How to Write Your Research Paper

Writing a research paper is about content and form. Let’s begin with the content.

# Deciding What to Write About

This question is the most difficult. It is an important decision because you have to live with the topic for almost an entire semester. One way to answer the question is by asking and answering a series of questions within the parameters the instructor sets and the scope of the course. Begin globally so that you can make some decisions about how to narrow down the topic.

Start with the three major topics of this book: dancer, dance, and dance works.

Write on a piece of paper who or what you know about each of these topics. It is more fun and you will get more ideas if you do this in a group or as a class. The contributions of class members might inspire your creativity and interests in what you write about. The next step is deciding what you want to know about each of these topics.

Other ways to look at the topics of dancers, dance, and dance works is to answer questions such as these:

* What is your favorite dance form?
* Do you have a favorite dancer?
* What is the Lindy? How do you dance it?
* Have you ever been curious about a dancer, choreographer, or personality who was mentioned in one of your other dance courses?

Consider other academic subjects, arts, and culture and their relation to dance, and answer questions such as these:

* When you took a course in history, were you curious about who danced, why they danced, or what the dancing was like?
* How did the American Revolution affect dance in the colonies? What was dance like during the Great Depression? How did the writings of Puritan ministers during the 1600s influence or affect dancing in New England?
* How was dancing a reflection of the 18th-century French court?
* Why is *Swan Lake* considered a classical ballet?
* How did the costumes and stages affect dancing in the 18th century?

These are some avenues for exploring dance topics and ways to help you generate topics and unanswered questions. However, keep in mind that dance must remain the focal point of the paper. Once you have decided on a topic or, better yet, a couple of possible topics that interest you and that you can live with for almost a semester, you are ready to begin your research.

# How Big Is Your Topic?

Global topics—such as the history of the Paris Opéra or dance in the 18th century—need to be narrowed down to a more manageable size. You are writing a paper that is a predetermined length—perhaps 20 to 30 pages or the length that your instructor indicates—not a book. On the other hand, the opposite problem is finding enough information to write a 30-page paper. You have to select a topic that you can research within the time limit you are given and that you believe you can make interesting to your readers. To determine how big your topic is and exactly what parameters you want to put on the topic, you need to do some preliminary research at your local or university library. A library that specializes in performing arts, such as the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, has an extensive collection of print and film resources on dance. You can search their database at <http://leopac.nypl.org/#focus>. Searching on the Internet to generate your topic is often a good choice. Sometimes visiting general dance sites will provide a portal to the information you are seeking and lead you to other specific information.

# Sources and Availability of Sources

Some journal articles and books are printed in their entirety on the Internet, but start your search for books and journals in the library. Consulting a librarian about digital resources available through the library can extend your search.

You will need both an overview and specific information for the research project. The overview entails the historical, political, societal, and economic information about the period in which a dancer or choreographer lived or the event or type of dance took place. Specific information refers to the *who, what, where, when,* and *why* of the dancer, dance, or dance work in relation to other arts during the period. After you have done preliminary global research, go local.

* Does the school, public library, or university library have books on this topic?
* Does the library have only one book about this specific topic?
* Are there sections in books on this topic?
* Are there journal articles, magazines, or monographs about this topic?
* Do you have access to general indexes such as the *Reader’s Guide* to see if the topic appears in magazines or other sources? (Your library may have print copies or access to online copies of *Reader’s Guide;* see<https://help.ebsco.com/interfaces/EBSCOhost/EBSCOhost_FAQs/Readers_Guide_to_Periodical_Literature_FAQs>.)
* Are there unpublished dissertations or theses written on this topic?
* Can you obtain sources through an interlibrary loan if the source you need isn't in your library?

The last item in the list can present a challenge. If there is only one copy of a book or other resource in a library in another state, you might have to request an interlibrary loan. Before you do an interlibrary loan request, search the Internet to see if an electronic copy of the book exists at a local library. Ask the librarian how long it would take to get the material from another library. You need an actual date, because the material could come in after the date the paper is due. Also, if it is a crucial piece to your research, what happens if it doesn’t come in because of unforeseen circumstances? Will another library do interlibrary loan? And how long will they let you keep the material?

