

Guidelines for Writing a Research Paper in the Humanities

A research paper requires **critical thinking**, **thorough research**, and a **well-structured argument**. The process involves finding a suitable topic, formulating a research question, gathering sources, and presenting an original analysis.

1. The Research Process

1.1. Choosing and refining your topic

A strong research paper starts with a **well-defined** topic. Here's how to refine your focus:

- **Begin with a broad theme**, then narrow it down based on specific aspects, perspectives, or case studies.
- **Find a gap in the research**: What hasn't been explored yet? Can you offer a new interpretation of a text, historical event, or cultural movement?
- **Ask yourself**: *What interests me the most? What do I want to prove or analyze?*

Common pitfall: topics that are too general, too obscure or too narrow. A vague or overly broad topic makes it hard to build a focused argument, while an overly narrow topic might not have enough sources.

1.2. Reading the work of scholars on your topic

- Engaging with existing scholarship is a crucial step in developing a well-informed and original research paper. Start by identifying **key academic sources**, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and essays from reputable publishers. As you read, take detailed notes on **main arguments, methodologies, and critical perspectives**.
- Pay attention to how different scholars approach your topic – do they agree, disagree, or offer contrasting interpretations? This will help you position your argument within the ongoing academic conversation.
- Finally, be sure to evaluate the credibility of your sources: prioritize **recent publications, authoritative scholars, and well-cited works** over outdated or non-academic sources.

1.3. Effective research strategies

- **Use diverse sources**: Primary sources (original texts, historical documents, artworks, films) and secondary sources (academic books, journal articles, essays).
- **Evaluate your sources**: Academic journals and books from reputable publishers (Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, etc.) are considered reliable and preferred over blogs or Wikipedia.
- **Take organized notes**: Use **Zotero, Mendeley, or a research journal** to track citations and key ideas.

Common pitfall: relying only on **Google searches** or using **non-academic sources**. Use **Google Scholar**, **JSTOR**, **Project MUSE**, **Academia.edu**, **your university library's database**, and the **University of Bologna library's database** (<https://sol.unibo.it/SebinaOpac/.do>) instead.

1.4. Developing a strong research question and thesis

Once you refine your topic, develop a **precise, analytical research question**.

A **good research question**:

- is specific and focused
- allows for critical analysis rather than just summarization
- encourages debate or discussion

Example:

- Too broad: *"How did Italian literature develop?"*
- Better: *"How does Boccaccio's Decameron reflect the cultural shifts of post-Black Death Italy?"*

A **thesis statement** should clearly **answer your research question** and present your central argument.

A **strong thesis is**:

- concise (1-2 sentences)
- debatable (not just a fact)
- well-supported by research (*i.e.*, reliable scientific sources)

Example:

"Boccaccio's Decameron serves as both a critique and a reflection of medieval morality, using satire and storytelling to navigate a society in transition."

2. The Writing Process

2.1 Structuring your paper

A **well-structured paper** ensures clarity and logical flow.

1. Introduction (10-15% of the paper)

- **Hook:** Start with an intriguing quote, fact, or question.
- **Context:** Briefly introduce your topic and its significance.
- **Research question:** The key issue your paper addresses.
- **Thesis statement:** Your main argument.

Example opening sentence:

"In the wake of the Black Death, Boccaccio's Decameron offered not just escapism but a radical rethinking of moral and social structures."

2. Body Paragraphs (70-80% of the paper)

Each paragraph should focus on **one main idea** and follow a **clear structure**:

1. **Topic sentence** (introduces the paragraph's main point).
2. **Evidence** (a quote, historical example, or properly cited reference).
3. **Analysis** (explain why this evidence is important and how it supports your thesis).
4. **Transition** to the next idea.

Common pitfall: overloading paragraphs with too many ideas. Stick to **one main point per paragraph**.

3. Conclusion (10-15% of the paper)

- Restate your **thesis in a new way**.
- Summarize **key findings**.
- Highlight the broader **significance** of your argument.

Common pitfall: introducing **new arguments** in the conclusion. Instead, reinforce your main ideas.

3. How, When, and Why to Quote

N.B.: Your argument should always be supported by evidence, *i.e.* reliable and correctly quoted academic sources.

3.1 Why quoting matters

- To **support** your claims with authoritative evidence.
- To **engage** with scholarly debates.
- To **illustrate** key points with precise wording.

Common pitfall: Overusing quotes without analyzing them. Every quote should be followed by **your own interpretation**.

3.2 When to quote vs when to paraphrase

Use direct quotes when:

- ✓ The original wording is particularly powerful.
- ✓ You are analyzing a text's language (literature, philosophy).

Paraphrase when:

- ✓ The information is more important than the wording.
- ✓ The quote is too long and needs simplification.

✓ Example of effective quoting

- **Direct quote:**
Primo Levi reflects on the loss of humanity in the concentration camp, stating that "to sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out the orders one receives, to eat only one's ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp" (Se questo è un uomo, p. 86), illustrating how survival often required moral compromise.
- **Paraphrase:**
Primo Levi suggests that passively conforming to the brutal routines of the concentration camp inevitably led to moral and psychological degradation (Se questo è un uomo, p. 86).

