

## What a Research Paper Is and Isn't

**Directions:** A research paper is a piece of academic writing. Academic writing has certain characteristics. To appreciate what sets academic writing apart from other kinds of writing, let's examine what a research paper is and isn't.

### A research paper is not . . .

- a collection of the all the sources you can find on a topic  
Research papers are not evaluated on how many sources the writer includes, but whether the writer's ideas are supported by other sources.
- a review of all the information in a field describing what's been said, and by whom, about a topic  
There is a place for reviewing in research, but this kind of overview is not the same as a research paper.
- a personal essay like an editorial or a newspaper column  
Essays rely on entirely on the writer's personal knowledge and opinions. But the writer of a research paper is saying, in effect, "This is what the evidence indicates, as provided by other people, presented with my interpretation."
- a five-paragraph essay with quoted examples from one text  
You may have written a paper about *To Kill a Mockingbird* and quoted the narrator, Scout, to show that she thinks more deeply about things than most children her age. But this approach is too narrow and too limited to be a research paper.
- a collection of memories taken from several books  
For example, three American soldiers' descriptions of their experiences in Vietnam would increase our understanding of what combat troops experienced in that conflict, but memories are subjective and can't be relied on exclusively to address larger issues such as, "Did the United States intend to win in Vietnam?"
- only what secondary sources say about your topic  
A research paper is not a collection of what the experts say, with your humble presentation of their ideas—one after the other—without comment.

**A research paper is . . .**

- an academic piece of writing that requires analytical thinking

This means familiarizing yourself with a subject through research and then comparing other people's thoughts about a key topic or issue with your own. In effect, you will be taking your place at a table of experts and explaining your own views in writing. You support your views with evidence you've gathered. Then, in the conclusion, you summarize your position.

- a paper that begins with questions

At the beginning of your work on a research paper, you have a number of questions: How did this problem/war/disease/tradition start? What is known about it? What mistakes have been made? You may think you have too many questions, which might be true, but all inquiry begins with questions. Eventually, you will reduce your questions to one central question, inferred from the sources you have found. Asking questions will take up much of your time at the beginning, but that is the best way to arrive at one critical question that is interesting and rich enough for you to write about.

- a paper that combines synthesis and analysis

Through synthesis, you pull together information from various sources. With analysis, you make the information meaningful by providing your own interpretation. One word of caution: don't give too much attention to synthesis at the expense of analysis. Having plenty of sources is fine, but your analysis is the heart of a research paper.