The Research Essay

1. The State of Knowledge
   • All research is meant to contribute to an expansion of knowledge.
   • Simply put, researchers seek gaps in the state of knowledge and perform research to fill them. This is a simple but important fact that you must bear in mind.

1.1 Traditions Of Inquiry
   • No matter what topic a researcher decides to investigate, there is always a tradition of inquiry in place.
   • When they report to other members of their community, researchers must be able to show they are aware of the state of knowledge and the tradition of inquiry they are working in.

1.2 You and the Tradition
   • In fact, the main purpose of a university student’s writing is to demonstrate an understanding of the state of knowledge and the associated tradition of inquiry.
   • Your readers (professors) want to see certain features (stylistic, structural, and substantive) in your writing that express your understanding.
   • Only occasionally is student writing actually expected to add to the state of knowledge.
2. Research Aims and Strategies

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.

-- Zora Neale Hurston

Research means to give each and every element its final value by grouping it in the unity of an organized whole.

-- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

2.1 What’s Worth Writing About?

• That’s your first and most important question.
• There are four primary requirements:
  – Sources are ample; lots of scholarly material available—avoid very recent topics.
  – Sources are diverse—avoid personal topics that are the reflection of only a few minds.
  – Sources can be assessed objectively—the topic not wholly a matter of belief, dogma, prejudice.
  – Sources can be examined thoroughly—topic is not too broad.

2.2 What’s Worth Writing About? (con’t)

• Pay attention to the knowledge deficit.
• The most interesting topics frequently emerge at the boundaries of what is already established and what remains to be determined.
• The difference between mediocre student research papers and excellent ones often has a lot to do with the interest and challenge of the topic.
• It’s part of the pre-writing stage of your paper to determine what is worth writing about.

2.3 General Pre-writing Strategies: Finding Knowledge Deficits

• Figure out what you know.
• Use a variety of research sites and sources to supplement your knowledge.
• Keep complete records and notes with proper attribution.
• Consider the credibility of the sources.
• Be prepared to adapt and develop in new directions based on your discoveries.
2.4 Specific Strategies for Students

- Brainstorming
- Flow charting
- Getting to know your librarian
- Consulting in-depth, authoritative overviews (e.g., encyclopedias)
- Reading general interest articles
- Surfing the Web, trying out key words in databases

2.5 Defining the Research: Considerations

- Audience (Immediate readers and other interested parties)
- Purpose (What are the audience’s needs? Yours?)
- Scope (Broad or narrow? Depends on above)
- Prior knowledge (What you already know determines what additional info you need)

2.6 Your 109 Research Essay

- **Type One:**
  - A report about the state of knowledge
  - Informative
  - E.g., Alternatives to Animal Testing
- **Type Two:**
  - An evaluation of a debate about knowledge
  - Comparative (i.e., researcher frames material as a debate and chooses a side)
  - More overtly persuasive
  - E.g., Is Media Violence Dangerous?

- Both types can be understood as arguments (i.e., claims with reasons)

2.7 Isolating a Viable Thesis

**Subject:** Pesticides

**Topic:** The use of pesticides

**Research Question:** What are pesticides used for?

**Informative Thesis Statement:**
Pesticides have a great many uses in securing the health and food of humans.

**Evaluative Thesis Statement:**
Despite their risks, pesticides must be used to secure human health and food safety.
2.8 Isolating a Viable Thesis con’t

**Subject:** Violence in film  
**Topic:** The effects of film violence  
Research Question: What are the effects of film violence?  
**Informative Thesis Statement:**  
Film violence has a negative effect on society, especially children.  
**Evaluative Thesis Statement:**  
Because of their negative effect on children, all films portraying violent acts should be restricted.

3.0 Introductions

- So far in this course we have not discussed introductions in any detail.  
- Like a paragraph’s topic sentence, the introduction is a “promise” about what is to follow.  
- Unfortunately, it’s hard to promise anything when you aren’t sure what you can deliver.  
- Therefore, although the introduction is essential to this genre, it is actually one of the last things you would write in the essay.

