

Chapter

4

IV. AN ESSAY BASED ON PRIMARY SOURCES

A. Focus: writing an essay based on primary sources

In this chapter you will begin writing the first research essay in this program. At the end of the chapter you will write the first draft. The general topic for the paper is: *A Remarkable Person I Know*. This is an expository essay, based on primary research, about an interesting and remarkable person who is known to you personally. Your subject cannot be someone famous or a public person known to most people. Your task is to make this person known to your readers.

Conducting primary research makes the researcher, or writer, an expert as the story must be based on familiar, often personal, information. For the essay, students develop their topic based on someone from their own background. Once students have decided on a general topic, they will gather information through various sources. This is called primary research because the data or information for the paper comes directly from the source. It is based on personal experiences rather than information from a “middleman” or someone who has already written about this topic. Because the writer becomes the expert on the topic of the paper, the focus of the work is shifted to the composition process itself and there is less emphasis on gathering information from other text sources, less reliance on other people’s writing and no settling for cutting and pasting other people’s views into one’s own.

The writing strategies presented in this chapter teach specific steps and processes that support new skills. The expectation is that by going through the steps, students will become conscious of the characteristics of the text that they produce and the strategies they employ to produce the text and hopefully, add new strategies to their repertoire.

Conducting research on a familiar topic makes it easier to develop one's own voice in writing. Doing primary research is also an excellent skill to learn as it can be useful in a variety of settings, including business, personal, and academic.

In this chapter students will:

- conduct primary research and evaluate resources
- develop a working thesis to guide the research
- incorporate sources into the text
- organize the information into a draft
- write body paragraphs
- write a basic introduction
- writing a basic conclusion
- format the paper using the MLA format.

B. Conducting primary research

It is useful to divide research into primary and secondary research. Most students are familiar with secondary research as most school essays are reviews of research already completed by others – hence the term *secondary research*. It requires working from books, journals and articles written by other authors on the assigned topic at the library or through the internet. The student then reviews the opinions expressed by the authors and reuses that knowledge to expose or clarify an issue, often in a new and different way. Secondary research is the topic of chapter 5.

Primary research is used to create new knowledge and is conducted when working on a topic that is new or original with few or no primary sources available. It includes finding the relevant sources, collecting data, analyzing it and drawing conclusions that present new knowledge to the readers. Examples of primary research are scientific experiments, interviews, case studies, surveys, and polls. The experience of conducting primary research can give better insight into the results and assumptions behind some of the secondary research we read and sometimes assume to be general, factual or undisputable.

Students can conduct primary research even in short academic writing classes. This is the only way to gather data when there is little or no research on a topic because the subject is local, personal or when the researcher is working with a specific group or person about their undocumented or unpublished experiences.

When writing about someone you know who you think is remarkable in some way, the best way to learn about their experiences is:

- to talk to them
- read letters or memoirs
- interview someone who was their contemporary or who may have known them and or heard stories about their experiences from someone close to them.

Relevance: It is usually easier to write a paper on a topic that is familiar to the writer. Doing primary research is also an excellent skill to learn as it can be useful in a variety of settings including business, personal and academic.

Reflection 19: Most adults have conducted primary research in some manner e.g. tried to find out where a person lives who is not in the phonebook or find out which company has the best price is on phone plans? Think about a time when you had to find information that was not readily available? How did you do it?

C. Choosing a subject

The assignment for this chapter is to conduct primary research on a person from your own background and write a paper based on your findings.

Description of the main assignment for this chapter:

Topic: *A Remarkable Person I Know*

Length: 800 words (3-4 pages)

Format: MLA, Times New Roman, 12 points, double spacing

The general topic for this paper has already been assigned. It is to write about a remarkable person you know. Some writers believe that it can take up to 10% of the overall time spent on the essay to decide on the topic, in this case subject, of a research project.

Below are some guidelines for choosing the remarkable person, or subject, which will become the center of the thesis for your paper. When choosing a subject, keep in mind that you will be asked is to place your subject into a larger socio-historical perspective for a later paper in this program. That later paper will be based on secondary research. The experiences of the person you choose to write about should therefore have some relevance

to the events, trends or moods of the times in which that person lived and should be easily placed within that larger context.

