

# Learning Café Quick Study Tips

## COMMON ERRORS IN RESEARCH ESSAY WRITING

For many students, the prospect of writing a research essay is daunting. Where to begin? What to write? What to include? How to document it? The questions seem endless. There are a number of pitfalls to avoid when writing a research essay. Being aware of these dangers & knowing where to get help are the first steps in writing a successful paper.

### Pitfalls to Avoid When Writing a Research Essay

- **Not planning the process**

Use the ¼ time plan:

¼ of time to research & prepare,

¼ of time for drafting,

¼ of time for revising, &

¼ of time for editing & presenting



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- **Leaving it too late**

Start the process several weeks in advance.

- **Collecting research material too early**

Before collecting a lot of research material, it is valuable to do a bit of background reading in order to define & refine your topic.

- **Choosing too large a topic**

Choose as small a topic as you can for the length of the paper required.

- **Failing to define your thesis & make a plan**

Before you start using your research materials, define your thesis. This will help to establish structure, organization, & focus. A standard 3 part thesis contains:

- statement of topic
- your position on it
- basic parts of your argument (blueprint or plan of development)

Once you have a thesis, creating even a basic outline will help you stay on topic & adequately develop your ideas.

- **Trying to use all the sources you found**

- Select only those sources that directly apply to your paper.
- How many? Usually a minimum of 5 or 1 per page of paper length
- Magazines and journal articles are easier to use than full length books.
- Not all sources are credible; select your information carefully.

- **Not following instructors' specifications**

- Conforming to instructor specifications is good!
- Use the marking key or written instructions as checklist.
- If little or no guidelines are provided, use standard APA document format.

- **Using quotes or paraphrases to make your points**
  - You make the point: use quotes and paraphrases to support your ideas.
  - Avoid the “necklace” paper: don’t string together a series of direct quotations. Your paper will lack flow & the your writer’s voice will be lost.
  
- **Plagiarizing and other forms of academic dishonesty**
  - All information you got from your sources except common knowledge in the field must be credited – in text and on your reference page.
  - Direct quotes cannot be passed off as paraphrases.
  - If you can find it on the Internet, so can your instructor!
  - The work must be your own and must be the first time it’s submitted for grading.
  
- **Using too many quotes**
  - Only use quotes when a paraphrase will corrupt or lessen the idea.
  - Use quotes for authority, eloquence, & control.
  - How many quotes? Only 1-2 per page. The remaining information should be paraphrased or summarized.
  
- **Skipping the revising process**
  - If the idea doesn’t fit, take it out.
  - If you have a hole in your ideas, fill it.
  
- **Not checking your documentation**
  - Follow the APA manual – down to spacing, periods, brackets, ... the works!
  
- **Skipping the editing process**
  - Look for and fix your common grammar & mechanics errors.
    - use your grammar checker, but make your own decisions
  - Run the spell checker -- this is a no-brainer!
    - Double-check for homonyms which the spell checker won’t locate as errors.
  - Make sure your final version is a clean copy.
  
- **Not backing up your documents**
  - We all learn this one sooner or later – failure to back up your documents in more than one place can mean you may lose all evidence of your work.
  
- **Not asking for advice**
  - Ask a friend with strong writing skills for feedback on your draft.
  - Make an appointment with a writing instructor in the Learning Café for some advice during the organizational or draft phases of your work.

## Other Valuable Writing Resources

- Lethbridge College’s *APA Student Guide* (available in the Bookstore or online)
- Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association 5<sup>th</sup> edition
- “OWLS” <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/index2.html>
- The Learning Café writing instructors (in the library or call 382-6952)

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