MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY moorhead

Writing Matters

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The Research Paper Assignment

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The research paper--also known as a term paper and sometimes as a literature review--why do we assign it? It's cumbersome to teach how to write one. It's unwieldy to grade. It's difficult for students to write well. Nevertheless, we have many reasons for assigning research papers of various kinds, including the following:

- Students need to learn to write well-developed, sustained arguments or reports.
- They need to learn to use outside sources to support their ideas and positions.
- They need to learn how to find and evaluate information.
- They need to learn to use proper documentation.
- They need varied writing experiences.

So we struggle periodically with research paper assignments of one form or another. Fortunately, we can make our job and the students' easier if we follow certain procedures in giving a research paper assignment or in teaching the documentation styles and critical thinking necessary for the most effective writing in our areas.

Paper Length and Documentation

Not all research papers have to be ten to twenty (or more) pages. Students may learn as much about research and writing from completing a three to five page paper well, incorporating only three or four sources, as they learn from doing a longer paper incorporating twelve sources or more, depending on our goals or objectives for the assignment. One reason they may learn as much is that they have a manageable number of sources. They still document them and prepare a proper reference page, but they are not trying to read, interpret, and incorporate ten sources or more into their writing, as well as to develop that many pages. If they learn to manage a short research assignment well, they may be more successful in eventually doing a longer one.

In addition to considering the length of our assignments, we should insist on documentation any time it's technically appropriate. For example, if a student writes a paper in response to a story read in an English class, any time she summarizes, paraphrases, or quotes directly from the story, she should use a citation. She should also have a Work Cited page at the end of her paper giving the primary source, even though the professor knows it better than she does. Insisting on proper citations in our students' writing in any course reinforces the practice of using sources and makes the documentation process less daunting for the students than it might be otherwise.

Assignment and Process

Giving the students the research/term paper assignment in writing, rather than just verbally, can facilitate their completing the assignment. The students can refer back to it. The guidelines are in writing for both professor and student reference; they don't change in the process. The written assignment, as with any essay assignment, should clarify

- what the final product and its form should be, including the appropriate documentation style,
- what the purpose, learning objectives, or rationale for the paper is,
- who the audience is,
- what the time line and other mechanical or business details are and
- what the evaluative criteria are.

Perhaps it will also suggest strategies for doing the assignment or point to available resources for help. The written assignment should be a sufficient, but succinct, presentation of expectations, not just an announcement that a research paper is due on a given date.

Many students, whether they have written a research paper or not, do not understand the process and the time needed for writing a successful paper. Therefore, with the written assignment, a time line of the steps and a schedule for completing the paper may facilitate their writing process. While we don't necessarily want to spoon feed them, outlining the steps in the process is good pedagogy, especially if the student has never written such a paper before. In addition, having a time line brings small pieces of the paper in at a time, perhaps making the grading of the whole project and final paper easier in the end. We also have opportunities early in the process to correct potential problems that could set students up for failure or set us up for frustration if they are not addressed early, such as topics that are much too broad, inappropriate or insufficient sources, or perhaps a general misunderstanding of the assignment. I give the students a form much like the following:

Continued back page

Where is The Write Site?

Located in Lommen 95, the Write Site provides an informal, friendly and private atmosphere for students to share their writing and writing questions.

Hours are:

Monday-Thursday	**9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.**
Friday	**9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.**
Selected Evenings at Livingston Lord Library, room 208	**8 p.m - 10 p.m.**

Your students may either make an appointment to visit with a tutor, or just drop in. Since we cannot guarantee that a tutor will be free at that time, scheduled appointments are encouraged. Services are offered free of charge to the MSUM community.

This is also where you'll find SuEllen Shaw if you want to consult with her about writing plans for your classes.