Practice 4C1: Brainstorming

Here are some ways to start thinking about a remarkable person you could write about in the first research essay. Write down some thoughts on the following questions. You should then be able to come up with the names of 1 to 3 possible candidates for your study.

1. Most families have stories about people that are passed down from generation to generation. Start with those stories. Could any of the stories be worked into an essay?
2. Are there any stories about people from the place/town/neighborhood where you, or people you know, live or lived at one time?
3. Is there a period of time that was remarkable for some reason and during which people you know lived?
4. What occupations have family members or people known to you had? Is there one that stands out for some reason?
5. Did someone you know do something extraordinary like save a life, make changes in their lives that took courage, affect change in their community, affect history?
6. Has someone you know defied convention or done something unconventional and forward thinking for his/her time?

D. Finding primary sources

When choosing a subject it is important to keep in mind how and where you will find the resources and also how much data you have access to. This is an opportunity to find out more about the interesting persons you are considering for your essay. Do you need to use family archives, letters, oral histories, documents, local archives, interview knowledgeable family members, other locals, your own memory, photo albums, blogs, and audio or video recordings?

If you are looking for data online, make sure that you know how to search effectively for information. Libraries regularly conduct tutorials for students. Below is a link to a free tutorial online presented by the University of California at Berkeley:

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/FindInfo.html>:

Keep in mind that there should be enough material for an 800 word essay (3-4 pages).

Practice 4D1: Focused free writing

Use focused free writing and the questions below to guide you as you begin to think about what kinds of sources you may need and where to find them.

1. What do I want to find out?
2. What type of evidence is needed to support my topic?
3. How, where and when am I going to find this particular information? (This is your research methodology)
4. Who am I going to talk to/observe/survey? (These are your subjects or participants)
5. What do I know about this topic and what is the source of that information, a person, a letter, a family story? Is it reliable? Is it accurate?
6. What do I think about this topic now?
7. What do I think will come out of this story? My conclusions?

Based on <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/559/01/>

Reflection 20: Based on your answers to the questions above, think about whether the person and their experiences fit the assignment? Does the story reflect the social, political, economic, historic contexts in which it took place? How?

E. Moving from a general topic to a working thesis

Ways to develop a working thesis were presented in the previous chapter. The thesis is a statement that expresses both the topic and the author's position on the topic. The thesis must do more than state or describe a topic. It also asserts a point of view on the topic that another person might view differently. A good thesis statement thus had two basic parts: A topic and a point of view. Because the thesis statement determines the controlling idea of the paper, both its content and structure, everything in the paper must relate directly to the thesis statement.

In the evaluation of the sources, it is likely that an interesting point or theme may have emerged. The subject is remarkable for some reason. Before starting the actual analysis of the data and composing the first draft, it is useful to develop a working thesis that will guide the organization of the information you will present. A working thesis may be revisited and reworked during the composition of the paper and a thesis statement developed.

Relevance: a working thesis guides the organization of the information

Reflection 21: The purpose of a working thesis: Think about a time when you started to write a paper without really knowing what you were going to write about. How did that work? A working thesis guides the writing process and makes it more focused and deliberate.

Practice 4E1: Prewriting to develop a working thesis

Use your preferred prewriting method to develop a working thesis using the following questions.

1. Who is the subject?
2. What makes the person remarkable?
3. Why did I choose this person?
4. What do I know about this person?
5. What is interesting to me about this?
6. What aspects of this do I have an opinion on?
7. What are some of the specific parts of this topic? Can it be broken down further?
8. Which of these aspects are limited enough to write about in 3-4 pages?
9. Which of these aspects lend themselves to expository writing?
10. Which one of these topics best suits my interests, knowledge and experience?
11. Do I have access to more information? Where?

Production 4E1: Writing up a working thesis statement

Read your working thesis statement out loud.

Circle your topic and underline your point of view.

Does it tell the reader what the essay will be about?

F. Collecting and evaluating data

Now you are ready to go to the resources; the family archives, knowledgeable individuals, local libraries, and local papers, to collect the data that will provide the evidence to support your story.

It is good practice to think about the quantity and quality of the sources or the raw data you are considering before you choose to use them as support for your paper. The question of quantity is easier to answer. Is there enough material to build a paper on? Is there too much material and if so, how do you choose which material to use and which to ignore? Which sources provide the most information? How much support is there? Knowing the quantity of the resources may help you determine which candidate is the best subject.

