

# HOW TO GET AN “A” ON A RESEARCH PAPER

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## A) THE HISTORICAL QUESTION

The secret to writing a good research paper is starting out with a good historical question.

What is a good historical question?

- 1) It is a question that is historical. For instance, you do not want to answer the question: Was slavery bad? This is a moral question. A good historical question might be: What impact did the American Revolution have on the practice of slavery in New Jersey?
- 2) A good historical question is very focused. A quick way to torpedo your project is to choose a project that is too big. Here are some examples of questions that lack proper focus: How did the United States relate to foreign nations? What is the history of the environmental movement? How did the Great Depression change America? The more you can focus, the easier your life will be. Why not ask: How did elites in New Orleans respond to the Haitian Revolution? How did the Sierra Club respond to the Reagan Administration? What impact did the Great Depression have on the Mexican American community in San Diego?
- 3) A good historical question is original. This may be difficult for an undergraduate, but try to answer a question that no one has answered or no one has answered well. This means that when you choose a topic, one of your first jobs will be to survey the existing literature to make sure that you are not simply re-inventing the wheel. One useful strategy is to choose comparative topics. For instance, you might ask: how did German and Polish Americans in Chicago respond to WWI? How did the whaling industry in Nantucket differ from the whaling industry in San Diego?
- 4) A good question is interesting. You want to ask a question whose answer is not obvious. Otherwise there is little point in answering it. For instance, did 13<sup>th</sup> century Native Americans who lived in the Mississippi River valley build mounds? The answer to this question is obvious: yes. A more interesting question might be: what role if any did deforestation play in the collapse of Cahokia?
- 5) A good question draws on your own interests. Choose something that you are passionate about. Choose a question that genuinely fascinates you. Curiosity is a terrific motivator. The best papers often draw from a personal hobby (What does the response to popularity of bicycling in Berlin tell us about the construction of

gender in late nineteenth-century Germany?) or from family history (What does the immigration experience of the Tran family from Vietnam to Southern California tell us about the Vietnamese American experience in Orange County?) or from a place that is important to you (How has San Diego's Mission Bay changed over time?)

## **B) RESEARCH**

Once you get your question approved by your professor, start researching now! Create a bibliography of all books, articles, and web sites pertinent to your topic. Books can be found here: [Finding Books and Reference Materials](#). Scholarly articles can be found here: [Finding Articles](#). If [Copley](#) does not have a book, it can often be ordered on [Circuit](#) and delivered within 24 hours. If not, you can [Interlibrary Loan](#) material.

If you find an article or book that covers similar territory, don't despair! Secondary sources are your friends. Come see me and I will help you slightly alter your question so that you are asking an original question.

The best projects will make extensive use of primary sources. Students in the past have used family papers, the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* database from Proquest, microfilm reels from the *San Diego Union Tribune*, and also the enormous amount of archival material now available on the web. Some online archival material can be found here: [Finding Primary Sources](#). Your professor can help you locate primary sources. Another great resource is History Librarian [Chris Marcum](#).

When you come across information that will help you answer your question, write the quote or the paraphrase down in a computer file. Be sure to include bibliographic information (source and page number) on the card so that you can easily cite the source later on.

The idea here is to become an expert on your question. Read/skim voraciously! Book reviews can be of great assistance.

## **C) TRANSFORM YOUR HISTORICAL QUESTION INTO A THESIS**

As you research your topic, you might come up with some tentative answers. A one-sentence answer to your historical question is your thesis.

For instance, if your question is "how did German and Polish Americans in Chicago respond to WWI?", you might, after researching the topic, conclude that German immigrants in Chicago supported a policy of neutrality while Poles in Chicago urged intervention on the side of the Allies.

For instance, if your question is "what role did art play in the Chicano movement in San Diego during the 1970s?", you might, after researching the topic, conclude that artists and

musicians played a formative role in the movement by helping Mexican-American youth imagine themselves as Chicano.

For instance, if your question is “how did the whaling industry in Nantucket differ from the whaling industry in San Diego?,” you might, after researching the topic, conclude that despite geographic difference and differences in timing, whalers in both places quickly exhausted fisheries and moved onto new waters.

## **D) ORGANIZATION**

Perry Mason time. Imagine yourself a trial lawyer, preparing to argue a case. You have a basic position which you want to prove—for instance, if you're the defense attorney, you're going to argue that your client is innocent of the charge alleged against him or her. If you are the prosecuting attorney, you must prove that the defendant is guilty. In order to persuade the jury to agree with you, you must provide specific and pertinent evidence for your stance, arranged in a way that presents each point in its strongest possible light. You will make a stronger case if you can anticipate what weaknesses in your argument the lawyer for the opposing side will pinpoint. At the end of the trial, you will sum up your case to the jury, tying all your evidence together and linking it to your original thesis: the individual on trial is wholly innocent or guilty, or perhaps guilty of a lesser charge but innocent of larger charges.