3.1 The Last Thing?

That’s right: the last thing. Oh sure, you may require a rudimentary introduction containing a thesis statement, background, and a preview of the order in which you plan to discuss your material to help guide your writing of the **body** of the essay. But trying to create the perfect introduction before the rest of the essay is completed is like trying to paint a house before it’s built. It can be done, but it’s an enormous waste of time and you’ll make a mess. Many student essays are irreparably flawed because they make false promises in the introduction.  
*Writing is a process, not a product.*

3.2 What Do Academic Readers Expect to See in Intros?

*Let's first look at what they don't want to see…*  
Here are the first couple of sentences from a student research essay:  
“*In today’s society, community has an important role to play. Communities can be large or small, inviting or uninviting, inclusive or exclusive. “*”  
(By the way, the essay goes on to report on recent studies in homelessness patterns in large cities.)
3.3 The Throwaway Sentence

Uh oh. The opening sentences, “In today’s society, community has an important role to play...,” are really very broad, meaningless bits of filler that have only a tangential relation to the focus of the report. They are grandiose truisms that add no value to the essay. The target audience feels patronized and immediately loses confidence in the writer. But stuck with a blank page, the writer had to begin somewhere. Unfortunately, the student didn’t revisit the introduction later and think about what it was really supposed to do. (Again, this is one of the reasons why you don’t want to waste too much time with intros at the beginning of your writing.)

3.4 So What Would a Good Introduction Look Like?

I’m glad you asked! An introduction in the academic genre

- begins with an opening statement at an appropriate level of generality (generally, this means that the statement is no more general than the most general of the essay’s high-level concepts).
- presents a series of statements that reviews the state of knowledge of the topic under discussion.
- narrows to the level of the current research itself
- finishes with a preview of the research goals, methodology and/or description of the essay’s structure.

An introduction may be short or long: and it may vary significantly from this model (e.g., an expanded state of knowledge/background section that comes after the preview).

3.5 The Funnel

The introduction begins broadly but, through an increasing subordination of ideas, leads the reader inexorably down to lower-level concepts.

3.6 An Example

“Contemporary large-scale human migrations across national borders have affected every continent on the planet. (broad) Not surprisingly, anthropologists have sought to understand the significance of these movements for notions of community, nationalism, and identity. (narrow) Anderson’s (1983) notion of the imagined community” has received particular attention in recent literature. (narrower) The purposes of this article are to examine contemporary notions of community in relation to international migration...” (goals)
3.7 Yeah, But…

Q: Yeah, but weren’t those statements truisms too? Wouldn’t the target audience already know most of that stuff?

A: Perhaps. But they contained key words that signaled to the specialist audience that the writer was also a specialist. These words oriented the audience to the broad topic so it would see how this particular essay was going to add to their state of knowledge of the topic. The statements were truisms but only to the right audience. They confirmed to the audience that it was in the right place.

3.8 So Is This The Only Way to Design an Introduction?

Of course there are other ways. Introductions can vary widely from the basic model.

Example 1: This article analyses labour supply decision-making for a particular group of women workers in a particular segment of the London clothing industry. (“cut-to-the-chase”)

Example 2: “I think girls just talk too much, you know, they—talk constantly between themselves and—about every little thing. Guys, I don’t think we talk about that much. (What kinds of things do you talk about?) Not much. Girls...cars, or parties, you know. I think girls talk about, you know, every little relationship, every little thing that’s ever happened, you know.” (“grabber”)

3.9 You see, it’s all about “form”

“Form...is an arousing and fulfillment of desire. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence.”

Kenneth Burke, Counter-Statement

You want to create a desire in the audience to “read on.” Making massive cognitive demands on the reader doesn’t do that.

Let’s look at three typical opening sentences to see how they create desire…

3.91 Example

1. People have speculated about the nature of writing for a long time.
   – Raises expectations positively—readers may expect a history of writing arranged chronologically.

2. Television is a medium that seduces, confuses, and impoverishes the life of the mind.
   – Creates expectations for a sequential examination of the three high concepts mentioned.

3. There are many differences and similarities between university and high school.
   – So what? Creates no desire and little preview.
4.0 The Research Essay

The question of form, of course, extends beyond the introduction...