The resources are the raw data for the assignment and they may vary in quality, appropriateness and relevance to the working thesis. It is useful to begin the evaluation by determining which sources are most thorough, interesting or unique. Is there evidence that some may be based on myth? Is the information provided by informants who might be biased against the candidate? If there is a conflict involved, the different parties on either side of the conflict will not express the same views. The same event may not be interpreted in the same way by all the people who experienced it. Biographies, autobiography and obituaries may be one-sided and either too positive towards the subject or too negative. Newspapers may be inaccurate or simplistic or just tell part of the story. Family documents can also be one-sided. Read the sources critically and evaluate them in relation to one another to determine which are the most appropriate.

Remember: Always get permission from the person you want to use as a subject in your study. Also, ask the people you interview for permission to use the information they have provided. Be careful not to hurt or harm your subjects by revealing inappropriate information.

Summary from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/559/01/>

G. Documenting sources during data collection

Remember to document all your resources as you are reading them. Having to go back to find sources while you are composing the bibliography is very time consuming.

1. Citing primary sources

MLA style: English and other humanities subjects

MLA recommends in-text citations that refer readers to a list of works cited. An in-text citation names the author of the source, often in a signal phrase, and gives the page

number in parentheses. At the end of the paper, a list of works cited provides publication information about the source; the list is alphabetized by authors' last names (or by titles for works without authors).

In-text citation

Mary Sundeen recounted how the women in the factory used to have to work much harder than the men to get noticed. They were very excited when Jean Benson became the manager of the factory (1).

Entry in the list of works cited

Sundeen, Mary. "Reflections of a Factory Girl." 11 March 2001.

Online posting. Blogspace.com. 16 April 2010.

<www.blogspace.com/factorygirl>

<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/rewriting/rc2.html>

2. Beware of personal biases

Be sure your own personal biases do not get in the way of your research and that you consider all sides. You should let your subjects know whether your research results will be anonymous or not. When reporting your results, be sure that you accurately represent what you observed or what you were told. Do not take interview responses out of context and do not discuss small parts of observations without putting them into the appropriate context.

3. Interview techniques

One way of collecting primary data is through interviews. Always bring prepared questions to an interview. Leave enough open-ended questions so that interesting information is not left out because it was not specifically asked for. It is often a good idea to start the interview with some small talk to give the informant a chance to get comfortable with the interview process. During the interview, pay attention, be polite, and do not push too hard for answers. Guide the interview so that you get the responses you need.

Good interviewers recognize that certain types of questions are more likely to elicit good answers than others. Avoid yes/no questions. Clearly a response sheet with nine yes's and six no's does not provide enough material for an 800 word essay. Also avoid biased questions. Those are questions that start with: *Don't you agree...* (Finnst þér ekki...), *Are you one of those people who think...* (Ert þú einn af þeim sem...?). Try to be clear and concise,

so the informant will understand what you are asking. A second, or third, interview might be necessary after the working thesis has been developed.

Summary from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/559/01/>

H. Analyzing primary data

Once the data has been collected, it must be analyzed. The key to analyzing data is to pull out information that is most relevant to your working thesis, information you can highlight and discuss, and information that will support your claims.

A good way to analyze data is to create categories or charts about the issues and identify recurrent themes that are most pertinent to the topic of your essay. Interviews are fairly easy to analyze - you go back through the answers, group the answers into categories and create a chart of how those answers may best fit within your essay.

Look at the following chart. Directly after the interview, the writer identified 5 topics or themes and supporting evidence for each of them. The writer then decided to use only three topics, and rearranged the evidence to support the new topics. The ideas that are crossed out are the ones the writer decided not to use.

Category/ theme	Evidence/ Supporting ideas, facts, examples, quotes, statistics.
Poverty	No education Few jobs before the war No jobs for women
Found job in a failing business	Men left for war and she found a job “I worked hard and became supervisor. I guess they had no one else to take over” Manager left to join the navy and she replaced him Difficult to get materials
Good group of friends	Magda? Played games Friends dropped out of school
Married young	Happy marriage 4 children Husband “Charlie” at war
WW2 opportunities	New markets Synthetic materials Manufactured boots Hired and trained women Job opportunities for women, Magda found a job in a weapon’s factory
Turned the business around and bought it	Materials Hired and trained women Changes to manufacturing boots Synthetic

I. Organizing the data

After developing a working thesis and analyzing the data, the next step is to organize the information in preparation for composing the essay. One way to organize the data is to write up another chart like the one presented below. The information may come from any of the sources, not just the interview. The topic, or idea, is written on the left side and the evidence or support available for that idea is written up on the right.