N.B.: Stick to the citation style you are more comfortable with: (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.).

4. Plagiarism and How to Avoid It

4.1 What counts as plagiarism?

Plagiarism includes:

- ✗ Copying text without citation.
- ✗ Paraphrasing too closely to the original.
- ✗ Using ideas from another source without giving credit.
- ✗ Submitting someone else's work as your own.

Common pitfall: Thinking that paraphrased content does not need citation. Even if you reword something, you **must credit the original source**.

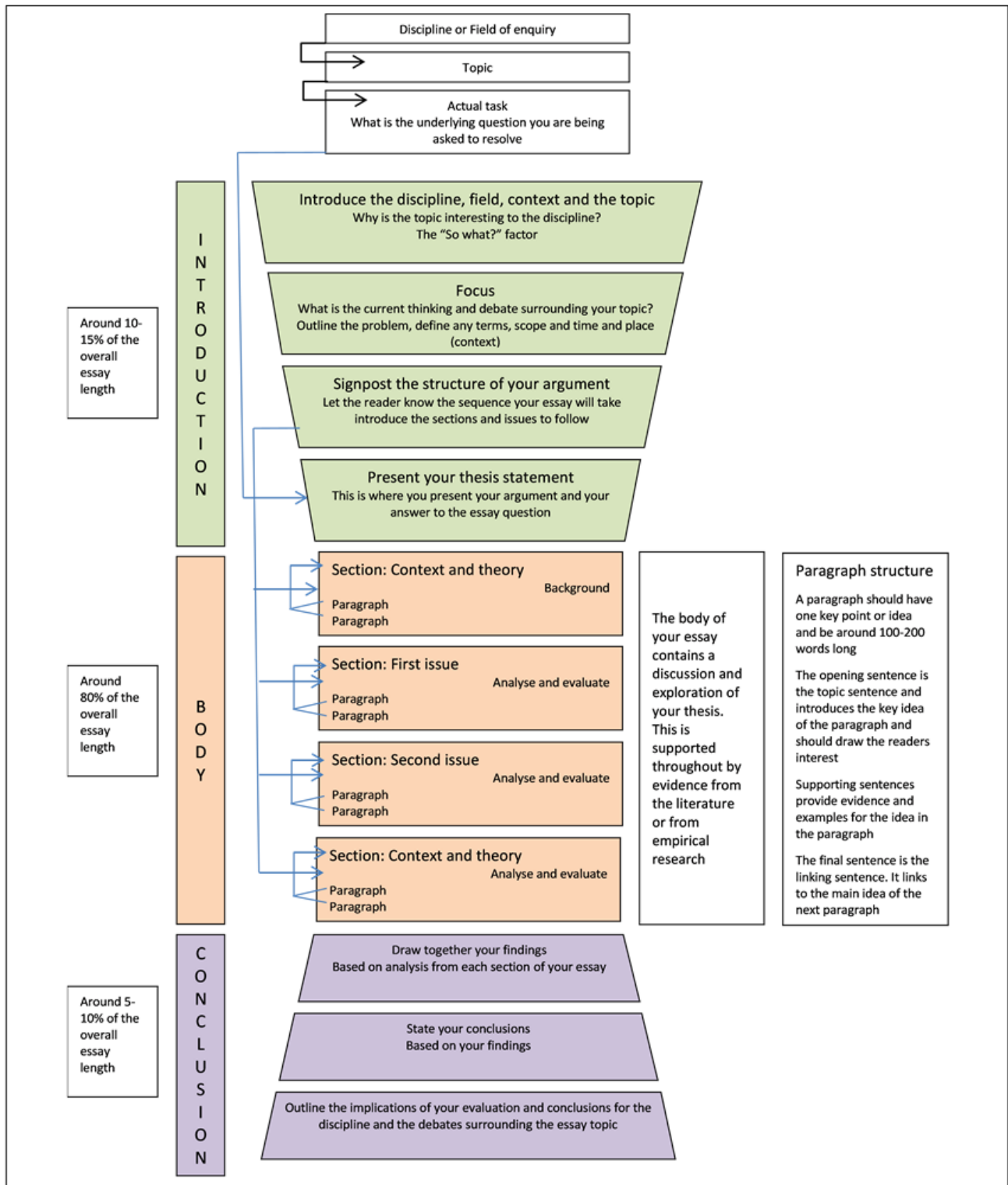
4.2 Strategies to avoid plagiarism

- ✓ Always cite sources, even when paraphrasing.
- ✓ Use plagiarism detection tools (Turnitin, Grammarly).
- ✓ Take detailed notes to differentiate **your ideas** from **others' research**.

✓ Example (Chicago Style Citation):

- *Machiavelli argues that rulers must be willing to act immorally if necessary to maintain power (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532, 72).*
- **Bibliography entry:** *Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. 1532.*

By following these guidelines, you will develop a **well-researched, well-structured, and compelling academic paper**.



Rao, V., Chanock, K., & Krishnan, L., *A visual guide to essay writing: how to develop and communicate academic argument*, Association for Academic Language and Learning, Sydney 2007.