# Decisions, Decisions

Is the material sketchy, or does it contain substantial information from a variety of sources that will support your research? Is an important resource located in another library that does not do an interlibrary loan or is it unavailable as an electronic copy? If you have found several books and journal articles on the topic, are they all old books and articles or a mix of old and new books and articles? (The right choice here will depend not only on your chosen topic but also sometimes your instructor’s preferences.) Are the books specific to the topic, or is the information contained in a general reference book (such as an encyclopedia) or in a dance history book? If all of the books and journal articles are old or the only sources you can find are entries in general encyclopedias (which are not considered acceptable sources for a research paper), then you need to reassess whether the topic you have chosen is worth the time and effort for a research paper. You have to make this decision before going on and spending valuable time and effort on the project.

If the topic is about a dance work, are one or more videos available for you to watch and analyze? If not, are they available on campus or at a community library or on the Internet? This is a deciding factor of whether the research project focuses on a significant dance work or represents a choreographer’s significant contribution.

# What Is Your Research About?

You have selected a topic and know that resources exist to support your research. Again, you need to pose and answer some questions. Simply put, these are the *why* and the *what* of your research project.

The *why* question refers to the purpose of the research project. The answer to this is beyond the practical reason that you have to write the paper to get a grade in order to pass the course. Instead, why is this research significant?

The *what* question is a research question or hypothesis. You pose this question so that you can answer it through your research of this topic. It specifies and delineates the research you will conduct. In other words, it is the problem you will solve.

Developing the research question and the purpose of your research will help you further focus your study. The purpose and the research question are stated in the introduction section of the paper. The research question is what guides your project.

# How Large Is the Project?

Now you have to determine what you will include and not include in your project, which will set the parameters of the research. This information indicates how much information you will cover, or the depth to which you will cover it. For example, if you will report on dance during a specific era in history, what dates will you cover? What aspects of the era will you include? If you will write a paper on a choreographer, how many significant works of the choreographer will you include? How will you limit the biographical study? Sometimes the number of resources required is a limiting factor. Another limiting factor is a lack of good resources available for the project.

After determining the size of the project, you should identify the process you will use to collect the research. Will you conduct interviews in combination with historical resources about the dancer? Will you attend a performance of a reconstructed work? Will you conduct your research in the library and on the Internet? Your instructor might place restrictions on the number of a certain type of resources you use. The resources can be books, journal articles, media (video or DVD), and Internet sites.

With all of these preliminary steps in place, you are ready to create the project proposal.

# Creating the Project Proposal

With a sense of the parameters of your research, a problem and purpose defined, and the process you will use to conduct your research, you are ready to create a preliminary outline for the paper. This step focuses your research as you collect it. It guides your writing of the paper and ensures that major themes are covered in proportion to the less important ones. The following elements make up the material for a proposal for your research project:

* The purpose (the *why*)
* The problem (the research question or the *what*)
* The scope and limitations of the project (how much your research will specifically cover)
* Outline of the paper

After your research you will need to determine your research findings and write the conclusion to your project.

Getting early feedback on your proposal from your instructor will help you get and stay on the right track in your research efforts. It also will make the time you spend on the project more productive. Sometimes after you have talked with your instructor, you have to tweak your purpose, research questions, or the outline, but it is better to do it during the planning stage than near the end of the project.

# Collecting Research

You have a preliminary process to tackle before you write your paper, namely, reading or viewing the sources to collect the research. Your instructor will determine what reference citation style you should use for your paper. Your instructor will also determine whether footnotes or endnotes should be used in your paper. For specific rules on style, you need to consult the style manual required by the instructor. Each style manual requires you to cite sources in a specific way. The style manual will provide the definitive information on every element in your paper. Although you can access some style manuals online, a style manual is something you should consider purchasing because you will need it throughout the research project, and it will help you as you prepare other projects throughout your academic career.

One way to collect the research is to use note cards or create an electronic bibliography. On each card, include the information about the book author (or editor if it’s a contributed book), title, publisher, city in which it was published, date of publication, and page numbers on which the information appears. If it is a second or other edition of the work, include this information as well.