Category/theme	Evidence/Supporting ideas, facts, examples, quotes, statistics
1. Poverty	1 No education 2 Few jobs before the war 3 No jobs for women
2. Found job in a failing business	1 Men left for war and she found a job 2 “I worked hard and became supervisor. I guess they had no one else to take over” 3 Manager left to join the navy and she replaced him
3 . WW2 opportunities	1 New markets 2 Synthetic materials 3 Manufactured boots 4 Hired and trained women

Production 4I1: Plan and outline your essay

Use the preceding table as a model to plan and outline your essay. Keep in mind that your essay is not limited to three topics or 3 types of evidence.

Topics/ideas	Evidence/Supporting Ideas, facts, examples, quotes, statistics.
1	1 2 3
2	1 2 3

3	1 2 3
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J. From working thesis to thesis statement

The purpose of the thesis statement is to express in one concise sentence the point and purpose of your essay. It takes a clear position or makes a claim which will be supported in by the content of the essay. The thesis statement may change as new relationships come to light through analysis or additional research provides new or expanded information. Now it is time to sharpen the working thesis into a thesis statement.

Examples:

Original thesis: In this paper, I will describe what a successful business woman my grandmother was.

This is both personal (informal) and does not present the author's position.

Taking a clear position:

Revised thesis: My grandmother's hard work and creativity and the right timing made her a successful business woman.

The thesis statement:

Presents the topic: My grandmother

Informs the reader of a claim about the topic: hard work, creativity and a bit of luck

The thesis statement controls the essay by showing how the grandmother became a successful business woman. The *content* of the essay will examine the factors that led to the grandmother's success. The *evidence* will illustrate and describe the hard work, creativity, and onset of WWII opening up opportunities for women, which led to the grandmother's success. The evidence is based on primary sources.

The essay must contain clear and sufficient evidence to convince the reader why the grandmother became successful. The thesis statement summarizes the claim or explanation you will present. The thesis:

- determines content and structure of the essay
- is a roadmap for the paper

- usually refers to the subject + the writer’s assertion about it + and reasons for the assertion
- tells the reader what to expect
- is usually in the introductory paragraph
- is supported by evidence.

Thesis statements need to provide a unified claim. Using transitions can make the thesis statement more unified. Words like:

Additionally, always, because of, clearly, conclusively, first, for instance, for example, furthermore, generally, however, if...then, in fact, it could be argued that, most convincing, never, not only...but also, often, second, therefore, third, truly, typically, specifically, in particular, in addition.

Other words are used to indicate a shift from a more general or abstract idea to a more specific or concrete idea. Using them can make the writing more cohesive. Words like:

For example, for instance, after all, an illustration of, even, indeed, in fact, it is true, of course, specifically, to be specific, that is, to illustrate, truly.

Avoid vague words like "interesting," "negative," "exciting," "unusual," and "difficult", because they are hard to support. Abstract, catch-all words like "society," "values," or "culture" need limiting and clarification: "Icelandic culture", "pre-war society", "Christian values".

Production 4J1: Limiting the thesis

A Broad Topic:

A Remarkable Person I Know

Your working thesis: _____

Limit this working thesis by asking:

What would be the topic of the thesis statement?

What would be the evidence?

Use transition words.

If your thesis can be divided into two topics connected a coordinating conjunction (like and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet), try to connect the two statements with a subordinating conjunction (such as through, although, because, since) to show the relationship between the two statements.

K. A blueprint for an essay

The essay will follow the format for an enumeration essay. That is, the outline will be essentially a list of points that support the thesis statement. The chart below will serve as a guide for composing your first draft. Fill in the chart using your own data. This will guide you in the development of your body paragraphs, introduction, and conclusion in later sections.

