

Basic Research Writing

Essay writing is a common feature of most academic programs, and students are expected to understand the requirements and features of an essay. The basic structure of an essay forms the foundation for most types of academic compositions, from term papers to academic articles. The following are some general guidelines to keep in mind

Standard Essay Components

The Introduction

The introduction paragraph of an essay provides information that helps the audience (the reader) understand the topic, issue, and main idea of the essay. It also gives a sense of purpose to the essay and lets the audience anticipate the kind of information the writer will provide. A good introduction should capture the reader's attention, make them interested in the subject, and make them want to read the rest of the essay. Introductions generally include:

- **The Lead-in or Opening Sentence:** This is the first sentence of the essay. It introduces or indicates the "general topic" of the essay.
- **Background Information:** Background information helps the reader understand the issue being written about. It may provide details that help the reader better understand the topic or the purpose of the essay. Sometimes, writers use a "hook", in the introduction – a sentence designed to grab the reader's attention and lead them to the main idea of the composition.
- **A Thesis Statement:** This statement provides the main idea of the essay. It often appears at the end of the introduction. Depending on the type of essay, the thesis statement may give the writer's point of view on the subject; or it may provide a central idea that the writer wants to explain or defend. The rest of the essay will support the thesis statement.

Support Paragraphs

The supporting paragraphs of an essay (sometimes called "body" paragraphs) provide information that *supports the thesis statement* (the main idea of the essay presented in the introduction). Each paragraph offers its own distinct focal point and details which help to prove or defend the writer's central point. Support paragraphs generally include:

- **The Topic Sentence:** a general statement at the beginning of the paragraph that introduces the focus or main point of the paragraph – often a point or example that helps to support the thesis statement.
- **Support Information:** Examples and details that help the reader understand the main point of the paragraph and the link between the paragraph and the thesis statement.
- **A Concluding Sentence:** A statement at the end of the paragraph that brings the paragraph to a close and/or prepares the reader for the next paragraph. Concluding sentences sometimes summarize the main points of the paragraph or simply offer a final statement on the main point. Often, however, paragraphs do not include an obvious concluding statement, they just end.

The Conclusion

The concluding paragraph brings the essay to a close. Writers use different writing devices or techniques in the conclusion depending on the subject or purpose of the essay. Since the

conclusion marks the end of the composition, it generally *does not* introduce any new ideas or supporting examples into the essay – this should only happen in the supporting paragraphs.

Concluding paragraphs generally include:

- **A Review of the Main Points:** Basically, this is a paraphrased summary of the main points used to support the thesis statement. The best conclusions give the audience a better (or more complete) understanding of the central idea of the essay by restating the thesis and supporting points in a different way.
- **Solutions, Recommendations, or Predictions:** Depending on the topic and purpose of the composition, writers sometimes suggest solutions to problems discussed in the essay, recommendations to the audience related to the topic, or predictions about what might happen in the future in regards to the issue discussed.
- **A Final Statement:** The last sentence of the entire essay is where the writer can give their final thought on the topic or issue. It could be just a reaffirmation of the writer's point of view; but the best final statements are more impactful, leaving the audience with something interesting to think about at the end of the composition.

Distinguishing Features of Research Writing

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.

Distinguishing Feature 1: Purpose

We write for different reasons: to inform, to explain, to cause reaction, to entertain, etc. The purpose behind a composition determines the content (the type of information it provides) and style of the writing (how the information is presented, the words used, the tone, etc.).

The purpose of most “personal” or opinion-based essays is to present the writer's point of view based on their existing knowledge and opinions; on the other hand, the purpose of most undergraduate research essays is to demonstrate the writer's knowledge of particular topic or issue by providing arguments and analyses based on research. This type of research writing also demonstrates learning, as students have to locate and use information provided by experts. (This is basically the type of writing required for the My Course Academic program.)

The purpose of higher-level academic writing (writing done in Master's and PhD programs, or articles written for academic/scientific journals) is usually to present *new information* created through scholarly/scientific research and analysis of research findings. This writing is very formal and often highly technical; and although it is noticeably different from basic research essays, there are certain stylistic features shared by all research papers.

Distinguishing Feature 2: Writing Style

Research writing generally has a more formal tone than personal essays and generally uses academic (often technical) language specific to the field of study – language that people from different academic areas might not fully understand. This is especially true for high-level writing described earlier, though perhaps not as much for undergraduate-level research papers.

Research writers rarely use “I” in their writing unless referring to specific research actions (what they did in their research study). This is because research writing never uses the writer’s personal opinions to support a central idea, but instead relies on information taken from “**credible**” sources. Therefore, the writer is often reporting what other researchers have discovered or said about the subject as a way of supporting (or explaining) their own statements.

