Modern European History

WWII Research Project

Basic Research Guidelines and Topic Proposal Assignment

Writing a research paper allows you to learn how to *teach yourself something*.

After you finish with your formal education (high school, college, etc.) you will continue learning about the world around you, both past and present. There is no better way to practice the skills of lifelong learning than by writing a research paper. During this process you are forced to ask good questions, locate sources that help you answer your questions, and then present your answers to an audience (and you are sometimes forced to defend your answers against detractors). These are all skills that you will use in any profession you might eventually pursue.

Here are some suggestions for writing a first-rate research paper:

**Do some background reading, think hard, and consult with your teacher.**

When you begin your research you will probably not know a lot of detail about the topic. You should begin by doing some general reading about the topic in several different encyclopedias. This will hopefully focus your attention to some detail about this topic you would like to know more about. You can then branch out and review other primary and secondary sources. Your initial research will answer the “what” question about your topic, as in “What is it?” For example, the question “What happened during the Battle of the Bulge?” requires the researcher to do no more than list facts and dates; a good encyclopedia entry, but not a good research paper.

**Have clear research questions.**

“What” and “when” questions are only the starting point for writing research papers; although you need to have a firm grasp of the facts of the case, you must then move on to answer serious and important “why” or “how” questions in your research. Follow-up research questions generally begin with “why” or “how.” Think of it as a puzzle: Why did a particular political or social event turn out as it did and not some other way? Why was a certain individual crucial to the outcome of a war? How did a specific event affect the outcome of an election? You should attempt to identify answers to questions that are not readily apparent; in the best social science writing you will be able to identify a clear “how” or “why” question at the heart of the research. “How” and “why” questions are essential because they require you to make an argument. Using the previous example, the question “Why was the Battle of the Bulge important to the overall war effort?” is a much more specific question and the answer to this could be argued.

**Conduct “real research.”**

Real research means using primary sources, not just secondary sources. What counts as a primary source depends on what kind of question you are trying to answer. If you were writing a paper on the importance of Nazism to the German military effort, you would begin by reading some general secondary sources on Nazism, from which you might find that two factors in its rise were German economic problems and Adolf Hitler’s rise to political prominence. Primary sources in this case might include economic statistics, memoirs of politicians from the period or reportage in German newspapers (use translation websites to convert to English). You might also arrange an interview with an expert in the field: a noted scholar, a prominent journalist, a former German national, a war veteran, etc. The point about primary sources is that they take you as close as possible to where the action is - the real, on-the-ground, rubber-meets-the-road facts from which you will construct your argument. You should try to get as close as possible to the events or phenomena you are studying. Part of being a creative researcher and writer is figuring out how to assemble enough evidence using the skills and resources that you possess in order to make a clear and sustainable argument based on powerful and credible sources.

**Make an argument.**

Unfortunately, many research papers are really no more than glorified book reports. You know the drill: locate ten sources, skim through three of them, save some documents to look at later or note down a few facts from them, combine the information in your own words, and there you have it. THIS WILL NOT WORK. Your paper must not only assemble evidence - facts about the topic - it must weave together these facts so that they form an argument that answers a research question. There are no once-and-for-all answers on topic, but there are better and worse arguments. The better ones have powerful evidence based on reliable sources, are ordered and logical in the presentation of evidence, and reach a clear and focused conclusion that answers the question posed at the beginning of the paper.

**Write well.**

Writing well means presenting your argument and evidence in a clear, logical, and creative way. An interesting argument cloaked in impenetrable prose is of no use to anyone. The writing style must be formal and serious. Tables, graphs or other illustrations should be included if they support your overall thesis. And sources must be accurately and adequately cited in footnotes using the Chicago Manual of Style citation format. You will no doubt develop your own style and techniques for doing research, making arguments, and presenting the results of your work, but if you follow these suggestions you will be well on your way to writing a great research paper - and hopefully you will learn something about an important topic along the way.

*Adapted and revised from “How to Write a Research Paper” by Charles King, Georgetown University, 1996.*

**Your First Task: Topic Proposal**

The initial fact-finding exercise will require you to conduct research in order to answer these three general questions about your topic:

What is/was your topic? (general identification)

Why is this topic important? (why should people know about it)

What research questions about this topic do I want to find the answers to?

(must have at least THREE)

**Format**

complete sentences in paragraph form

correct spelling and grammar

no less than 500 words; no more than 1,000 words

12 pt. Times New Roman, double-spaced

1-inch margins, all four sides

footnoted in Chicago Manual of Style format

Google Doc, shared with me with “editing” privileges

**Due Date:**

Orange 3-4: Thursday, 5/14 Black 3-4: Friday, 5/15