

# Research Essays

**Research essays** are basically compositions that use research and information taken from external sources to develop and support their central ideas. There are different types of research essays, ranging from undergraduate term papers and research assignments, to PhD theses and articles written for academic journals. In their simplest form, research essays are similar in appearance to basic essays, especially in terms of structure and organization. However, as a form of academic writing, research essays have several distinguishing characteristics. The following is a brief overview of the main features of research writing and basic research essays.

## Purpose

The purpose behind a composition directly affects the content and style of the writing:

- The purpose of most personal essays is to present the writer's point of view based on their own knowledge and opinions.
- The purpose of undergraduate research essays is usually to demonstrate the writer's knowledge of a particular topic or issue through arguments and analyses based on research.
- Higher level academic writing is usually to present new information created through scholarly/scientific research and analysis.

## Writing Style

Research writing style is different from that of personal essays.

- Research writing has a more formal tone and often uses academic (often technical) language.
- Research writers seldom use the first person "I" in their writing unless referring to specific research actions or situations that impact their research.
- Research writing never uses the writer's personal opinion as a basis for supporting a central idea. All supporting information is derived from research and "**credible**" sources of information (see note).
- Research writing does not use contractions: *isn't* becomes *is not*; *doesn't* becomes *does not*, etc.

**NOTE:** Credible sources are sources of information that can be "trusted" in terms of accuracy and correctness. Such information is often provided by experts or by organizations that can be considered as truthful and unbiased in their reporting. See the IWC Quick Guide to Finding Credible Sources for more information.

## Special Format Features

Research essays (especially those written as academic course requirements) have various format elements not typically found in basic essays:

- Most research papers will require a **title page** containing the title of the essay, the writer's name, student number, and course name and number; as well as the name of the course instructor.
- Certain format styles require a "**running head**" (a shortened version of the title) at the top of each page.
- **Page numbers** are always required, especially since research papers are usually longer than one page.

**NOTE:** Certain format requirements will depend on the format style the essay uses such as APA, MLA, Oxford or IEEE style. Different academic fields use different format styles. Check with your professor to see which format style is most common for your academic major.

## Referencing & Citation

As mentioned, research writing uses ideas and information taken from outside sources (books, articles, websites, etc.) to support the writer's main ideas. Research writing also requires that writer's indicate which information and ideas come from their sources. To do this, writers use "referencing and citation", which is probably the single most defining aspect of research writing.

- Referencing and citation basically refers to indicators placed in the text that identify information and/or ideas taken from sources.
- Some referencing/citation styles give source details such as the names of the authors and dates of publication and/or page numbers from the original texts. Other styles just use numbers.
- Along with in-text referencing/citation, research essays always provide full lists of the source materials which include details such as the author/authors, the title of the original work, the publisher, publication date, and page numbers for journal articles. Some styles also include the place of publication. These lists usually appear as one of three formats: full "**reference lists**" (aka works cited lists) at the end of the essay; **end notes** (a feature of Oxford style) which have special format rules; or **foot notes** which appear at the bottom of the page.

## Sample

The sample shown above is an excerpt from a research essay titled “Skills for Effective Academic Writing”.

This essay uses APA format style: In this particular style, the in-text citations provide the last name of the author/authors and the date of publications (as well as page numbers for quotes taken directly from the sources).

**NOTE:** The in-text citation have been highlighted in bold to demonstrate the format.

## General Rules of Format

### Page Margins:

Page margins (the space at the top, bottom and sides of a page) are typically set at 1 inch (2.54 cm) on left and right sides, top and bottom (the “normal” setting in MS Word). The bottom margin may increase when using foot-notes (a referencing/citation style sometimes used in research papers).

### Paragraph Format:

Research essays generally use paragraph indentation i.e. the first line of each paragraph begins one tab stop (usually about 7 spaces) from the left margin, indicating the start of the paragraph (see the IWC Quick Guide to Essay/Paragraph Formats for more information).

### Line Spacing:

Research essays (especially those done as part of academic course requirements) are usually double-spaced, the argument being that it makes the text easier to read, and, traditionally, provides a space for the instructor to make feedback notes.

### Font Style:

Generally speaking academic/research writing requires the use of Times New Roman as the font style, though some professors are more flexible, allowing for any “readable” font style. The standard font size for academic or basic essay writing is 12, but this may vary when using larger font styles such as Arial. **NOTE:** Colored fonts are rarely used for academic writing. Standard black is preferred.

#### Skills for Effective Academic Writing

When given a writing assignment, more often than not, people find themselves staring at a blank page or screen waiting for inspiration to hit them. When they finally have ideas to work on, they look for the motivation to push them to begin, and the determination to finish what they have started. Indeed, writing is not an easy endeavor. Most people see writing as a chore, and like any other chore, it is ignored as it requires a lot of time and effort. What these people seem to be missing is the vital role of writing in today’s world. According to **Weigle (2002)**, the importance of effective writing is becoming increasingly important, especially due to globalization which has brought people and places closer than ever before.

The need to communicate effectively, especially in English, which is the dominant language of international communication, has become a prerequisite to cross geographical and cultural boundaries. According to a 2011 survey, strong communication skills landed on top of the list of what companies were looking for in new recruits (**Graduate Management Admission Council, 2011**). Some companies even asked applicants to send writing samples before the interview (**Holland, 2013**).

Perfecting writing is not entirely impossible; however, “Writers, just like musicians and athletes, must be trained, so that what they know is retrieved and creatively applied during composition” (**Kellogg & Raulerson III, 2007, p. 238**). Writing is a demanding task that requires various cognitive inputs like memory and language, and mental activities like analyzing and synthesizing (**Kellogg & Raulerson III, 2007; Alamargot & Chanquoy, 2001**). The best approach to any academic writing assignment is diligently learning and practicing these cognitive skills, because these will enable a writer to proceed with the work in a manageable and systematic way; thus, training him to write effectively.

Writing as an activity involves a combination of various actions. In the book, *Academic Writing*, **Mulvaney and Jolliffe (2005)** discussed in detail the specific actions