# Setting Up Footnote Information Cards or Documents

You may choose to use either electronic or handwritten documents for footnote information. Regardless of the format, they will be referred to as “cards” in these guidelines. On the top line of the card, write the author's name. If the author has more than one book you will use, include a short version of the title. If you use more than one library, it is helpful to indicate the library and the call number in case you have to recheck the information you collected. Because your research project may cover a variety of topics, if you can identify the topic as it relates to your outline and write it on the top of every card, it will help you sort it later.

If you copy a long passage from a book and it takes up more than one card, be sure to indicate the author, book, topic, and page where you start on subsequent note cards or documents. Then clip the pages together so that they don’t get separated later.

# Citing Sources

During your research, you will notate information from the source. These two types of information require documentation: direct quotations and paraphrasing. You need to cite both types of sources.

If you use text as it appears in the source, enclose it in quotation marks. On your reference card, include the author’s name, the name of the book, the year of publication, and the page number of the quote. If the quotation is long and some of the information is not pertinent to your topic, you may choose to leave out some of it. To do this, use ellipses (three periods with spaces between) to indicate you have left some of the quotation out.

If you include a long quotation, then your style manual may indicate that you use a block format for the quotation. This means you will set the quotation off from the regular text by indented margins and use single spacing. Consult your style manual for specifics.

If you read a section in the book and synthesize the author’s information into a condensed version using your own words, that is considered paraphrasing the author’s work, and you must cite the source. In your paper, you do not need to cite the page numbers for paraphrased text, but you will want to write down the page numbers on your reference card for your own records.

Academic honesty extends beyond test taking to researching and citing sources in written and Internet-based projects. In doing scholarly research and writing, it extends to how you cite sources and other people’s ideas. A scholarship ethic is involved requiring you give credit to the people who wrote or developed the idea. So, when in doubt, cite your source.

# How Much Research Is Enough?

It is not always possible to gauge how much information you will need for a 10-, 20-, or 30-page paper. There isn’t a mathematical formula on how to determine this information. However, it is better to have too much material and have to cut some of it than to have too little. So, think larger when collecting. Later when you are sorting and writing, you have options from which to select.

# Ready to Write?

You have completed your research and you are ready to write. Before you turn on the computer, you need to sort your research and shuffle your note cards in relation to your outline. Stack your cards as they relate to specific topics in your outline. Then go through each stack and order the cards into the proper sequence. Check to see if you have one or more stacks with a large number of cards and some stacks with only one or two cards. Look at your outline and determine whether you have completed your research or if you still have more to do. If you have electronic note card documents, it will be helpful for you to print them so that you can sequence them. If you are ready to write, turn on your computer and have your note cards and style manual handy.

# Format for Your Research Paper

Consult your style manual to determine the parameters for page dimensions, indentation, and spacing. Your instructor may indicate that you use a specific font, such as Times New Roman, and font size. The general format for your research project includes the following items:

## Title Page

The title page should have the following information in the following order:

* Near the top is the name of your university. Check your style manual for the specific number of lines from the top.
* Aligned center on the page lengthwise is the title of your research paper.
* Near the bottom and centered is your name. Under that are the title of the class (e.g., DAN 300 History of Dance), the instructor’s name, and the date the paper is due. Check with your instructor about the preferred style for the order and format.

## Introduction

The preliminary part to the research paper, titled Introduction, is written in first person and includes the purpose of the paper, the research question, the scope and sequence of the topic, and any other delimitating factors.

## Body of the Research Paper

The format for the first page of the paper is usually somewhat different from the format for the subsequent pages. Consult your style manual to find out how many lines down you need to have on the first page before you start to write.

Catch the reader’s attention by beginning the paper with some interesting information.

If the paper is long, then consider breaking it into sections delineated by headings. Follow the approved outline.

## Research Findings

Near the end of the paper, you need to list important findings from your research. The findings should support a conclusion. The conclusion should answer the research question asked at the beginning of the study. Often your research doesn’t end there; rather, it opens up additional questions or areas to pursue for further study. You may be asked to list these questions or suggestions for future research.

