

# Writing a Research Paper in Archaeology

Curtis Runnels  
Patricia McAnany  
Priscilla Murray  
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## Introduction

The ability to write a good research paper is an essential skill. If you are not confident of your ability to write a good paper, or you have received poor grades in the past, this handout will help you make improvements. You may also wish to get one of the manuals for writing theses and term papers available at the Boston University bookstore, and plan to work with a tutor at the Boston University Writing Center. Two helpful publications are W. G. Booth, G. G. Colomb, and J. M. Williams, *The Craft of Research* (2003, Chicago, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) and the *Chicago Manual of Style* (2005, Chicago, 15<sup>th</sup> edition). The former gives practical advice on how to plan research and write formal papers. The latter is the essential reference for formal writing from grammar to bibliography to the use of electronic sources. These books are available in Mugar Memorial Library (Reference) and the Stone Science Library.

## Getting Started

What subject do you find interesting? What is known, and not known, about the subject? What questions remain to be answered? What would be the significance of the answers? Use your interest in a particular subject and the unanswered questions about it as a starting point to formulate a specific problem that you wish to analyze as a thesis. Example: you might be interested in the Greek Bronze Age and the Mycenaeans. That is a **subject**, which is both broad and unspecific. A specific **topic** might be “Why did the Mycenaean Empire collapse?” A possible answer to this topical question could be posed as a **thesis**, e.g. “The Mycenaean Empire collapsed because of a prolonged drought.” Once you have formulated this sequence of subject, topic, and thesis, you are ready to start.

A thesis is the heart and soul of any paper. A successful paper **must** begin with a thesis, typically the first sentence of the introduction. A thesis is a **hypothesis** or a proposition such as “the Maya collapse resulted from an increase in population that surpassed the productive capacity of the available agricultural technology” or “the Neanderthals became extinct as the result of new diseases introduced by contact with anatomically modern humans.” A thesis posits a cause and effect relationship between events or variables and engages the reader’s interest by telling the reader what the research is about. A good thesis guides your research and requires careful evaluation, explanation, and testing with evidence.

Your paper should convey your interest and engagement in the subject. Avoid a simple descriptive report on the sources you consult or the reiteration of one author's arguments. Read primary sources. Do not rely on other writers' interpretations of the sources, but evaluate all arguments and evidence yourself. Be skeptical. Challenge the arguments. Dig deeper. Try to think like a member of a jury in a trial. Think of your sources as the attorneys for the defense and the prosecution that present their arguments for and against the thesis. You must reach a verdict and decide in favor of one or the other. Which one is right? Why? Be explicit when you explain your reasons for your verdict on the thesis. Don't be afraid to prove that the thesis you began with is *not* supported by the evidence. Negative results are a productive form of research.

### **The Abstract**

Every paper must have an abstract of 100 to 300 words identifying the subject, topic, and thesis, and summarizing the research, results, and conclusions. An abstract is not a statement of what you are going to do, but what you have in fact done in the paper. Tip: write the abstract *twice*, once before you begin writing the paper to clarify your thinking about the question or questions you are trying to answer, and again after you are done with the paper and you know how it all came out.

### **Structure of the Paper**

The first paragraph of your paper is very important. It must introduce your subject, topic, and thesis, discuss the significance of the problem, describe your research, and give an outline of your conclusions. The introduction must get the reader's attention and let the reader know what is in the paper. After the introduction, each paragraph should follow in a smooth, logical sequence. Your last paragraph is equally important because it summarizes your findings and convinces the reader that your conclusions are supported by the evidence. State your conclusions clearly in the first sentence of the last paragraph.

### **Other Points to Remember**

Write a detailed outline before you begin your research. As you work, consult the outline frequently, adding to it, turning it from a subject outline to a sentence outline, and ultimately expanding it to full paragraphs. Once you start writing, bear in mind that one draft of your paper is inadequate. Experienced writers write many drafts, typically three or more. Include a title page and an abstract; double space everything; paginate the text; use headings and subheadings to divide the text; make sure that every citation in the text is in the bibliography and vice versa; use dates consistently and explain conventions (e.g., are you using calendar dates B.C. and A.D., or uncalibrated or calibrated 14C?); do not use slang or vague expressions ("cool," "a lot"), double negatives, or contractions.

Keep your writing simple and use declarative sentences and direct verbs, avoiding the passive voice (e.g., “they found artifacts in the ravine” not “artifacts were found in the ravine”). When you are finished, proofread your paper to check spelling, grammar, and punctuation, paying attention to the agreement of tense (has/had), number (one/they; phenomenon/phenomena), possessives versus plurals (artifact’s/artifacts), case (who/whom), and other common errors such as confusing “its” (possessive pronoun) with “it’s” (contraction of “it is”) or “affect” with “effect.”

Cite only the references you use. Do not cite titles that you have not read or consulted. Use primary sources such as excavation reports and articles in peer-reviewed journals, and limit your use of textbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and web sites. If a source has not been subjected to peer review or editorial control be skeptical of the contents. Remember that newspaper editorials, blogs, and similar writings are unfiltered opinion and not data. Always provide sufficient detail for the reader to know where you obtained your information, and include the author, year of publication, place of publication, and specific page numbers. Specific page numbers for large books must be cited. For web sites, use only those that are peer-reviewed, and for individually-authored sites (as opposed to sites like JSTOR or e-journals) include the author, year written, page number, and the complete URL address.

Notes go at the end of the paper before the bibliography. Citations in the text are placed in parentheses immediately following the information you are referencing. The format is “author’s name-date-page numbers” (e.g., Potter 1979: 15-20). The entry in the bibliography corresponding with this citation is Potter, Timothy W., 1979, *The Changing Landscape of South Etruria*. New York: St. Martin’s Press. Details for citing books, journals, and chapters in books can be found in the *Chicago Manual of Style* or in the “Guidelines for Contributors” of journals (e.g., the *Journal of Field Archaeology* or *American Antiquity*).

Figures (maps, plans, photographs, or other images) are grouped at the end of the paper, each with a number and a caption explaining the figure and identifying the source. Figures are not window dressing: each should add something to your argument. A map is useful for putting archaeological sites in context. Figures should convey information that cannot be adequately expressed in words alone. Photographs or drawings may be used to clarify the details of a building or an artifact being described in the text. Graphs, charts, and tables should be used sparingly. A simple line graph depicting declining rainfall in the Bronze Age and demonstrating the severity of a drought affecting the Mycenaeans may be used to make a presentation of quantitative data if a table or a verbal description is insufficient.

Tip: when you are done have someone read your abstract, or the whole paper, and comment on it. Are your arguments logical? Are they supported by the evidence? Do you present only positive evidence to support your thesis? Do you evaluate negative evidence that might lead a skeptical thinker to challenge the thesis?

## **Plagiarism**

Do not commit plagiarism. Plagiarism is a serious offense. Never take credit for other people’s ideas or words. Your papers must be your work entirely with your own

thoughts, ideas, and words. You are responsible for creating your work from your own imagination and based on original research. It is not acceptable to paraphrase or copy the work of others. Just as you cannot cut and paste from a printed source, it is completely unacceptable, under any circumstances, to cut and paste even a word from the Internet without attribution. When you use any source it is absolutely necessary to provide a full and accurate citation of it. Anything less is a form of theft and will have serious consequences. Do not plagiarize yourself. You may not submit the same paper, or substantial portions of one paper, to more than one instructor. Every paper, in every course, should be completely original. If you have questions about the line between original scholarship and plagiarism, or if you have questions about specific practices, ask your instructor about them at an early stage of your writing. Do not be tempted to make a mistake that could impact your career.