing research carefully and reporting it clearly can be hard work, consisting of many tasks that will often compete for your attention at the same time. And no matter how carefully you plan, research follows a crooked path, taking unexpected turns, sometimes up blind alleys, even looping back on itself. As complex as that process is, we will work through it step by step so that you can see how its parts work together. When you can manage its parts, you can manage the often intimidating whole and look forward to your next research project with greater confidence.

Our Promise to You

This book reflects its authors' decades of dedication to understanding how writers write, how readers read, and how researchers do their work. What you find here is grounded not in our mere opinions but in our own efforts to answer these questions through our own research. It also reflects our collective experience as teachers of writing and research at more than a dozen universities. We know what it means to be a college student, and you can rest assured that we will give you the most practical advice we know how to give. We know what it is to have to get a paper out the door, and we'll respect your need to get your papers done. But we'll also show you how to get them done right.

Finally, we have written this book in the hope that it will inspire some of you to think of yourselves not just as students learning what others have already discovered or as preprofessionals training for your careers. We hope that some of you will experience for yourselves the joys of writing and research: the thrill of discovery and the feeling of accomplishment that comes from making and sharing new knowledge.