## End in Sight

At the end of the research paper is the selected bibliography. The term *selected* is used because you probably did not consult every book, journal article, video, or Internet site that ha**s** information about your topic. Also, you may have been asked to access only a certain number of resources for the project.

## Additional Resources

Sometimes providing photos, drawings, diagrams, or web pages adds to the research paper. These additional items require citations.

Use the Checklist for Writing Your Research Paper (which appears later in this document) in conjunction with your style manual to navigate the process.

# Time Management of Your Research Project

The key to controlling your research project is to break it into manageable portions. You can’t write a good research paper in one night. Establish a plan in which you dedicate a set number of hours a week to work on the project. Set a deadline in advance of the project due date and begin writing early. If you encounter problems, seek help immediately rather than wait for them to resolve themselves; in other words, be proactive.

# Prepare for Murphy’s Law

Murphy’s Law (Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong) can go into effect at any moment. Your printer can break down as you print your paper. You can lose your research when your hard drive dies, so back up your work often on a USB drive. Anything can happen, and it can happen at the worst possible moment. Be prepared; plan ahead, start early, and don’t leave big questions or small details until the very last minute.

# Oral Report

After you have written the paper, you may not want to talk or read about the topic for at least six months. But you are not finished yet. You did the research; now present it to your classmates. Preparing an oral report that presents your research, outlines your purpose or problem, synthesizes the information you found about your topic, lists findings, and contains a conclusion is often a culminating project in a dance history class. Your instructor might ask you to include audiovisuals in your oral report or do a PowerPoint presentation with photos and videos. Why? This is practice for the real world!

Your research, writing, and presenting are finished for this project. However, you might still have unanswered questions or ideas. These are great springboards for future projects or just follow-up interests in a topic. So, take advantage of this moment and jot them down in an electronic folder for future projects and interesting things to explore further.

# Checklist for Writing Your Research Paper

## Sources

The following are major resources for dance materials. Other dance collections are part of university libraries, museums, and organizations.

* The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts: Jerome Robbins Dance Collection ([www.nypl.org/about/divisions/jerome-robbins-dance-division](http://www.nypl.org/about/divisions/jerome-robbins-dance-division))  
  The Dance Collection page includes the following information:  
  Archival Manuscripts and Rare Books  
  Iconography, Prints, and Designs  
  Jerome Robbins Audio and Moving Image Archive  
  Dance Oral History Project  
  Digital Collections
* The Library of Congress Dance Collections  
  (<http://www.loc.gov/acq/devpol/colloverviews/> [Click on “Humanities,” then click on “Dance.”])
* Periodicals (magazines and journals): *Dance;* *Dance Chronicle; Dance Research Journal; Dance Research Journal, National Dance Society Journal, Dance Teacher,* and *Journal of Dance Education*
* Monographs: Dance Perspectives, Studies in Dance History, CORD Research in Dance: The Society of Dance History Scholars
* Unpublished materials
* Theses and dissertations
* Diaries
* Internet resources
* General dance Internet sites: Use *dance* as the general search term

## Note Cards

* Bibliography cards
* Reference cards: Include author, titles, subject, page number, year of publication

## Outline

Introduction

* Purpose: The *why*
* Problem: The *what;* often called the *research problem* or the *hypothesis*
* Procedure or method: The plan to present the problem
* Scope and limitations of the research

Body of the Research Paper

* Citations for quoted materials
* First citation
* Subsequent citations
* Sequential citations
* Quotations
* Short quotations
* Block quotations
* Paraphrased materials

Ending

* Findings
* Conclusion

Selected bibliography

# Components of the Research Paper

Title page

Introduction (written in first person)

Quotations and paraphrased citations

Cited direct quotations

Primary sources

Secondary sources

Block quotations

Double quotation marks

Other citations

Paraphrasing

Ellipses

Footnotes or endnotes

Sequentially numbered

Selected bibliography

Only those sources used in the research project

# General Specifications for Typing the Research Paper

Typeface: Times New Roman 12-point type

Type color: Black

Margins: 1 inch all around (top, bottom, left, right)

Page numbers: On the bottom right

Footnotes

Presentation folder: Paper or plastic

Title page:

Name of university

Title of research paper

Your name

Title of course

Instructor’s name

Date