	Section	How to	Your notes
INTRODUCTION	Subject(s)	Write a brief description of your remarkable person	
	Time and place	Describe the time period and place	
	Precipitating factor: dilemma, problem, crisis, predicament, situation, etc.	Summarize what factors started the chain of events Summarize the factors that make this person remarkable	
BODY PARAGRAPHS	Events: decisions, actions, help, hindrances, challenges, setbacks, good luck, etc.	List each important event that contributed to the outcome 1. 2 3 4	

CONCLUSION	Outcome	Summarize the most important events Describe significance of the outcome to your family	
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L. The architecture of body paragraphs

There are three main types of paragraphs: The introductory paragraph, the body paragraphs, and the concluding paragraph.

Most often, writers compose the paragraphs of the body of the essay before writing the introduction and the conclusion. This is because there may be a slight change or adjustment of the thesis statement during the writing of the essay itself. As the introductory and concluding paragraphs contain a reference to the overall thesis, it is wise to leave them until last.

Body paragraphs, like the essay itself, have a clear organization, an architecture that is common to most body paragraphs in expository essays of the type developed here. It is possible to characterize the body paragraphs in the following way:

1. Good body paragraphs organize presentations of ideas for both the writer and the reader.
2. Each paragraph discusses one idea.
3. Each paragraph contains: a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence.
4. Each paragraph has unity and cohesion.

Unity means confining the paragraph to a single topic, or subject.

If you change the topic, start a new paragraph. Cohesion means using a controlling idea or logical division of ideas.

1. Topic sentences and supporting sentences in a paragraph

Topic sentences tell the reader what the paragraph is about and what aspect of an idea will be developed. They can be placed anywhere in the paragraph, though they are usually the first sentence.

Supporting sentences help to develop the topic in more detail, perhaps providing evidence for a claim.

The concluding sentence sums up the information given in the paragraph. It may be introduced by a signaling phrase such as “In conclusion” or “To sum up”. It usually restates the topic sentence in different words or sums up the evidence in the supporting sentences. Its function may be to evaluate the information in the paragraph in relation to the purpose of the section or indeed the text overall.

http://www.ioe.ac.uk/caplits/writingcentre/essay_4cohesion.htm

Production 4L1: Composing the body paragraphs

Compose the first draft of the body paragraphs. The paper is about 3-4 pages. Use the blueprint you filled out above to guide you as you compose each paragraph. As this is a paper on a remarkable person, try to include at least one descriptive paragraph and one narrative paragraph.

Make sure that each paragraph has unity or discusses one idea that is presented in a topic sentence. Each topic sentence must be followed by supporting sentences and finally a concluding sentence. Use the transition words presented above to create cohesion within each paragraph. Use the following questions to guide you:

1. Is your dominant impression or point of view evident to the reader?
2. What vibrant details do you use to “show” your character? As with a descriptive essay, a good narrative does not explain but it “recreates” the characters, their actions, and the setting with vivid language.
3. What concrete and sensory details create the dominant impression for the readers?
4. Is your organizational structure clear? The narrative essay usually relates events in chronological order but the author might also present the events in the order of importance.

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/606/01/>

<i>INSTRUCTIONS</i>	DRAFT
Introduction	
Thesis statement:	
Body Paragraphs	
Topic sentence: for Main Idea 1	
evidence in support of the topic sentence	
evidence in support of the topic sentence	
evidence in support of the topic sentence	

Transition

Topic sentence: for Main Idea 2

evidence in support of the topic sentence

evidence in support of the topic sentence

evidence in support of the topic sentence

Transition

Topic sentence: for Main Idea 3

evidence in support of the topic sentence

evidence in support of the topic sentence

evidence in support of the topic sentence

Transition

Conclusion

Restated thesis:

M. The art of composing: strategies for writing introductions and conclusions

Understanding what strategies are and how they are used is an important part of this writing program. Generally speaking, strategies are tactics or procedures that are applied *consciously* to accomplish a task. People learn new strategies and master skills for every new situation. We have all learned to read by consciously using strategies to remember letters and sounds; yet now we are not at all aware of the mental steps and processes we are using to read text. Same applies to driving a car. An accomplished writer is usually not aware of how (s)he, for example, develops an introduction, because his or her use of these strategies is automatic. With practice, the learner begins to use a strategy automatically and unconsciously.

Some strategies for writing basic introductions and conclusions are presented in following.