



The Exploratory Research Paper – Syllabus

Course Description: Exploratory writing begins with a question. Research is then conducted to find potential answers that are shared with readers. This course guides the student through the process of writing an exploratory research paper of 1800-2200 words. Students learn how to develop a research question, choose and analyze a minimum of ten sources, group sources by potential answer, and organize a successful exploratory paper. Students enrolled in this class should already be comfortable with writing a standard middle/high school research paper, utilizing a variety of sources, and constructing a bibliography and works cited list in MLA format.

Class Outline:

Week One: First Steps

- A. Develop a Research Question
- B. Read and Analyze Sources
- C. Begin the Annotated Bibliography

Week Two: More Research

- A. Finish Reading Sources
- B. Group Sources

Week Three: Organizing the Paper

- A. Understand the Exploratory Paper
- B. Construct an Outline

Week Four: The Rough Draft I

Week Five: Continuing the Rough Draft

Week Six: Finishing the Rough Draft

Week Seven: Revisions

Week Eight: Final Submission



The Exploratory Research Paper

Grading Information: Assignments 1-7 will be averaged together to receive a weekly assignment grade. The final project submitted on Week 8 will receive a separate grade. Both the weekly assignment average and the final project grade will be combined utilizing the weighting seen below:

Course Components	Percentage of Final Grade
Weekly Assignments	40%
Final Paper	60%

Assignments 1-7 will be graded using the following rubric. The final project submitted on Week 8 will be graded using our standard grading rubric for *The Advanced Writer*.

Exemplary 100%	Strong 99%-90%	Proficient 89%-80%	Developing 79%-70%	Emerging 69%-60%	Beginning 59%-50%	No Attempt 49% and below
Student has followed all assignment directions and has demonstrated exemplary understanding of lesson concepts. For drafts of outline, bibliography, and paper, student has submitted a complete assignment and demonstrated excellent effort.	Student has followed most assignment directions and has demonstrated strong understanding of lesson concepts. For drafts of outline, bibliography, and paper, student has submitted a mostly complete assignment and demonstrated strong effort.	Student has followed most assignment directions but has struggled to fully understand lesson concepts. For drafts of outline, bibliography, and paper, student has submitted a mostly complete assignment and demonstrated proficient effort.	Student has followed some or most assignment directions but has demonstrated a need for better understanding of lesson concepts. For drafts of outline, bibliography, and paper, student has submitted mediocre written work and demonstrated some lack of effort.	Student has followed some assignment directions but has demonstrated inadequate understanding of lesson concepts. For drafts of outline, bibliography, and paper, student has submitted inadequate written work so that the instructor finds it difficult to provide helpful feedback.	Student has followed few assignment directions and has demonstrated poor understanding of lesson concepts. For drafts of outline, bibliography, and paper, student has submitted short and poorly written work so that the instructor is unable to provide helpful feedback.	Student has followed few to no assignment directions and has demonstrated no understanding of lesson concepts. For drafts of outline, bibliography, and paper, student has submitted nothing.



The Exploratory Research Paper

Lesson One: First Steps

SAMPLE LESSON

To begin, we would like to note the requirements for your paper. They are as follows:

- **Length: 1800-2200 words**
- **Sources: At least eight sources for research, with four of those sources being primary or secondary sources. The other four sources may be either primary, secondary, or tertiary.**
- **Citations: At least five sources cited within the paper and presented in a works cited list with the final paper.**

When writing an exploratory paper, you will not begin with a thesis – a point you are trying to make. Instead, the process of writing this type of paper is a **journey of research and discovery which brings you to the point, and perhaps, to several potential ends.**

The exploratory paper is different from the majority of other types of academic writing because its very name presupposes that you pass through unknown territory and should find your own way in it. Speaking less metaphorically, you begin writing without knowing to what conclusions you are going to come. Usually, you have a point in the beginning and should prove it in the paper; here you should write a paper in order to find a point.

By nature, exploratory writing generally explores a *problem* or a *question*, rather than a firmly planted idea. You are seeking a *solution* or *answer* throughout the process, rather than trying to prove a predetermined conclusion (i.e. a thesis). Throughout the exploratory paper, the writer is allowed to evaluate several potential solutions or answers, each with strengths and weaknesses, before determining which they find to be the most valid conclusion.

