

Boston College: Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
THE GRADUATE RESEARCH PAPER

A research paper differs from other types of papers because it involves consulting what other readers (i.e., reputable scholars) have written about a work or author or literary theme, rather than an exclusive focus on your own ideas. Your objective is to make the work/s you analyze more understandable to your reader; you are pointing out something worth knowing, availing yourself of your experience with the texts, the period, and your insight into the material, especially as garnered from your library (or online) research.

I. The Objective of the Paper

Your objective is to produce an insightful, intellectually mature, and compelling argument. The paper must be structured logically, with consecutive paragraphs leading to and building upon each other in a progressive construction of your argument. Always keep your reader in mind: the reader must never have to struggle to understand your meaning or the step-by-step logical unfolding of your exposition.

If you are introducing theoretical matter as part of your thesis, seek a balance between close reading of the texts and theorizing of the text. The former grounds you firmly in what an author has actually said and the latter will help you to establish a critical distance from the text and to understand and articulate the broader implications of your ideas.

Correct grammar, style, and form (i.e., structure and formatting, especially in footnotes) are essential. Your expository prose must be clear and easy to read, with a seamless integration of the most recent and most reputable secondary sources. Defects in any of the preceding will undermine your credibility as an author in the eyes of the reader.

For every point you make, provide evidence from the primary text(s) under analysis and any relevant secondary sources.

II. The Thesis

A thesis is an argument that you prove with evidence. State it on the first page, if not the first paragraph. Any thesis must be based on a close, careful reading of the text.

There are various ways to conceive of a thesis about primary sources:

(1) A critical thesis works best with a single primary source, and is based on an idea that has piqued your interest. Your paper should include the analysis of other critics regarding the same text, contrasting their ideas and interpretations with your own.

(2) If you are working with more than one text or author, a thematic thesis might be effective. Rely on critics to guide you in your analysis of the significance of the theme. When writing, define the theme you wish to trace, identify its origins, the various ways in which it is manifest. Define the the function of the theme and reasons for its importance in the texts your are analyzing.

(3) You can focus, instead, on literary genre if you are working with more than one text or author, or texts from different periods by one author. After collecting your sample of primary texts, learn more about the genre by consulting literary dictionaries and other relevant discussions. Compare the characteristics and function of genre as evident (or not) in each text and evaluate the effectiveness of each text compared to the other(s).

III. Secondary Sources

Read widely and deeply, even if in the end you will have to discard whatever does not help you to make your point.

Read current, up-to-date research (i.e. the latest scholarship published on the subject). If you decide to use a source published over 20 years ago, justify your choice.

Do not make arguments on the basis of literary manuals or encyclopedias.

Cite in the original language. Never translate secondary sources.

Keep direct quotations in proportion to your paper; a few sentences are usually enough. In your own exposition, do not repeat what a quotation says. Make sure quotations are grammatically and logically integrated into the flow of your text.

Always make the reason for the inclusion of a passage from a secondary source clear to the reader.

Do not include bibliographic information in the body of your paper; your reader will find all necessary information in the "Works Cited" list: namely, do not say: "In her article on the use of animals in *El conde Lucanor*, Prof. Blanche White says...."; but rather, "According to White, "[direct quote]".

Use only reputable scholarly sources, i.e., those that document (with adequate footnotes) their own findings and have been published in "refereed" journals, books, websites or other sources of scholarly literature. *Wikipedia* is NOT an acceptable source.

Always document secondary sources using the *MLA Style Manual* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*, or whatever other stylesheet the professor mandates.

It is better to be overly zealous in documenting ideas from secondary sources than to borrow an idea and not fully attribute it to its author: the latter could incur charges of [plagiarism](#).

An abridged version of the *MLA Style Manual* is available free [online](#).

The entire *Chicago Manual* is online: free access through the O'Neill Library catalog.

IV. Additional Points

Using the first person (singular or plural) – "I" or "we" – reduces the authority of your prose.

Every paragraph should (1) be clearly introduced; (2) have its own internal logic; (3) relate to your thesis. Each paragraph and each sentence must flow logically one from the other.

Delete everything not directly related to the thesis: "Less is More." Do not be verbose, redundant or repetitive.

Do not summarize plots or the entire argument of a secondary source: present or highlight only the portion that is strictly necessary for clarity and the advancement of your argument.

Double space and paginate your paper. Place your name, course title, and date on the cover sheet.

Use the present tense when writing about the contents (plot, characters, etc.) of a work of literature (i.e., "The narrator claims that she is unaware of her mother's crime"). Everything else (e.g., the history of the work and its reception, or comments about the author, etc.) may be in a past tense.

V. The Conclusion of the Paper

Make sure you have a solid, compelling, helpful conclusion that is not simply a repetition of what you have already stated. In addition, a good way to finish your exposition is to also suggest ideas for further inquiry, building upon the thesis that your paper presents.