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Research Skills / Critical Thinking / Information Literacy

## **The Research Paper: From Articles to Outline**

After narrowing your subject, creating a search strategy, and searching the databases, book catalog, and open internet, you will hopefully find information in and of sufficient quantity and quality to answer your research question(s). Here are the steps to take *after* you retrieve your sources.

### **Think About What You Have Found**

Consider the following things:

Have you found enough information to answer all the questions you have about your subject?

If not, you can:

- revise your search strategy by searching for other keywords, subjects, authors, or titles
- refine your topic to be more specific or more general
- brainstorm with your instructor and/or librarian to find more terms or a different angle

### **Evaluate Information for Credibility, Timeliness, Objectivity, and Authority**

After reading an article begin asking questions: First, who wrote it, and are the author's affiliations known? Does the language appear biased, or does the article present only one side of an argument? Is the purpose of the article to inform you or to convince you? What does the article leave out? When was the article written? Are there new developments that

the article does not take into consideration? How does what you have found complement or contradict what you already thought? Does it come from an authoritative source? Is the source objective, timely, and credible?

In general, these considerations will determine how (and if!) you present the materials you have found. For instance, if new research provides a new way of looking at an old problem, it is good to know the timeline. If the new research comes from a think tank funded by a political organization, it should be looked at carefully to determine possible biases. Old research, on the other hand, should not be held up as the state of the art, though it may be useful in describing the social or historical context of your paper.

## Use the Information

The answers to the above questions help determine how you will present the articles in your paper. In general, you will do one of five things:

- 1) Realize the article is off-topic and of no use to you.
- 2) Use it to establish the social, political, or scientific context of your topic.
- 3) Use the article to bolster your claim.
- 4) Present the article as a counter-argument and then refute it.
- 5) Realize that you cannot refute the article and modify your thesis.

## Cite Your Sources

Put together a list of the sources for each quote, paraphrase, or summary you intend to use in your paper. In order to fully integrate a quote, summary, or paraphrase into your paper, you need to do **four important things**:

### 1.) You must lead into the information.

You can't simply put a quote in the middle of your paper! You must lead into the material with your own words to prepare your reader for the transition. A good rule of thumb about leads is that they tell who said it and what his/her qualifications are:

According to Marilyn Gilroy, author of *STUDENT DRINKING: New Strategies but No Magic Bullet*, "Experts say the root causes of excessive drinking revolve around depression, anxiety, peer pressure, and the desire for social acceptance. This is

coupled with a culture of drinking often encouraged by local bars, which run promotions where low prices and happy hours offer incentives to drink.”

**2.) You must use parenthetical notation after the quote to show where you found it.**

The parenthetical notation typically contains the author’s last name and the page number on which you found the quote. When quoting from an electronic source without page numbers, you should indicate the paragraph from which you take the quote, as in the example below. In any case, the parenthetical notation goes directly after quoted material:

According to Marilyn Gilroy, author of *Student Drinking: New Strategies but No Magic Bullet*, “Experts say the root causes of excessive drinking revolve around depression, anxiety, peer pressure, and the desire for social acceptance. This is coupled with a culture of drinking often encouraged by local bars, which run promotions where low prices and happy hours offer incentives to drink” (Par. 5).

**3.) After each quote, paraphrase, or summary you must explain the quote’s significance regarding what you want to prove or explain in your paper.**

All of your cited materials should relate to the thing you want to prove, and you must show how they prove your point.

**4.) You must have a Works Cited page at the end of your paper.**

The works cited page is a list of your sources alphabetized by author’s last name. It includes: Author’s name (last name first), article title, book title/magazine title, place of publication, and date of publication. When using any of the online databases, you should cite your source as an “Online Subscription Database.” Such citations look like this:

Gilroy, Marilyn. “STUDENT DRINKING: New Strategies but No Magic Bullet.” *The Education Digest* 1 Nov. 2009: 52. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Mar. 2010

## **Create an Outline**

Using the articles you have found to answer your original research questions will provide a basic outline for your paper.

For example, if you start with the research question, “What are the causes of binge drinking among college students?” and you find articles that point to three main reasons, say,

academic stress, peer pressure, and a lack of coping skills, then your thesis might look like this:

**The causes of binge drinking among students are academic stress, peer pressure, and a lack of coping skills.**

Your thesis statement is the road map for your paper. You now know both the substance and the order of your paper. Take quotes, paraphrases and summaries from your sources in order support your thesis.

All that remains is for you to write your introduction, present your thesis, arrange your reasons and evidence in a compelling order, and then write your conclusion.

### **A Couple More Things**

Make sure you speak with your instructor about what is expected of you. Also feel free to visit the library and review a copy of whichever style manual you are supposed to use for your paper/project.

There are also a number of websites to help you with your citations, such as Purdue OWL (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>).