“An exploratory essay is, in essence, a retrospective of your writing and thinking process as you work through a problem. It describes when, how, and why you completed certain types

of research. This kind of writing is about how you work through problems that require writing and research. You will have to be introspective and think about your thinking process in order for your essay to turn out well.” (1)

KEY FEATURES OF AN EXPLORATORY PAPER –

1. **Exploratory papers are objective.** These papers approach a topic objectively and are written with a neutral tone. The writer is not trying to *solve* the problem or definitively *answer* the question. Rather, the writer is looking to discover and then explain all of the varying perspectives about the problem or question.
2. **Exploratory papers find common ground.** In order to objectively and clearly explain each perspective on an issue, the writer must consider the different audiences and groups of people who are interested in the issue. While exploring different viewpoints, the writer must seek common ground among the viewpoints and their proponents.
3. **Exploratory papers cover at least three points of view.** Mainstream issues or questions often maintain two major sides of debate. However, the exploratory essay should “look beyond the obvious answers to find creative solutions. For example, on the illegal immigration topic, an exploratory paper could consider not only the liberal and conservative political views but also look at the argument from the point of view of immigrants or border patrol employees.” (2)

BEGINNING STEPS –

We begin this week by choosing a research topic and locating sources. As with most research papers, almost any topic will work. However, remember that you will ultimately need to formulate a research question which will guide your exploration process. Follow these steps to choose a topic and develop a strong research question.

1. **Choose a topic of interest** and one that lends itself to investigation. Some topics may naturally be better for research than others.
2. **Conduct preliminary research** on your chosen topic to learn about what is already known about the topic, what information and literature exists for the topic, and what other research may have been completed or is ongoing for the topic.

3. **Consider the value of the topic in terms of exploration:** is there an area that has yet to be investigated worth your research, or are the topic and its questions overdone? Even for common topics, you can often put a new spin on an old question, but you also must be careful not to create a paper that is a replication of what others have already researched and discovered.
4. **Narrow the topic** using open-ended questions, such as *how* and *why*, or *so what*. In addition, consider the following: why does this topic matter to you? Why does this topic matter to others?
5. **Narrow the questions.** Create a list of potential questions that are of interest and can be further explored through research. Here, it is important to understand how some questions may be too broad or too narrow, both of which will make your research difficult.

EXAMPLE –

Too Broad: Why is social networking harmful?

This question is simply too broad and unclear. What social networking sites are being referred to? What is the harm that is being caused? How is *harm* actually defined?

Too Narrow: How many people use Instagram every day?

This question is too narrow, because the answer is a statistic. In addition, a research question that can be answered with a simple *yes* or *no* is also too narrow and should be avoided for this type of paper.

Strong Research Question: “How does the use of Instagram promote feelings of depression and inadequacy?”

This question is strong because it denotes a specific social media platform and problem.

NEXT STEPS –

You may perform the above steps for several topics, generating a list of multiple potential research questions. But, just as all topics are not suitable for this process, not all research questions are suitable either. Next, follow these steps to evaluate your potential questions and ultimately choose your final research question:

1. If possible, develop three or four strong research questions that interest you. Choose the one of most interest to begin with.
2. Write a paragraph or two based on what you already know about the question you have chosen. Include why the topic is important.
3. Predict at least three or four ways of answering the question you selected. Write a paragraph describing how each of these approaches answers the question.
4. Did you develop at least three approaches, and does this question still interest you enough to research possible answers? If you have already lost interest or could not find three approaches to answering the question, repeat steps two and three, using a different question.

With question in hand, you now begin the research process. Your research should utilize a variety of sources, including:

- **A minimum of four** primary or secondary sources (print or online) which are credible, reliable, and relevant. These sources should be professional or scholarly in nature.
- **A minimum of four** additional sources which may include organization-based literature (pamphlets, informative documents, etc.), films, personal interviews, government documents, popular sources in print or online, maps, charts, etc.
- **Personal experience and observation**, as is relevant to your essay.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS –

After you have settled on a research question, conduct some research using the Internet and your local library. For the purpose of this paper, you must utilize four or more primary and/or secondary sources *and* four or more additional sources.

Use the corresponding document sent with this week's lesson to review choosing & using sources, as necessary. You may have already covered this information with us, but either way, it is good to review the concepts so you can ensure that you are looking for and locating proper sources for the project.

THE ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY –

If you have written a research paper before, you should have some experience with constructing a bibliography. However, as you have been using a works cited list throughout most of our advanced classes, we want to review the difference between a works cited list and a bibliography.

A bibliography is a list of sources used for research. For a typical bibliography, full citations are required, including all of the bibliographic information for each source using the format designated by your instructor or school. The content for each citation varies by type of source.

On the other hand—a works cited list is a list of sources from which you cite (*use of direct quotation, statistic, or largely paraphrased fact*). Near the end of the project, you will create a works cited list for this paper, but for these initial assignments, the focus is on a bibliography – a list of all sources used in your research.

An annotation is a note of explanation, summary, and/or evaluation. Thus, an annotated bibliography includes not only the bibliographic information but also a paragraph (or several) which explains, summarizes, and evaluates the source for your own personal benefit and the benefit of other researchers.