477-5937 (Appointment)

477-5938 (Director)

Steps and Schedule For Writing a Research Paper

What you must do	What you must produce	When it's due
1. Select a topic (note specifications on assignment sheet)	Two acceptable topics, one of which I will approve (some of you faculty might want a proposal paragraph or two, not just a topic phrase).	
2. Do exploratory scanning and in depth reading on the approved topic.	A working bibliography, written in the proper format, of possible sources to be used in the paper. (Some of you faculty may want an annotated bibliography.)	
3. Record and assemble the gathered information and notes into a coherent sequence (often on note cards, either hard copy or electronic).	A progress report of not more than two pages on your search process—what have you done, what are you learning, what is confusing, what are your questions?	
4. Draft a thesis statement (or hypothesis), setting forth the major idea of your paper/study.	Notes, a thesis statement, and an outline (or an abstract?)	
5. Outline the paper in its major stages.	See note in square above. (Some faculty will want a sentence outline, rather than a topical outline.)	
6. Write a rough draft and argue, prove, or support the thesis with the information uncovered from the sources. Acknowledge appropriately borrowed ideas, data, format, and opinions.	A rough draft of the paper (Faculty may wish to define "rough" draft, what will be acceptable.)	
7. Prepare a bibliography listing all sources used in the paper, using the proper format. (In some disciplines the Bibliography contains all sources consulted.) Write a final paper.	The final, polished paper, complete with the bibliography in proper form. The reference page should not be difficult if the working bibliography was done correctly.	

Time Line Considerations

In step one, I can warn students of topics that are much too broad or unwieldy or that don't answer the assignment before they have used much of their time pursuing a poor topic. Some of you might reverse steps two and one since finding a topic may be difficult for students without knowing much about a given subject. If students are writing a report rather than a thesis paper, instructions in step six will vary somewhat with organization concerns being prominent.

Notes on Using Sources and Documentation Styles

We also need to remember that English 101, the foundational writing course, does not teach research methods and documentation styles. The first course in the English offerings to do that is English 201. So we must be deliberate about the paper format and documentation style we are asking students to use. They will probably need examples and explanations of your discipline's writing conventions or your expectations for format and documentation, whether the style is APA, MLA, CMS, ASA, CSE or some other (it's no wonder they get confused). Often the documentation style is apparent in the textbook or the articles used in class, but students don't always recognize a textbook's documentation style as an example, so pointing that out in passing as you discuss a reading is a manageable way to give examples.

Remind students that source material, regardless of the field, usually supports their own ideas and interpretations. The paper should not be a patchwork of other people's work: one blocked quotation after another. Therefore, all paragraphs should begin and end in the student's own words:

Cited material generally comes in the middle of the paragraph to support their own topic sentences, discussion, and summaries that begin and end paragraphs.

A caution for faculty is not to require students' using more sources than the paper's length will support. If we require twenty sources in a three-page paper, the paper length will not allow space for student thought—only for the citations. This may be appropriate for some assignments, an annotated bibliography, but not for a traditional paper asking for students' critical thinking.

Conclusion

I have given suggestions that may make a research paper assignment more manageable. That does not mean that such an assignment is appropriate for every class. In many respects a research paper may be an impractical, even archaic, assignment in that it's a kind of writing students may never have to do after graduating from college. Therefore, clarifying the objectives of such an assignment both for our selves and for our students is important.

While the research paper assignment can be treacherous to teach, write, or grade, if we know our objectives, we can create a thoughtful assignment that's both a good learning experience for the students and manageable for ourselves and for them as well. Such an assignment with polished pieces of it due in increments can be more manageable to grade than a term paper at the end of the semester whose parts we've not seen earlier. These incremental assignments can also fulfill a requirement for multiple polished writing assignments over the space of a semester in writing intensive courses, and they can provide opportunities for informal writing, unrehearsed writing in class, about the students' subjects as well.

If we have responded to the paper in increments, the final, polished paper should not take as long to grade as one we've never seen, and we should not have to write much on it. The students will also benefit from our feedback early in the process. We can front load most of our time and response, and students may learn from and act on that response—something that doesn't happen for those students who never pick up the final research paper after it is graded at the end of the term.

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