

# Writing a Research Essay

# 10

## Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you'll learn to

- 10.1 Apply what you've learned about writing shorter inquiry-based papers to an extended research project.
- 10.2 Identify different forms of researched writing and the purposes behind them.
- 10.3 Practice reading, analyzing, and writing with a limited number of sources on a single topic.
- 10.4 Use invention techniques for discovering a researchable question.
- 10.5 Refine a research question to narrow the topic focus and lead to a judgment.
- 10.6 Use audience and purpose to make decisions about the structure of the work and the types of information to use in it.

## Writing with Research

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In a way, there's no such thing as a research paper. Research is a source of information, not a form of writing, and it's a source you've been using all along in the inquiry projects here. And yet, instructors assign "research papers" all the time. So what are they talking about? Usually, a research paper is a thesis-driven, documented essay that draws on multiple sources of information relevant to the topic. It is modeled in some ways after the scholarly articles that your professors write.

What isn't apparent is that much scholarship reports on the *products* of the inquiry process—what the researcher concluded from exploring a topic—and so it's easy to assume that writing a research paper means abandoning the goal of most academic inquiry: discovery. Yet that is the goal of scholarship—and it's the goal of the research paper, too—so in an effort to lift the curtain on the process of inquiry, I'll introduce you in this chapter to a variation of researched writing: the research *essay*. As you'll see, the research essay begins with the motive that

**Research is something writers naturally do whenever they have questions they can't answer on their own.**

drives any essay—the desire to find out something about a topic. Later, this may lead to argument—the intention to prove something—but essaying begins with exploration, the beating heart of inquiry.

## Research Essays, Research Papers, and Research Reports

While any piece of writing can be researched—including things such as short stories, blogs, and personal essays—academic research assignments typically fall into one of three categories (see Figure 10.1):

- Research reports
- Research (or term) papers
- Research essays

The less common of these in college is the research report. This is the familiar paper many of us wrote in high school that simply explains—Wikipedia-like—what is known about some topic. The writer of a research report isn't trying to *use* the information to make a point or investigate a question. There is, however, a version of the research report, called the *literature review*, that is sometimes a first step in the research process. A literature review summarizes how others have addressed the question you're exploring.

A far more common college writing assignment is the research paper, a term that is loosely used to describe an essay that is an extended argument on some topic. It's like the essay you might have tackled in Chapter 8—the argument—except that the research paper leans much more heavily on outside sources and is intended for a more academic audience. Its goal is to prove a thesis using the evidence the writer gathers.

The research essay is the most obviously inquiry-based of the three genres. While the research paper certainly can involve an open-ended investigation, the paper itself usually reports conclusions rather than the questions that gave rise to

	Research Report	Research Paper	Research Essay
<b>Purpose</b>	To explain	To prove	To discover
<b>Thesis</b>	None	Up front	Delayed
<b>Documentation</b>	Yes	Yes	Usually
<b>Organization</b>	Summary-explanation	Thesis-support	Question-answer
<b>Use of "I"</b>	No	Sometimes	Usually
<b>Inquiry</b>	Low	High	Highest

Figure 10.1 Three genres of academic research

them. Both the research paper and research essay have a thesis, but in the essay it might appear late in the work, as the writer works through questions and evidence to arrive at an understanding of the topic. While it may be a less common assignment than the argumentative research paper, the research essay is much more likely to encourage the habits of mind that encourage genuine inquiry. It invites writers to begin with questions rather than answers, to suspend judgment, and to accept that ambiguity—even confusion—is a natural part of the research process.

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## Motives for Writing a Research Essay

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I was in the market for a new guitar, and for several weeks I'd been studying back issues of an acoustic guitar magazine, searching the web for guitar makers, and talking to people who play. My process was driven by particular questions I had: *What are the best tone woods for a classical guitar? What are the various models and how much do they cost? What are the sound qualities to consider when selecting an instrument?* Questions like these—factual or informational questions—are often where we naturally begin when we begin research. Everyday research, things like shopping for a guitar or investigating the museums in a new city before vacationing there, may never go beyond basic information seeking: What is already known? While inquiry-based investigations often begin with factual questions, they rarely stop there. The motive behind writing a research essay—or term paper, for that matter—is to *do* something with the information you find. It's to make an argument, explore a hunch, or answer a more specific question. The research is always in the service of what a writer might be trying to *say* about a topic.

