



**Writing Research Papers and Theses:**  
**Some Tips for Students at the Senior Undergraduate and Masters Levels**  
**Department of Asian Studies, September 2006**

*The ultimate objective of a research paper is to 1) develop an argument about a clearly defined topic; and 2) persuade the reader with evidence that your argument is the correct one.*

**Step #1: Identify the topic:** Since you and your topic will be spending a great deal of time together, be sure to choose one that interests you. At this stage of the research process, your topic will probably be very general, even vague (“Women in Tokugawa Japan”; “China’s one-child policy”; “Indian migration to North America”, etc).

**Step #2: Do some preliminary reading:** Read a few books or articles that will provide you with: 1) general background information about your topic; and 2) the ideas and arguments of other scholars as they pertain to your topic.

**Step #3: Formulate a research question or hypothesis:** Once you have a general understanding of your topic, narrow it down into a manageable research question or hypothesis. This will help you define the parameters of your research, as well as your argument. Some possible research questions relating to China’s one-child policy are:

- What effects have the one-child policy had on China’s medical system?
- How have ordinary Chinese citizens reacted to the one-child policy?
- How has the one-child policy affected family life in China?

Hypotheses relating to the one-child policy include:

- China’s one-child policy has led to an increase in the national abortion rate.
- The desire for long-term economic growth is what ultimately prompted Chinese authorities to introduce the one-child policy.

Hypotheses look very much like “mini-arguments”; the objective of the research paper is to present evidence that will *prove* those hypotheses.

**Step #4: Compile your bibliography and read, read, read!:** Once you have a workable hypothesis or research question, you will have a better sense of where to look for evidence to support it. Look for books, book chapters, academic articles, documents, etc. that relate—directly and indirectly—to your question or hypothesis. As you collect your sources and read through them, keep the following points in mind:

- Collecting sources *takes time*. Consult a *variety* of search engines and databases (all of them have different strengths and weaknesses), and look through the notes and bibliographies of books and articles that you have already collected. Think of yourself as a detective trying to solve a mystery; hunt for a “lead” and follow it through, and expect some dead ends from time to time. If

you encounter too many dead ends, consult a university librarian for help. And if that fails, you may have to rework your hypothesis or question.

- Take advantage of PCL's Interlibrary Services to obtain sources from other universities.
- Take careful notes as you read. Jot down the page numbers beside particular pieces of information (this will come in handy as you compile your footnotes or endnotes), and be sure to *paraphrase* the information in your own words (this will help you avoid unconscious plagiarism as you draft your paper).
- Pay attention to the different *arguments* and *theories* presented by the authors of secondary sources. In some cases, you will agree with a particular argument or theory and incorporate it into your own. In other cases, you will disagree with those arguments; do not, however, ignore them. The more you are able to address problematic arguments in your own written work and explain why they are incorrect or inappropriate, *the more valid and convincing your own argument becomes*.
- [Students required to write *research proposals* should do so early on in this process. See "Writing Research Proposals for the Honors Thesis"]

**Step #5: Outline your paper:** When your reading no longer yields new information, you are probably ready to start organizing the paper. But before you sit down to write, think through the *argument* and *methodology* of the paper. In other words, what are you going to say in the paper, and how are you going to say it?

Your outline should be viewed as the analytical skeleton of your research paper. Thus, it should include information about each of the three main sections of the essay:

- Introduction: your research question or hypothesis, the methodology, and the argument.
- Body: evidence used to support your argument.
- Conclusion: summary of argument, statement about the significance of your findings, directions for future research, etc.

Students are strongly recommended to consult with their course instructors or thesis advisors once they have a workable outline.

**Step #6: Draft the paper:** Before you begin writing, go through your notes and keep only those that have a bearing on your research question; discard the rest. Remember, the aim of a research paper is to develop an argument about a carefully defined topic: as soon as you digress from that topic, your argument becomes weak and irrelevant.

Expect to complete several drafts of your paper. (It's easier to build perfection in several steps than in only one try!) In the first draft, focus on laying out the argument. Once the argument is in place, work on grammar and style.

**Step #7: Develop citations and bibliography:** Information that is not common knowledge or that pertains to someone else's opinion *must* be acknowledged in a citation. If you're ever in doubt about whether or not to cite something, err on the side of caution and cite it.

**Step #8: Spit and polish:** Try to set your paper/thesis aside for a few days before submitting it. When you finally pick it up again, you'll be able to assess it with a fresh, more objective eye. Now's the time to proofread it for factual and interpretive errors.



## ***The Research and Writing Process: Some Miscellaneous Terms and Tips***

### **Levels of analysis:**

**1. Description:** statements about the qualitative (and perhaps quantitative) parameters of some thing, event, person, phenomenon, text, etc.

- “The Chinese government is controlled by a small group of leaders.”

**2. An Argument** can be defined as *your point of view* about some thing, event, person, phenomenon, text, etc., plus *supporting evidence*. An argument can consist of an interpretation of the relationship between events, or of the broader significance of a single event, text, etc.

- “The Chinese government is pursuing economic liberalization in order to preserve its political power.”
- “The Chinese government is pursuing economic liberalization in order to improve China’s standing in the world.”

Note that these “arguments” are not facts; they simply propose a relationship between two phenomena. In order for these arguments to be considered “valid” or “persuasive”, they *must* be accompanied by evidence.

**3. A Theory** can be loosely defined as an argument (or logical explanation) for some phenomenon that can be applied to a variety of circumstances. Needless to say, theories also need to be proven with evidence.

- “Strong governments engage in economic liberalization in order to preserve their power.”

This particular “theory” is stated in the form of a **hypothesis**: a simple explanation of a particular phenomenon that needs confirming through observation, testing, experimentation, etc. Some disciplines define a hypothesis as a “tentative” theory, or as an idea whose merit has yet to be evaluated. (Note that this particular hypothesis, like theories in general, can be applied to several cases in history, including China and the former Soviet Union.)

Students at the senior undergraduate level should strive to develop sophisticated arguments in their writings. They should also know how to recognize different theories in the writings of others. Some students, including honors students and those interested in developing disciplinary expertise, may be encouraged to apply or test specific theories in their writings. Graduate students should strive to apply or, depending on the discipline, test theories, and even to posit new hypotheses.

**Methodology:** the methods, procedures, and techniques used to gather and evaluate information and, consequently, prove your argument or theory. All disciplines have different methodologies. Examples include:

- experimentation (for the hard sciences)
- survey research/ regression analysis (social sciences)
- in-depth textual analysis (humanities)
- case studies (in-depth description of one or more examples of a particular phenomenon)

**Research question:** a question that enables the writer to develop a single, substantiated argument. As such, the research question should be limited in terms of the number of phenomena to be examined and the time frame.

(Some students, particularly at the masters level, will base their arguments on hypotheses instead of research questions.)