

The Research Process

Research papers are an opportunity to learn about a new topic, formulate your own ideas, and demonstrate how these ideas relate to a larger conversation. It's an exciting but also complex endeavor. Take your research papers one step at a time and follow a purposeful research process to making your work more productive and your papers more effective.

Defining a Research Question

Whether your professor assigned you a topic or you've chosen one yourself, you'll want to begin by defining a research question. Start by mining for questions around the topic at large. If you're interested in the titles of artworks, for example, you might ask yourself about the implications or consequences of titles, leading to a question like: How do the titles of artworks impact viewers' interpretations of the work?

Preliminary Research

You may already have a potential answer to this question, but explore further by reading widely on your topic. You might start with Google, then visit the library and search for books and scholarly articles. Bibliographies of one book can often lead you to another. Likewise, once you've found a helpful book in the library, look around it on the shelves: books are usually arranged thematically, allowing you to find unexpected new sources. Librarians are always there to help expand your routes of inquiry, too.

As you dive into numerous sources, read critically to identify arguments and examples around your topic. Take careful notes about both what you learned from the source and what you think about it. These written responses often end up part of the paper and help you reach a central idea.

Forming a Working Hypothesis

Consider all the points of view you have discovered in your research. In the example about how artworks' titles impact interpretation, maybe one of your sources argued that titles dictate a single meaning, but you're starting to think they open up new possibilities for meaning. Disagreement is good! Contradictory opinions help define your point of view through counterpoint. Maybe one of your sources made an argument very similar to the one you hoped to make — that's okay, too. Take it as an opportunity to fine-tune your argument to say something slightly different or to say it in a new way, and use that source as supporting evidence for your point of view. Continually review your progress, refining your hypothesis as you build your evidence. Thorough research will often lead you to new questions, and, finally to a working thesis.

Refine Your Sources

Refine and deepen your research to find specific supporting evidence for your working thesis. You'll want a variety of types of sources, too. You should include both primary and secondary sources. Primary source information is factual, uninterpreted data from things like audio recordings of speeches, a painting, field notes, interviews, statistics, etc. Secondary sources are other people's interpretations of facts or data.

Let's say your working thesis is, "artworks' titles expand the interpretive possibilities of the art itself." You may analyze titles of artworks that exemplify your argument. In order to avoid overgeneralizing results based on too few observations, you must consider other factors beyond these primary sources. In this case, your secondary sources would likely include critics', historians', and artists' perspectives on the topic.