

Documented Essays

As college students, you will be asked to write papers using sources. Using sources effectively means that you must understand what you have read and integrate this material with your own opinions and observations. It's a process that requires a high level of skill in thinking, reading, and writing. We call this "critical thinking."

Documented essays are also known as term papers, library papers, or research essays, and we generally write them for one of three reasons: to analyze, to interpret, or to report.

A **report** is the simplest type of documented essay: it presents or surveys a problem or issue, and that presentation is uncomplicated. The second type of documented essay, an **interpretation**, presents a problem and interprets your findings as well. It examines and weighs various views and perspectives on a specific problem or issue. The third type of documented essay, an **analysis**, involves advanced critical thinking. Here, the writer presents a hypothesis, tests that hypothesis, and then evaluates the conclusions. Each of these essays is an extension or development of the type before it.

Documented, analytical essays force you to evaluate your reading, your sources, and even your own reasoning ability.

Both reading and writing documented essays will involve the integration of two complex skills: research and writing. Critically reading documented essays demands that you understand the material and evaluate where you found that material—your sources—as you move along. Writing your own documented essay involves both reading and understanding the sources on your subject and integrating this material with your own conclusions.

A Brief Overview on Writing Documented Essays.

There are many sources that contain information on writing documented essays, and many of these sources are online. Research the topic, and see what you can find.

Documented Essays

In the meantime, here is a brief bit suitable for our purposes in WR121.

Research and writing are the basic skills of writing research papers. You must know where to find your material, and you must understand the material you have read in order to summarize, paraphrase, and explain it. Along the way, you must evaluate the sources that you use—are they reliable? Think about this whether you agree with them or not.

When you consult a documented essays as part of you research, first look at the title. What does it prepare you for? Then skim the essay to get a general feel or impression of the matter and the writer's own point of view. While you're at it, check a little about the author as well. Look for some information in the biographies. Why did the author write the essay?

This may have not occurred to you initially, but think a moment: you are writing a documented essay and must cite your sources—what about the sources the writer uses? Check them out and evaluate them. Are they respected and reliable?

Finally, ask yourself how the ideas of the writers you read pertain to the world and human nature.

When you read the source essays closely, ask yourself whether or not you find the arguments or claims convincing, and determine why you do or do not. You have to determine what the writer's thesis or argument is in order to understand the intent of the essay. Only then can you begin to respond critically to the content and the point of view.

Keep your mind open. A closed mind is resistant to learning. Look at the sort of devices the writer uses in the argument—are they logical? Emotional? Ethical?

What are your own thought processes while reading the source material? Do you react emotionally? Logically? What are the reason for your reactions. Be aware of yourself as a thinker and of how your mind works. Be aware of your own value system and of where you stand on the claims the writer makes.

Documented Essays

When you write your own essay, you will usually use both **primary** and **secondary** sources. Primary sources are the original materials—the literature, historical documents, letters, speeches, your own experiments, and so on. Secondary sources are the explanations from other people on the original material—their evaluations and opinions.

Begin by forming up a thesis, and know that at this stage it will be tentative and subject to change as you progress in the research and your knowledge grows. Determine what audience you are writing for as well.

Remember that a documented essay integrates three types of material:

- Common Knowledge
- Your own thoughts and observations
- Someone else's thoughts and observations

You must document (or cite) your sources for the third type. If you do not, this unacknowledged use of another's work is called **plagiarism**. Plagiarism consists of using words from your sources (direct quotes) without using quotation marks. However, it also includes summaries of that material (the ideas or writings of another person) without citing that source. Finally, it includes using someone else's academic work—another student's, etcetera—and passing that off as your own.

Scholarship consists in large part of researching materials and citing that material. It shows you are well read and hard-working.

And as a final step in writing your essay, try reading it from your audience's point of view. That will help expose any weaknesses in your paper.

Good luck.