## The Research Essay and Academic Writing

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The research paper is a fixture in high school courses, usually lodged in the junior or senior English class and advertised as preparation for The College Research Paper. (Even my nine-year-old daughter wrote research papers.) Research-based writing assignments are probably among the most common in college, across the curriculum. In fact, at my own university, almost three-quarters of the faculty surveyed said they assign an “academic paper that requires research.” That's one reason you're writing a research essay in your composition class—to help prepare you to write papers in other courses.

You've already had some practice with some of the genres of researched writing that you might encounter in college: proposals, reviews, critical essays, and argumentative essays. But the researched academic paper is usually longer, with more sources, and it features some scholarly conventions such as citation of

sources and, in some cases, a formal organization. You might imagine the conventional college research paper as organized in three acts:

- **Act I:** Establish the significance of the research question, review what has already been said by others about it, and introduce the thesis proposed to answer the research question.
- **Act II:** “Prove” the thesis by bringing the evidence on stage. Actors might include expert testimony from those who support your main idea, experiences and comments from those affected by the issue you’re investigating, and especially your own analysis about how this information supports your thesis. All of this is set against the backdrop of relevant data, statistics, and factual findings.
- **Act III:** The last act unfolds as an inevitable conclusion. There’s a summary of key findings, while the original thesis is revisited. Unanswered questions might make a brief appearance, along with thoughts about other directions for the research.

The research *essay* might roughly follow these three acts as well, but it may focus on the drama of discovering the answer to your research question. What is your motive for exploring the question? What’s the story of the research, and why did your discoveries lead to your conclusions? This is the process of inquiry that is typically invisible when we read conventional scholarship, which often argues from conclusions stated early on.

The research essay is common in nonacademic writing, and particularly in creative nonfiction—the kinds of essays and articles you might read in a magazine. But even if documented research essays aren’t usually assigned in college classes, I think they’re a powerful *introduction* to academic inquiry, because they place emphasis on the process of coming to know. How did your thinking lead to the research question that drove your investigation into the topic? And how did your thinking evolve as you began to consider the evidence? Though the initial motive behind a research essay is *to find out*, it may end with an attempt *to prove*—the purpose behind most conventional research papers. Inquiry precedes argument, and it is the best way to discover a thesis that grows from evidence rather than thin air.

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## Features of the Form

### Feature

### Conventions of the Research Essay

*Inquiry questions*

What does the evidence suggest is true? What is the relationship?

*Motives*

Academic inquiry always begins with the desire to find out something. Sometimes the researcher has a theory about what might be true—a hypothesis—a hunch that arises

from an initial investigation. Sometimes the researcher merely begins with a question: What could be the cause of this? What is this like or unlike? What might explain it? While the initial motive is to *find out*, a subsequent motive may be to *prove*. In academic writing, this is usually the argument a researcher makes to convince others that an explanation, claim, or theory is true.

### Subject matter

While academic fields often fence off certain territories of knowledge that they are particularly interested in, any topic is researchable if the researcher has a good question.

### Structure

Research begins with questions, not answers. Later in this chapter, we'll explore what makes a good question, something that may be the most important thing you can learn about writing with research. Research papers and research essays (see Figure 10.1) have some different features (e.g., the thesis is delayed in a research essay), but they also have similar features, including:

- A review of what has already been said by others about the research question.
- A proposed answer to the question based on appropriate evidence.
- Citations that signal which ideas and information belong to the writer and which belong to sources.
- Information from multiple sources, analyzed by the writer for its relevance to the research question and/or thesis.

### Sources of information

Informal research essays—those intended for an audience of nonexperts—may rely on all four sources of information: personal experience, observation, interview, and reading. In more-formal forms, the writer's personal experiences may not be used at all. What's key is to understand what is meant by "appropriate" evidence. This is the information that is most likely to be viewed by a particular audience as most reliable, relevant, and convincing. The more knowledgeable your audience is about your topic, the more restrictive the rules of evidence.

### Language

We often assume that all researched writing should sound "objective." It should scrupulously avoid the first person, use formal diction, and employ the passive voice. As you'll see in the next section, however, the language of researched writing, like any other kind, is determined by the answer to a rhetorical question: For whom am I writing and why?