

Alternatives to the Research Paper

Some Common Concerns

While the “research paper” may be one of the most commonly assigned papers in college courses, students often disappoint their professors when sent off to complete these sorts of assignments on their own.

- Students often see research papers as formulaic or rote.
- Some may not think through the material as carefully as we’d like them to.
- Inexperienced writers often do not understand the nature of expertise/authority in academic fields. Because they lack depth and breadth, they are often unable to situate themselves within the ongoing conversations that we take for granted.
- Even advanced students will struggle to synthesize new materials—it often takes more than a semester to “synthesize” major concepts with prior experience, knowledge, or opinion.
- Students may underestimate how much time and planning a well-researched response will take, so put off doing the smaller tasks that build toward the final.
- Many students struggle to read academic texts because they are unfamiliar with these forms. (Research on student citation practices suggests that most students cite from the abstract or first page of their sources.)

Some Alternative Assignments

- Answer a question that is closely related to the learning goals of the course. Giving students a question to answer, a problem to solve, or a dynamic to explore helps them approach the research task in fresh and creative ways.
- Describe the ongoing conversation on a disciplinary topic, including how to thinkers/authors may diverge in their positions and what standpoints inform those points of agreement/disagreement.
- Read and annotate the references from a key essay’s bibliography.
- Trace a scholar’s career through key publications.
- Analyze competing book reviews, news responses to an event, or stances in an industry.

Other Tips

- Define the audience students will address. Be sure to discuss the attributes, needs, and values of this audience in class.
- Scaffold or break down the project into smaller pieces with deadlines. Even if you can’t break the entire project into parts, a few deadlines well before the final due date can be very helpful to take the temperature of ongoing work, establish strong work habits, and allow time for questions, roadblocks, and drafting. (Examples of scaffolding: a proposal, a research plan, an annotated bibliography, a research narrative.) This approach helps to

keep students on track and dissuades them from writing the essay a day or two before the final due date.

- Offer models (written by students or professionals) to show the kinds of responses you would like to see.
- Model use of the Library's web tools and resources in class (in brief sessions) so that students are reminded of the many valuable resources found there.
- Discuss what tools like Google or citation generators do and do not offer the researcher, so that students know how to use Google like a researcher might.