

Organizing Research Papers Script

This workshop has been designed for a 50-minute class, and should last no more than 45 minutes if run as efficiently as possible. In longer classes, this leaves extra time which can be used either for other (non-Writing-Studio-assisted) class activity or for extending the time allotted for the activities below.

Note to Consultant: While this script is full of content, it should not be seen as strict or constraining; rather, it is designed to provide guidelines upon which you can rely, but which you can also depart from. Your role in facilitating a workshop is to generate and guide conversation, so do what works for the class. Also keep in mind that if you have a way of talking with clients about, for instance, thesis statements that you find more useful or that better suits your own style, then please feel free to make use of that, or even to rewrite any portion of the script for yourself—this can help to make you a more comfortable and effective facilitator. However, if you are nervous about being in front of a class and not knowing what to say, this script should provide a useful resource to which you can turn at any point.

Materials Required

From Writing Studio: Index cards for minute papers; Handouts & Worksheets: [“Formulating Your Research Question”](#), [“Structuring Your Research Paper”](#), [“Blank Source Grid”](#), and [“Source Grid Instruction Sheet.”](#)

From Instructor: Be prepared to discuss the objective / purpose of the assignment, the level of breadth and / or depth required for coverage, minimum and maximum number of sources, citation style required, and any other pertinent information. **Note: This workshop is appropriate for a class period *after* students have conducted substantial research.**

From Students: List of sources / source notes / original sources to organize and categorize during the workshop.

Objectives

- Students will learn how to develop a focused research question.
- Students will consider how to situate their work in relation to other research.
- Students will begin to organize their research findings in light of their research question.

Plan

Consultant: before the workshop begins, write the Spatt quote on the board.

I. Concentrated Writing Studio Presentation (5 min.)

II. The research paper endeavor (5 min.)

Lead class and instructor in a discussion of ‘what is your sense of how a research paper differs from other kinds of papers?’

During the discussion, consider emphasizing the following points:

- Research papers often involve an exploration of the empirical research and arguments of others.
- Even though we account for others’ findings and claims in our research papers, we also are responsible for making our own arguments in conversation with these other thinkers.
- Ask the instructor to clarify the goals of the assignment.

III. The Research Question (5 min.)

One way of thinking about how to formulate one’s own argument in response to existing research is to work on developing a specific Research Question that will help guide your investigation. It’s important to clarify the question that will help you categorize and make sense of all the data available on your topic.

You can think of it like this: first you identify your topic, then you develop a focused research question, then you work toward developing a thesis claim of your own. The difference between topic and thesis is like the difference between simply saying WHAT you are studying and explaining a detail of HOW a particular aspect of that topic works or HOW various findings are related to one another.

TOPIC → RESEARCH QUESTION/ HYPOTHESIS → THESIS

Brenda Spatt offers a useful way of thinking about your job when working with your research question; she says:

“Do not regard your initial statement of opinion as a thesis to be proven, but rather as a hypothesis to be tested, modified, or even abandoned.”

Spatt, 2007, p. 264. *Writing from Sources* (7th ed.)

Spatt reminds us that in a research paper, we do not set out to search *only* for sources to support our own initial opinion but have to be open to seeing where our questions lead us. We seek to understand the discourse and research on a particular area and determine how our own opinion, along with the opinions of others, holds up to other theoretical and empirical accounts – and maybe (likely!), along the way, we have to revise and refine our question as well as our projected thesis claim. We have to be sensitive to differences in existing data sets, and in the interpretation of data or the claims made from the evidence the data provides.

IV. Activity I: What is Your Research Question? (8-10 min.)

You know your topic, but what is your specific research question?

If the students have not yet formulated their research questions, allow them time to do so.

If (or once) the students already know their research questions, ask each one to share her or his research question with a neighbor/partner and discuss merits and detractors or potential stumbling blocks.

Finally, ask at least one volunteer to share her or his question with the entire group, and involve the class and the instructor in evaluating the RQ and, if necessary, in helping revise and refine the question.

Consider distributing and discussing the handout: "Formulating Your Research Question"

V. Organizing Sources (15 min.)

Maybe you've searched the literature and found little written on your subject area, or, more likely, you are a little overwhelmed with all the papers and books in your subject area. How do you make sense of all of these to write your paper in a way that really synthesizes the literature you have engaged? One way to begin is by creating a grid or other diagram that allows you to think about the relationships among your findings and sources. Sometimes, when we have many different sources to negotiate, it's useful to think backwards from the source findings to the theories and hypotheses behind them.

Pass out blank source grid and Source Grid Instructions sheet. Guide the students through the source grid instructions. You may want to modify (shorten) this exercise significantly depending on the amount of time available. Before students begin to fill out their grids, have them brainstorm, either individually or in pairs, the specific information that they may want to write down. Allow about 5 minutes for brainstorming, another 5 for filling in the grid, and split the other 5 minutes between introducing the grid/wrapping up the activity.

Instructions:

This grid offers you a simple way to begin to connect and categorize the sources you have found so far.

1. Write your research question in the space provided at the top of your grid.
2. In the first column, list the papers/sources that are most relevant to your research question.
3. In the second column, list the main argument(s) of each source. This is not an easy step, but it might be the most important one; working carefully to identify the authors' arguments in this step can make synthesizing material much easier later on.

4. In the third column, list any comments or questions that you have about each source, and record the most important or most interesting detail that the source provides.
5. Compare and contrast the sources on your list. Do any of them fall into the same “camp” or category? Within a particular category or camp, what distinguishes different authors or studies from one another? Do some of them contradict or put into question others? extend another’s hypothesis? or limit it? Note these distinctions in the margins, at the bottom, or on the back, of your grid sheet.

Allow students to work for a bit, then say the following after asking them to wrap-up whatever they’re working on:

The last item on your instruction sheet offers some questions that can help you to evaluate your research thus far:

6. Once you have completed the grid, try to answer the following questions:
 - i. What conclusions can you reach based on the available evidence from your research?
 - ii. What are the gaps you see in the current literature (what other studies are needed)?
 - iii. What are the contradictions you see in the research literature?
 - iv. Which questions do you feel are left unanswered after engaging the literature in your area of interest?

What this exercise emphasizes is that, in large part, coming up with a strong thesis claim of your own will hinge on your ability to do this work of categorizing and thinking across multiple sources, holding them all in view and showing the relationships among them.

IV. Concluding Discussion (5 min.)

Pass out the “Structuring Your Research Paper” Handout.

When it comes to writing up one’s findings, many writers find it helpful to think about structuring their research papers in one of the ways listed on this handout. Some strategies may be more appropriate to some disciplines than to others; in most cases, you may wish to apply a combination of these approaches. But this handout can be useful as you begin to think about how best to make sense of your research for a reader.

V. Minute Papers

Distribute the index cards and ask the students to answer (anonymously) one question on each side.

Question 1: What is the most important thing you’ve learned about writing a research paper today?

Question 2: What questions or concerns do you still have regarding writing a research paper?

Collect these responses. If time permits, it might be worthwhile to read some or all, especially of Question 1, aloud. And possibly also to invite brief answers to the concerns raised in Question 2, if you decide to read any of those.

Remember that a writing studio consultant can work with you on this and any other aspect of writing your research paper, from initial brainstorming through revision of a full draft.