Research writing does not use contractions: *isn’t* should be written as *is not*; *doesn’t* should be written as *does not*, etc. This is because contractions are considered to be too informal for research papers.

Distinguishing Feature 3: Referencing & Citation

Research essays contain referencing citation. Research writing uses ideas and information taken from outside sources (books, articles, websites, etc.) to support the writer’s thesis and main points. Writers indicate which information and ideas come from their sources by using “referencing and citation”. This is probably the 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 details about the source such as the name(s) of the author(s) and date of publication; other styles just use numbers to represent the sources (see sample, pg. 4).

Along with in-text referencing/citation, research essays always provide lists of the source materials used, including information that will allow other researchers to locate and use the same materials if they wish to do so.

General Rules of Format

Most of the format rules for research essays are basically the same as for regular essays. In summary, they are as follows:

- **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).
- **Page Numbers:** Page numbers are always required, especially since research papers are usually longer than one page.
- **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.
- **Title Page:** In addition to these format requirements, research papers usually require a title page (a.k.a. cover 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.

Sample

Below is an excerpt from a research essay titled “Skills for Effective Academic Writing”. This essay uses APA format style. The in-text citations have been **highlighted in bold** to demonstrate the format – you *do not* have to use bold in your actual essays.

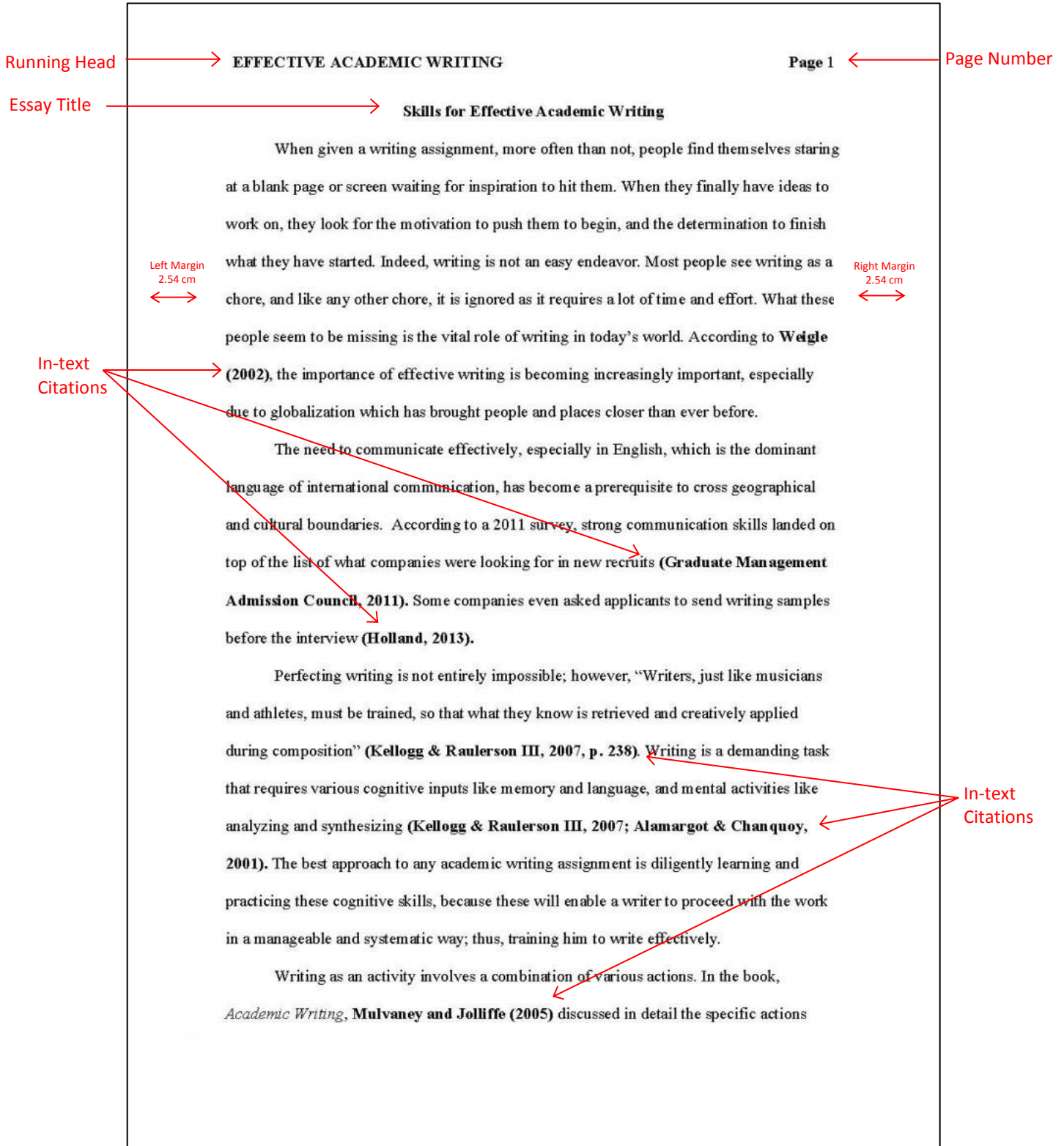
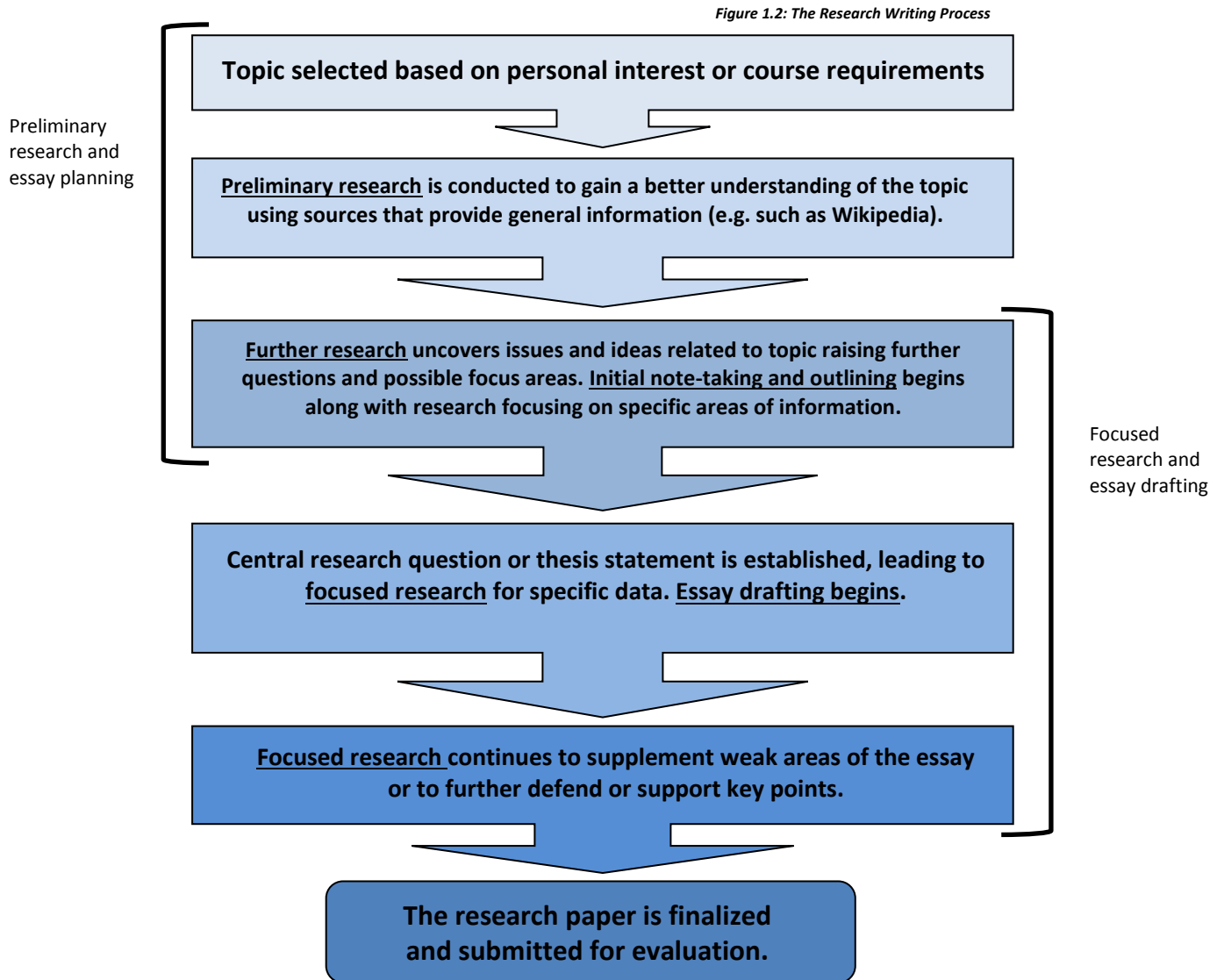


Figure 1.1: Academic Essay Format Style

The Research-Writing Process

Students often think of research writing as a linear, step-by-step process in which research is done at the beginning, followed by drafting and revision, ending with the final essay. In fact, research is often done throughout the writing process, depending on the needs of the essay.

Consider this illustration of the research writing process:



As you can see from the illustration, research is done at virtually every stage of the writing process. Where or how you begin your research often depends on how familiar you are with your topic. If you are already familiar with your topic, your research may be very focused and specific from the onset, especially if you have already formulated a research question or a thesis statement. In many cases, however, your knowledge of a subject may require you to conduct preliminary research just to build a knowledge-base from which to plan further, more focused research based on a central question and finally an established formal thesis statement.

