

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

UWS AND COMP ESSAYS: THE RESEARCH ESSAY

Unlike research essays you probably did as a high-school student, college-level research writing is *argumentative* and does not merely *report*. Your essay will primarily be an argument about your primary text or subject but will also be engaging with and responding to the existing conversations occurring about that primary text or subject.

Where do I even start?! (Don't panic.)

- **Identify your interests** around the topic you are writing for.
- **Start with sources, not a thesis.** In research writing, your thesis will evolve as you research.
- **Skim** to identify helpful sources. Read:
 - Abstracts
 - Key terms and subject terms
 - Indexes, bibliographies, chapter lists
 - Introductions, conclusions, first/last sentences of paragraphs
- **Read your sources**, take notes, write summaries, and keep track of the citation information!
- **Don't stop researching** when you have the required number of sources and be aware that you may need to return to research throughout the writing process.

How do I use my sources?

- Primary source(s)– this is still the primary focus of your essay!
- Other sources (supplementary primary sources, secondary sources, and reference sources) will scaffold the argument you make about your primary text and may function in one or more of the following ways:
 - Informative evidence:
 - Helps define a key term
 - Provides context or background
 - Describes a scholarly conversation in which the essay participates
 - Speculative evidence:
 - Imagines a practical application for the essay's claim
 - Presents a potential solution to the complication the essay deals with
 - Provides inspiration or a call to action
 - Supporting evidence:
 - Supports the essay's argument
 - Adds additional examples
 - Adds to the complexity of the argument
 - Motivating evidence:
 - Presents a problem that the essay sets out to solve
 - Provides a counterargument to the essay's claim
 - Identifies a short-fall, gap, or mistake in the critical conversation

Types of research theses:

A research thesis BOTH makes a claim about the primary source or topic AND identifies how that claim responds to the critical conversation. A strong thesis may:

- Take sides in a debate
- Fill in a gap in the scholarship
- Redirect focus away from or toward a particular feature or aspect of the primary text
- Offer a new perspective on the topic (new lens)
- Correct a misinterpretation or misunderstanding

What about motive?

More than any other essay you will write for UWS, your research essay will depend heavily on MOTIVE. Motive is both why we write and how/why we are entering a conversation. Your thesis is the contribution you are making to that conversation and fulfills your motive.

Dos and do-nots

Do:

- Use both paraphrases and direct quotations
- Differentiate your own ideas from those of your sources
- Use your sources to help articulate your ideas about your primary text
- Introduce, analyze, and cite your sources
- Allow your thesis to change as you encounter new information
- Both discard and add new sources
- Follow citation rules
- Ask for help from a Brandeis librarian (www.brandeis.edu/library/research/help/)

Do not:

- Use sources to express your argument
- Let your sources drown out your own ideas
- Use sources to do all of the analysis of your primary text
- Use hit-and-run quotes
- Assume that the source's significance will be obvious to the reader
- Ignore sources contrary to your thesis
- Keep sources in your paper just because they were in your bibliography

Example: Introduction from a student research essay

Is it possible to make efforts to encourage oppressed or marginalized groups while simultaneously sending messages of discouragement, even unintentionally? Such a situation may seem contradictory, but then, "Aarne Thompson folktale type 440", commonly known as "The Frog Prince," is full of contradictions. A frog is portrayed as revolting but is then ultimately revealed to be an attractive partner, and a princess is rewarded both for the assertion of her wishes and for deference to those of another. Two stories adhering to this archetype, one modern and one older and more traditional, both show this duality. One, The Princess and the Frog, is a relatively recent version, was released by Walt Disney Animation in late 2009 and tells the story of a waitress in 1920's New Orleans who first transforms into a frog and then into a princess. The other is an older text, considered a classic, and was formally published through the efforts of the Brothers Grimm in 1812, and known as "The Frog King." While both appear to be mainly independent takes on the same tale type, there do seem to be some apparent connections between the two. These two different versions of the tale provide case studies for how the story manages to simultaneously send overt messages encouraging self-assertion and social mobility while undermining those messages by endorsing existing social hierarchies.

Much of the existing scholarly writing regarding both works has paid specific attention to the gender politics of the film, although the work on The Princess and the Frog generally focuses on the racial implications of the story. Opinions on those implications are by no means unanimous, and even individual reactions have often been mixed. ... Further research regarding the texts and analysis of them reveal that how the stories deal with race and gender are part of a comprehensive approach to social hierarchies in general.

Credit: The Brandeis University Writing Center, 2020.

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For more information, see www.brandeis.edu/UWP or write to UWP@brandeis.edu.