A. Introduction: Reveal your Argument. This paragraph must contain your thesis statement (what it is that you're arguing, put concisely and directly). If you have trouble coming up with a thesis, refer back to your historical question, look at your data, and talk with your professor. After the thesis statement, give your reader a brief roadmap. In other words, tell the jury how you are going to go about making your case. Like any good lawyer, you should reveal your sources (name the books, primary source documents, etc; surprise witnesses can be grounds for a mistrial) up front.

B. Body: Demonstrate your case with evidence. Each new paragraph must have a topic sentence, usually the first, which indicates the nature of the material that immediately follows. Provide specific examples from your sources to illustrate your points. Examples are not substitutes for your explanations about their meaning! You cannot simply show the jury a punched timecard—you have to tell them that this is evidence that your client was at work at the time the crime in question was perpetrated. You also have to explain why this is proof—that it would not have been possible for your client to duck out on a coffee break and, say, murder the mad professor. You also have to say where the timecard came from if it's to be admissible as evidence—it won't do if it's not from your client's workplace, or from a different week than you claim. For your paper, that means that you need to use footnotes or endnotes.

Historians use footnotes/endnotes for a variety of purposes:

- 1) To show the source of little-known facts. For instance, you do not need to footnote the fact that the Civil War started in 1861. But you should footnote, say, the number of southern soldiers who died of epidemic disease.
- 2) To show the source of all direct quotations.
- 3) To show the source of all indirect quotations, otherwise known as paraphrases. What is a paraphrase? A paraphrase is your own version of someone else's words.
- 4) To show the source of an argument that you use.
- 5) To add extra information that is not directly relevant to your argument.

For footnote/endnote style, click here: [How to Cite Using the Chicago Manual of Style](#).

Beware of plagiarism: Plagiarism is the stealing of another author's words or ideas. Plagiarism includes: directly copying from a secondary source (a textbook, a documentary video, or a web page) without the use of both quotes and a citation; presenting someone else's argument, idea, or concept as your own (that is, without crediting the original author); or making minor word changes to a secondary source, even with proper citation (there is an important difference between making minor word changes and paraphrasing, that is restating someone else's idea in your own words). Click here for more on **Avoiding Plagiarism**

C. Conclusion: Final Argument. Now tie things up, summarize your evidence, and sell your thesis to the jury, me, your friendly Professor.

### **TROUBLESHOOTING:**

1. Have you answered the question? The whole question? Is it focused? Did you defend your argument well?
2. Compare your conclusion with your opening. If they don't agree, you have a problem. Solution: maybe your conclusion—the terrific idea about what all this really means—ought to be your original thesis. If so, move the conclusion to the beginning, edit the body of the paper so that it reflects the new thesis, and write a new conclusion. Almost all papers benefit from some version of this step.
3. Read your paper again. Do your ideas follow each other in a logical progression? Can a non-expert reader (like your roommate who is not in the class) get the gist of your paper and understand what you are trying to convey? Do topic sentences effectively introduce paragraphs? Can you make vague language more precise? Most importantly, does everything in your paper contribute to your argument? Trim the excess. Most good papers start out at least half a page longer than the final draft.
4. Read the paper out loud. I know this sounds stupid, but it helps. Check that each sentence is complete. Make sure that your sentences are of different lengths and

structures. If you have to pause for breath in the middle of a sentence, it's (almost always) a run-on and should be cut into shorter statements.

5. Proofread the draft. Check for spelling, punctuation, and typos. If you are using a computer, use the spell checker function. Grammar is important.

6. Have someone else proofread the draft. Print out a copy of your draft. Show this to a classmate -- get them to sit down with a pen and to critically read your work. Tell them to be honest about what they think of your argument. Get them to point out any errors they see. Are your points absolutely clear to your reader?

7. Incorporate all revisions and polish the draft into a Final Paper. Read it over one more time before turning it in.

### **CONGRATULATIONS, YOU'RE FINISHED!!**

Remember, your professor is available to help you at any step of the process. Students rarely visit during office hours, so sometimes we pass the time working grading, reading the *New York Times*, or playing Words With Friends. We would much rather meet with you, so take advantage of listed office hours!