

# A Writer's Guide to the Research Essay<sup>1</sup>

Just as much as a thesis or a dissertation, a research essay is a problem-solution form or *genre*. As such, most researchers write the research essay in three stages: finding the “problem” or “question” in a field, finding the solution or answer for that field, and writing the problem and solution for a general or specific audience in that field. Few researchers move through the three stages in a linear manner, but operate in a “messy” recursive manner, moving back and forth between stages and tasks, refining and revising their ideas as they work and write. This guide provides an overview of the research-writing process, including tips and examples to help you develop some necessary skills and strategies along the way, but you have already learned the key strategy: thinking of the research essay as a problem-solution genre. An outline of this three-stage, research-writing process is below, keyed to chapter numbers in Kate L. Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers* (on the right), so that you can turn to the section with which you want help and refer to Turabian’s text for more detailed information.

**Genre of the research essay:** This section defines and describes the two types of research essays, namely the deductive (argumentative) essay and the inductive (analytical or exegetical) essay. 5.5

## FINDING THE PROBLEM

**Finding a topic:** This section provides considerations and advice for choosing a topic. 2.1

**Finding an audience:** This section helps you define and consider your audience(s). 14, 5.4.3

**Finding a research question:** This section helps you move from topic to problem to question. 2.1

## FINDING THE SOLUTION

**Searching with a hypothesis:** This section helps you create a working thesis to focus your research. 2.2, 5.3

**Searching for answers:** This section helps you start searching for answers to your research question. 3-4

**Searching with an outline:** This section helps you outline your research and your essay. 5-6

## WRITING THE PROBLEM-SOLUTION

**Writing the draft:** This section helps you begin drafting your research essay. 7.1-9

**Writing the revision:** This section helps you find and focus on your argument. 9-10

**Writing and editing:** This section provides guidelines for editing sentences. 11, 20-26

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<sup>1</sup> At the outset, I wish to acknowledge and recommend my two main sources for this very short guide, sources I reference at the start of each section and in citations so that you can refer to them for more information: Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*, 7th ed., ed. Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). If you have questions or suggestions, please contact John Burkett in the Writing Center at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, who revised this guide in August 2009.

# Sample Outline

HEADLINE-STYLE TITLE: SUBTITLE

## INTRODUCTION

- Hook (anecdote, question, quotation)
- Significance of the issue: What is the problem or question? (Frame your essay as a problem-solution or question-answer argument.)
- Identify the heart of the issue or debate (the *stasis*)
- Thesis statement (*contra* antithesis) with advance organizer.  
Example: While many people think [ANTITHESIS: \_\_\_\_\_], sound reasons and evidence clearly show [THESIS: \_\_\_\_\_], because of [REASON 1: \_\_\_\_\_], [REASON 2: \_\_\_\_\_], and [REASON 3: \_\_\_\_\_].

## BODY ¶: CONTEXT OR BACKGROUND

- Clarify and explain the context or necessary background information
- Define key terms (especially those within your thesis statement)
- Explain your approach of investigation (literary theory), if it is not obvious

## BODY ¶: REFUTATIONS (optional)

- Summarize major interpretations or evaluations
- Rebuttal against opposing viewpoint's strongest argument(s)
- Expose fallacies or weakness in the opposing viewpoints.

## BODY ¶: ARGUMENT 1

- Reason #1 supported with evidence and example

## BODY ¶: ARGUMENT 2

- Reason #2 supported by evidence and example

## BODY ¶: ARGUMENT 3

- Reason #3 supported by evidence and example

## BODY ¶: COUNTERARGUMENTS

- Anticipate audience's objections to your argument
- Answer objections

## CONCLUSION

- Reaffirm thesis and supporting reasons and evidence
- Refer to the introduction's hook (anecdote, question, quotation)
- Motivate audience to adopt your reasoned and researched positioned on the issue