General Research Directions

You are to select a contemporary international news topic that interests you, research that topic, write an essay, and make a presentation that demonstrates what you have learned about your topic. Your essay should be four – six typed pages with internal MLA citations. Both the essay and the presentation should have proper MLA citations, and you should also provide research note cards and a list of works cited.

1. Selecting a Topic and Developing an Effective Research Question

Developing a focused research question and a hypothesis should be your top priority. You must begin by selecting a broad topic or area of interest and begin narrowing that broad topic. You should use a variety of resources (Internet, periodicals, reference texts, and books) as you do this. As you read and research your broad topic, you should be attempting to move your research question from the very broad to the very specific.

For example, I am interested in learning more about the spread of Ebola and the economic impact of this disease in West Africa, but that topic is far too broad or too general to be acceptable. After reading articles about Ebola and West Africa, I discover an article that demonstrates the link between Ebola, migrant labor, and the cacao harvest in Ivory Coast and Ghana, so I decide to narrow my research focus on migrant labor, Ebola, and West Africa. As I continue to skim, scan, and occasionally read articles about the impact of Ebola on migrant labor in West Africa, I notice many articles about recent, controversial travel bans and quarantines that limit human movement and how the typical movement of migrant laborers in West Africa has been constrained. Ultimately, my research question might read as follows: To what extent is the Ebola crisis impacting migrant labor and agricultural industries in Western Africa? This question is specific enough for the purposes of a short essay, and it is a debatable, arguable question because it allows me to look for the extent to which the crisis is having an impact on migrant labor and agriculture. Also, because there is no guarantee the impact will be entirely negative or entirely positive, I’m left with room to explore the controversy/debate surrounding my topic in my thesis and in my argument-based research essay.

2. Developing a (Hypo)Thesis

The answer you generate in response to your narrowed research question will become your Hypothetical Thesis Statement. It will be important that your narrowed question is not so specific that you are unable to find a sufficient number of sources to support your discussion of this topic, yet not so broad that all you do is generalize and summarize information about your topic. In your hypothesis you must address all the parts of your research question. Your research question and your hypothesis should balance between extreme specificity and broad generalization.

3. Researching a Topic, Answering your Research Question, and Taking Notes

Once you have established your research question and hypothesis, you are required to find, read, and take notes, ON NOTE CARDS, from a variety of different sources. You must use a MINIMUM of FIVE to SEVEN* sources to compose your essay.

- **Periodicals:** You must use at least FOUR articles from periodicals. Database and online articles from periodicals will not be considered a web source so use as many as you like.

- **Internet:** You may use TWO or fewer web or Internet sources in your essay. Not all Internet sources are reliable; consult with me if you think your source may be questionable.

- **Books:** You should try to use at least ONE book as a source for your essay. It may not be necessary for you to read an entire book. Sometimes only a chapter or chapters from a book may be suitable for your essay. In some cases, it may be necessary for you to visit a library other than our LRHS Media Center. Consider visiting public libraries and university libraries if your need for sources extends beyond our school’s offerings.

- **Reference:** You should try to use at least ONE reference text as a source for your essay.

* Check with me if you would like to use any non-print sources (like television shows, radio interviews, films, or other non-print media) as references. I will help you navigate these media.
Here are some helpful hints to keep your research notes organized . . .

1. **Use note cards** to record the information that you deem most important from the sources you consult or cite. **Color-coding** the note cards can also prove helpful during the drafting of your essay. Although note-taking on note cards has become, to an extent, an outmoded means of gathering data, **For the purposes of this project it will be required**.

2. Use a variety of techniques to record the information that you plan to use in your essay; however, it **will be important for you to avoid plagiarism**. To help you avoid plagiarism, we will practice effective note-taking skills in class. These skills are described at the bottom of this page.

**Plagiarism** is literary theft. **Plagiarism is intentional or unintentional theft of someone else’s ideas or the actual phrasing of those ideas**. To avoid literary theft use the following techniques (listed in order of usefulness) to record the important notes for your research products:

- **Paraphrase**: When you use this note-taking form, you are essentially translating another writer’s thoughts and ideas into your own language **without borrowing any of the diction or syntax from the original** writer’s text. A paraphrase should be approximately the same length as the source. Novice researchers most often plagiarize when paraphrasing. Try to avoid doing this by not looking directly at the original when you are composing your paraphrase. Read the original then write your paraphrase of the original. Be sure to include a sense of the speaker and context along with appropriate parenthetical information.

- **Summary**: It is acceptable to summarize a significant passage in an article or book chapter that provides only general information or that has no specific ideas you want to quote or paraphrase. Even when you summarize information in a research essay, it will be important for you to identify the speaker and offer a parenthetical citation.

- **Quotation**: This form is best when you want to borrow the **exact language** of the writer in your text. When you quote a passage you should select the passage because the author’s phrasing is difficult to paraphrase or the idea is phrased in an especially effective manner. A mistake that novice writers often make is using **too many quotations**. Select quotes carefully and use them only when they are absolutely necessary to accentuate your writing. **Quotes should add to your writing not replace it**. Be sure to include a **signal phrase**, with **speaker** and **context**, and the appropriate parenthetical information.

3. **Write down all of the relevant bibliographical information** (author’s name, title of books or periodicals, edition, publishing info, dates, pages numbers, etc.) for each source that you plan to use and develop an indexing system to track which source connects to what piece of information. Record this info as you read and research. **Don’t wait until the end of your research to gather this bibliographic information**.

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**Source Material**

Wernher von Braun, a German rocket scientist who was a leader in the development of rocket technology in the twentieth century, once said that "basic research is what I am doing when I don’t know what I am doing." His simple explanation of the scientific process has since inspired many scientists and scholars.

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