

## Research Essay

Not every history course requires a research essay, and many that do give you a selection of two or three set topics from which to choose. However, at some point in your academic career, you will be presented with the task of writing a research paper with a topic of your own choosing. Depending on your personality, the chance to select a research project of your very own is either a blessing, a curse, or, more often than not, a combination of both. Ultimately, the success of your essay depends on adhering to the following list of helpful do's and don'ts. The result will be a rewarding researching and writing experience.

- 1) **DO** have an idea of the material covered in your course that interests you. Did you enjoy Professor Johnson's lecture on the origins of the feminist movement in nineteenth-century America? Were you fascinated by the role played by black women in the early years following the founding of the NAACP? Perhaps you should explore one of those avenues. This leads to the following point.
- 2) **DO** meet with a librarian once you have a general topic picked out. Librarians are your best friends. Their knowledge of their own collections and of valuable online data sources, and their years of expertise in the field, can make researching a potential topic much easier. They also might inform you that their sources on your ideal project are limited or nonexistent. That might send you back to the drawing board, but at least you found out early enough to look for a new topic.

Selecting a research project is as much about avoiding some common pitfalls as it is about making the right choices.

- 1) **DON'T** pick a topic that does not interest you (see tip 1 above). I have seen far too many students get frustrated and nervous about not having a topic, and consequently fall back on a topic that does not interest them. If you do not like Keynesian economic policy in 1930s Europe, please stay away from it. You will become bored, frustrated, or both, and your writing will suffer accordingly.
- 2) **DON'T** worry about not having a coherent argument before you begin researching. As I mentioned above, pick a general topic that interests you and start reading up on it. The more you read, the more easily you can begin to develop an argument.
- 3) **DON'T** pick a topic that is too broad, or that you cannot sufficiently cover in the allotted space of time. As fascinating as a paper on the evolution of European art from the Baroque to the present might sound to you, can you really construct a compelling and coherent paper covering 400 years in only a few months, while still meeting your other commitments? Or you might find that your essay topic, although intriguing, would require you to travel to Romania for three months, which you cannot afford. You might also encounter a topic about which most of the sources are in a language you cannot read. Plan your time carefully, and

refer back to point 2 under **DO'S**. If you meet with a librarian early enough, he or she might be able to steer you away from a dead end.

- 4) **DON'T** get lost doing too much preliminary reading on your topic. If you find that a quick search of the library catalog reveals hundreds of books on your topic, narrow your research project. This will cut down on the number of books you have to read and allow you to devote more energy to constructing your own argument.

Whatever topic you pick, pursue it with confidence and optimism. A research essay is your chance to shine, to show what you have learned, to flex your intellectual muscles, and to make an argument that is your very own.