How to Write a Research Essay

A research essay requires you to do a number of things;

1. It requires you to demonstrate your capacity to analyse your chosen question and to understand clearly and precisely what it is asking you to do. One of the major problems I have found with undergraduate essays is that they often simply do not answer the question.

2. It requires you to make use of your research skills (both traditional library based research, and, if you wish, your web research skills) to find appropriate academic material to help you put together a convincing and well argued response to your chosen question. The more in depth your research is, and the more you are able to apply it critically to your question, the better you are likely to do in your essay.

3. It requires you to critically analyse your research material to determine where and how it will be relevant to your argument. A common problem in student essays is a tendency to generalise, to make broad or sweeping statements with insufficient evidence or argument to support it. This is where your research comes in; every statement, claim, or argument you make must be supported one way or another by either argument, evidence, or research (preferably all three). In particular, whenever you make a factual claim you must provide evidence in the form of a reference to the source on which you base that claim.

4. Once you have determined what the question is, and what the key points you wish to make in relation to it are, you must structure those points into a clear, concise, specific, and direct argument. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of structuring your work clearly and carefully.

The structure of an academic essay will usually follow this format; the first paragraph will outline what you understand the question to be, and how you will go about answering it. It will also outline the main points of your argument in a series of topic sentences. In a short essay like this one, each point (each topic sentence) will often correspond to a single paragraph in your argument. After the introductory paragraph, each subsequent paragraph should address a single point, which should be clearly connected to both the preceding paragraph/point, and the one that follows. Think of each paragraph as a premise, or logical step in your argument; each paragraph / premise should lead logically and directly to your conclusion. Your concluding paragraph should summarise your argument and state your final overall position on the question you are answering. A concluding paragraph should contain no new arguments or factual material.

5. Remember; a clearly structured, concise, specific and direct response to the question, supported by appropriate research.

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