Furthermore, research may continue far into the drafting process – even when the essay seems nearly finished – as you come up with new ideas or ways of supporting your thesis statement, which may require specific data or information.

In summary, the entire process of writing a research paper from start to finish involves recurring “cycles” of thinking, researching, writing, and reflecting on the essay (i.e. actually thinking about the topic and your research needs) until the final draft is submitted. It goes without saying that this takes time and effort.

Understanding the Focus of Your Writing

At the core of any piece of academic research writing will be a topic, a general area of interest. However, the focus of the writing will usually center on an *issue* or specific point of concern related to the topic.

Topic vs. Issue

For the purposes of this course, a *topic* is defined as the general subject area of the writing. A topic can be broken down into smaller subsections or components. For example, “immigration” as a topic for writing may be broken down into smaller focus areas such as “the various causes of immigration”, “illegal immigration”, “federal immigration policies”, “the impact of mass immigration on a society or culture”, etc.

An *issue* is a specific problem or area of concern related to a topic, usually on which opinions are divided (i.e. something people disagree about). For example, under topic of “immigration” listed above, you might choose to focus on the impact immigration has on a society or culture. The issue could be whether immigration has a positive or negative affect on local culture. Based on your research, you may develop a specific position that will become the basis for a research paper; or you might write an essay that explores both sides of the issue.

For the My Course program, topics are provided in the form of “writing prompts” (statements and questions related to various topics) which also indicate the issue the essay could focus on. For example, a typical writing prompt might look like this:

In the modern world, online learning utilizing computers and IT has become a major component of many educational programs. Do you think that online learning will ever completely replace traditional classrooms? Write an essay explaining your point of view.

In this case the *topic* is education (more specifically online education). The *issue* is whether or not online education will ever replace the traditional classroom style of teaching and learning.

Choosing a Topic/Focus Area

Usually, the topic of a research essay is determined by the focus of the class – economics courses will focus on topics and issues related economics; history courses will focus on topics and issues related to historical studies, etc. Students are often allowed to select a focus area for their research assignments; and the purpose of the assignment is to demonstrate their knowledge of the topic and their understanding of the issue based on their research findings.

You should always try to find a topic or issue related to the topic that you are interested in (something that is important to you). Being interested in the subject matter makes the research-writing process more enjoyable and will likely result in an essay that is well-researched and more interesting for the audience to read.

Topic Analysis

As you begin the research-writing process, you need evaluate your understanding of the topic and the issues associated with it. Often, what we think of as “knowledge” about a subject is actually just a superficial awareness of it, usually one-sided, and based on opinions rather than proven facts or scientific data.

In order to actually “know” something about topic or an issue requires that we explore it *analytically* and try to understand it in terms of cause and/or effect, its implications (social, cultural, political, etc.), its relation to other issues, and so on. Before starting any research, consider these questions:

1. How much do you know about your topic?
 - How is it related to (or how does it affect) people and society?
 - Does it have an impact on culture, cultural traditions, or cultural beliefs?
 - How is it related to (or how does it affect) politics, government, and law?
2. What are the main concerns or issues associated with the topic?
 - What do people usually talk about when they discuss this topic?
3. Which of these issues are you most interested in (which one is the most important)?
 - What is your opinion on the issue?
 - What information or examples would you give to explain or defend your position?
 - What type of information or data would make your explanation stronger?
4. What opposing ideas or viewpoints can you think of?
5. How would you argue *against* these viewpoints?

Such questions can help establish a central idea for a research paper, create a basic outline or plan for the essay, *and* highlight areas that require further research and specific types of information. As the research-writing process continues, more questions and research requirements will emerge.

Determining Research Requirements

Once you have assessed your own level of understanding about a topic, you can begin research to fill in the “gaps” in your knowledge. If your knowledge of a subject is too limited, then general research on the topic can help you to establish a foundation on which you can begin the research-writing process.

If you are familiar enough with the issue to formulate a thesis or central idea, then your research will focus more on finding key data and information that will support your position. You are essentially looking for two things:

1. Information and/or data from credible sources that justify *previously established statements* supporting your thesis or central point (i.e. your own, original statements based on your knowledge of the topic and issue that support your thesis statement)
2. *Additional(previously unknown) examples, statements, or theories* from credible sources that support your thesis or central point as well as the information and/or data that explains the examples, statements, or theories.

Keep in mind, however, that your ideas and opinions on a given issue may change as you conduct your research and discover new information. Although this means you may have to adjust your thesis and main points to accommodate this new perspective, it is, in fact, a good thing, as it indicates *learning*, the primary purpose of research.