In your introduction you probably will have previewed your essay’s organization to decrease the cognitive demands of your essay. But how do you determine that organization? Is it guesswork? Does it just “happen?”

There are some basic structures you might consider...

4.1 Topic Types

You might try organizing your essay in one of the following ways.

First determine whether your topic is best understood as static or progressive:

- A static topic is one that can be viewed as an entity, fixed in time and space.
- A progressive topic is one that occurs through time and space (i.e., it’s “story-like”)

Note: Most topics can be developed in either way, but one mode may “suggest itself” as better!

4.2 Your 109 Topics

“State of Knowledge” patterns (these draw most heavily on summary skills):

- Enumeration (Static: reveals the key parts of the entity in order—but you have to decide which order is best!)
- Definition (Static; defines high-level concepts, uses lower-level material to exemplify)
- Narration (Progressive: gradual revelation of topic—replicates the actual tradition of inquiry for the reader)

4.3 Your 109 Topics con’t

“Debate about Knowledge” patterns (these draw most heavily on comparison skills):

- Point-by-Point Comparison (Static: extracts common high-concepts and compares how they are interpreted—similar to Analytical essay)
- Half-and-Half Comparison (Static: describes one interpretation of data, then another; uses intro and conclusion to summarize similarities and differences)
- Cause and Effect (Progressive: describes the main cause/problem/concept, then traces the different effects—which could be interpretations)
4.4 Organizing the Essay

Whichever strategy you use, you must eventually explain to yourself why you are presenting your ideas in that particular sequence. If you don’t know why, chances are the reader won’t either. But the most appropriate sequence may not suggest itself until after you’ve done a fair bit of writing. Don’t be trapped by your own first impulses.

And remember, academic essays are not like jokes: don’t save the punchline (the “point”) until the end. The old saying—“tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them”—applies.

4.5 Organizing the Essay con’t

As we’ve noted previously, the essay, like the paragraph, proceeds by patterns of subordination and coordination.

e.g.,

- Introduction
- Concept 1
  - 1.1
  - 1.2
- Concept 2
  - 2.1
  - 2.2

4.6 Organizing the Essay con’t

You can decrease the cognitive demand on the reader by signaling coordinate and subordinate paragraphs clearly through the use of transition words (e.g., first, second, on the one hand, on the other hand, furthermore, in other words, etc.). As well, don’t forget to reassert your topic frequently.

You are also free to use headings and subheadings to divide sections (but do not overuse, especially in short papers).

You may also use diagrams, illustrations, charts, and layout features to aid understanding.

4.7 Organizing the Essay concluded

- Never forget that good writers reshape not just the words but the broad patterns of their essays right up until the deadline.
- If you give yourself adequate time to write and revise, you’ll build a fine vehicle to carry your ideas.
- If you do not, it will seem as if you’ve loaded all your ideas in a truck and dumped them on the reader for sorting.
5.0 Conclusions

You all know a conclusion is a place to reassert what you think your essay has accomplished, making certain the reader is clear on the connections you’ve already made. We can think of it as a kind of reverse funnel:

Specific
to more
general

5.1 Conclusions con’t

- The repetition often does repeat what was said in the introduction simply to serve the cognitive needs of the reader.
- You also might expect a conclusion to emphasize the main consequences of the research—to confirm that the knowledge deficit has been filled in some way.
- But you may also see the delineation of a new knowledge deficit, the identification of areas that the research couldn’t address.
- The identification of these new areas places the research in a larger tradition of inquiry, and points the way to the next research project.

5.2 Conclusions Concluded

**Summation:** “We have tried to show that there are basic principles which are being shared and used in an anti-racist as well as a more racist discourse.”

**Confirmation:** “My reading of the accounts given by the women workers...leads me to conclude that...”

**Speculation:** “Had Bangladeshi immigrants found themselves in a more hospitable society, the negotiation process would probably have been very different.”

**Contextualization:** “This, too, is a form of power that will increasingly inform anthropological theories... as anthropologists continue to work among the many displaced and mobile populations of the world.”

**Continuation:** “We need more research analyzing and contesting the assumptions about language underlying teaching methods which offer to ‘cure’ all signs of conflict and struggle.”