An annotated bibliography is primarily beneficial because it allows you to learn more and think critically about your topic. The process of writing an annotated bibliography requires you to truly comprehend each source and assess the information critically. In doing so, you understand the topic more thoroughly and can see how each source may or may not be useful to your research question. Throughout this process, you gain a better perspective of what has been or is being said about the topic, which will later assist you in developing your own point of view and a thesis.

Follow these steps to create a proper listing for each source in an annotated bibliography.

1. Construct the full citation for each source, providing all bibliographic information in MLA format.
2. Then, write a brief summary (2-3) sentences about the content of each source. Your summary should give a brief synopsis of the main points of the source and be completely objective; do not include your own opinion of the text in the summary.

3. Finally, include a sentence or two discussing how each source is relevant to your own research. (That is: what kind of information does it provide? What perspective does it offer on your topic? What do you think you might do with this information?)
4. Alphabetize your sources according to the first word in each bibliography, i.e. the last name of the author or first major word of a title (normally excluding prepositions or *a*, *an*, and *the*).

EXAMPLES –

Notice how the first example is annotated in a single paragraph, whereas the second example is annotated in three paragraphs. For the purpose of this class, each of your annotations should be a single paragraph in length.

Brauner-Otto, Sarah. Personal Interview. 4 May 2011.

In this personal interview, I spoke with Dr. Brauner-Otto, a Sociologist at MSU, about the effects of single-parenthood on children. She discussed some of the setbacks for these children, such as being more likely to become single-parents themselves and potentially having a very low income in adulthood. However, she agreed with prominent research that most of this can be blamed on the income of the household as opposed to the parenting of the single-parent or absence of a second parent. This will be helpful in my paper because it confirms that economics are the main problem for single parents. This will also give my essay credibility as Dr. Brauner-Otto is a prominent sociologist on campus who is known for her work in the area of family structure.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Anchor Books, 1995.

Lamott's book offers honest advice on the nature of a writing life, complete with its insecurities and failures. Taking a humorous approach to the realities of being a writer, the chapters in Lamott's book are wry and anecdotal and offer advice on everything from plot development to jealousy, from perfectionism to struggling with one's own internal critic.

In the process, Lamott includes writing exercises designed to be both productive and fun. Lamott offers sane advice for those struggling with the anxieties of writing, but her main project seems to be offering the reader a reality check regarding writing, publishing, and struggling with one's own imperfect humanity in the process. Rather than a practical handbook to producing and/or publishing, this text is indispensable because of its honest perspective, its down-to-earth humor, and its encouraging approach.

Chapters in this text could easily be included in the curriculum for a writing class. Several of the chapters in Part 1 address the writing process and would serve to generate discussion on students' own drafting and revising processes. Some of the writing exercises would also be appropriate for generating classroom writing exercises. Students should find Lamott's style both engaging and enjoyable.

Assignment 1A: Complete both the beginning and next steps as discussed in the lesson. Develop a clear and focused research question for your project. Present your research question along with a paragraph that discusses how you chose your research question. You may use the example below to guide you. Notice also how a research question can be posed as an actual question or given in a statement.

EXAMPLE –

Chloe S.

26 January 2021

Research Question Structure 1: Does what we eat affect our mental health?

Research Question Structure 2: I would like to explore whether or not what we eat affects our mental health.

How I Chose My Research Question

Several months ago, I decided to attempt the vegetarian diet. The switch to eating a more balanced palate of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains not only seemed to improve my physical well being but my mental health as well. Since the change in diet, I have been curious to know how much of an impact the food we eat has on our mental state, or if what I was feeling was a fabricated, psychological response. There seems to be a rise in both mental illnesses and obesity, and I would like to know if there is a direct link between the two or any other correlation between our eating habits and our mental health.

(continued on next page . . . don't miss Assignment 1B!)

Assignment 1B: Then, conduct research and locate a minimum of eight sources, as discussed in the lesson. Remember to include a **minimum of four** primary or secondary sources (print or online) which are credible, reliable, and relevant. These sources should be professional or scholarly in nature. Then, include a **minimum of four** additional sources which may include organization-based literature (pamphlets, informative documents, etc.), films, personal interviews, government documents, popular sources in print or online, maps, charts, etc.

For any sources you are able to fully read/research this week, construct an annotated bibliography, using the lesson information and examples to guide you. For the purpose of this class, each annotation should be a single paragraph.

For any sources you are unable to adequately research, you may complete the annotation next week, once research is complete.

Sources –

1. Brizee, Allen. "Organizing an Exploratory Essay." *Purdue Online Writing Lab*, 17 April 2010, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/common_writing_assignments/exploratory_papers/organizing_an_exploratory_essay.html.
2. Kearney, Virginia. "How to Write an Exploratory Essay . . ." *Owlcation*, 13 June 2022, <https://owlcation.com/academia/How-to-Write-an-Exploratory-Essay>.