

## Tips for Writing the Research Paper

### The Proposal

#### Process

By the time you sit down to write the proposal for your paper, you should have:

- narrowed down your topic
- begun the research on the topic, including compiling a preliminary bibliography and beginning to read some of the books and articles you've identified as important
- identified primary sources (if possible for the topic) as well as secondary sources for the paper
- identified the questions your research is trying to answer
- thought about how your research topic relates to other questions in the course
- thought about the interpretive methodology of your research
  - which of Scott's interpretive frameworks are useful for you?
  - what are the limitations of your sources (all male-authored? sparse in number? the genre?)

#### Contents

The proposal should be about 2 pages long, *plus* a bibliography. A good proposal states the topic, the significance of the topic, the questions/problems the research is trying to answer, and a brief overview of the issues the paper will address. It also may wish to explain the sources (especially primary sources). If you have a preliminary thesis, then include that in the proposal, as well. (It is fine if your thesis changes as you write the paper.)

*You may reuse material from your proposal in your paper.*

#### Research

1. I recommend beginning your research by "following the bibliography trail."
  - Begin with the suggestions for further reading in Clark/Richardson and MacHaffee in the chapters that most closely touch upon your topic. If we don't have the relevant books/articles at the Pacific library, use ILL.
    - ⇒ If MacHaffee or Clark provide excerpts from a primary source you wish to use, that is great -- you may use it! But most of the readings in those books are excerpts from larger works, so use the footnotes and introductory material to identify the larger works.
  - Use the encyclopedias/reference works discussed earlier in the semester -- see what books and articles they recommend.
  - If you find another great article or book, see what works *that author* cites
2. See if there are books on reserve for this class (reserve list is on the Blackboard site)
3. See if I recommend any books in our conference.
4. Do "cold searches" on JSTOR, ATLA, the Pacific Catalog, etc.

**ILL early! You should be using interlibrary loan now to find books and articles you may need for your work.**

## Writing the Paper

### The Thesis

A good research paper in the humanities is usually thesis-driven. (Not always, but often.) For a long research paper such as this, it may need to be a complicated thesis of more than one sentence.

A strong thesis:

- is specific
- is analytical -- not just a restatement of a historical fact or a summary of a source (even a paper that is primarily social history of women in some era/movement will need some analytical hook)
- is arguable and requires evidence to be proven (test it by coming up with counter-arguments)
- is not obvious -- requires reading the rest of the paper to prove the thesis/persuade the reader

Develop your thesis *after* doing a lot of your reading. Your thesis is your *answer* to your major research questions.

### Outline/brainstorming

Do outline or brainstorm with some kind of idea-map before writing your paper. Figure out how you want to organize your ideas, and what the best *order* is for your ideas before you start to write.

### The Body of the Paper

The greatest danger for a paper this length and this style is to revert into summary of historical background for too long. Your paper **DOES** need to **BRIEFLY** introduce the people, events, and background, but most of it should be an *analysis*.

Use the skills you've developed in the micro, macro, and Scott papers:

- the micro papers taught you how to read primary sources closely to analyze gender issues in religion;
- the macro papers taught you to do this on a big-picture level;
- the Joan Scott-related papers taught you to think about what kind of analysis you're doing: social history of women or gender relations; the social construction of gender; the impact of gender ideals on religion; the impact of religious ideals on gender; etc.

To ensure that you're not falling into summary, be sure that most of your paragraphs have topic sentences that are analytical claims, which support your thesis.

### Conclusion

A good conclusion often summarizes the argument and *then* says something about the significance of the research.

### Title

Don't forget a good title for your paper!

## **Bibliography & Citation**

Use footnotes; put the footnotes and bibliography in MLA format

### **Note to NAPS participants:**

This assignment had the following stages, each of which received a letter grade:

1. EARLY in the semester a workshop in the library by a reference librarian introducing students to major research tools in the field. At the conclusion to this workshop, students had a mini-research project in which they had to find three types of sources to answer a general, basic research question (e.g., how did early Christians view same-sex relations between women?): a reference source, a scholarly article, a book. At the next class session, they turned in a paragraph response to the research question along with their three (or more sources) in the proper bibliographic format.
2. Turn in paper topic, followed by individual student conference. Classes were canceled for the day(s) of the paper conferences to alleviate my own time management concerns. I took notes on my computer during the conferences, so that I would remember what I advised each student (and thus could grade their proposals properly).
3. Research paper proposal with bibliography, which received comments.
4. Paper drafts and in-class presentations, which received comments
5. Final papers, graded with little-to no comments.



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/us>

Tips for Writing the Research Paper Handout by Caroline T. Schroeder is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 United States License.