A young freshman sat in her first college class, nervously examining the syllabus that would lead the students through the next three months. *I can do this,* she thought to herself as she scanned her new responsibilities. Then her heart skipped, and she sank a little lower in her chair. There . . . near the bottom . . . a research paper! She felt terrified, having never written a research paper before. She didn’t even know where to begin!

I was that young freshman. It seems like a lifetime ago that I fumbled my way through that first research paper. Having attended Adventist schools all my life, I expected to be well-prepared for the academic rigors of college. But during that experience, I felt let down and panic-stricken. As a consequence, throughout my teaching career, I’ve incorporated a great deal of writing instruction into my classroom assignments.

Within the academic big three—reading, writing, and arithmetic—writing is an important component. Essays, journals, responses, critiques, and papers of all genres should be infused in the classroom writing workshop repertoire.

In this article, we will discuss research writing. Students need experiences in middle and high school that will provide a stable base of knowledge and skill as they progress to higher learning. Every college freshman should know how to write well and have had experience with research writing.

College graduates today have no guarantee of a job. The College Entrance Examination board surveyed more than a hundred major U.S. corporate employers and reported through the National Commission on Vital Instruction for All Students
Writing that a candidate’s writing skills can determine whether he or she gets a job. In fact, the survey results explicitly state that writing skills provide professional opportunities. Many employers hiring for well-paid positions assess writing ability during the hiring process, since these jobs often include ongoing writing responsibilities.

In reacting to the survey, Bob Kerrey, president of New School University, stated: “This survey confirms our conviction that individual opportunity in the United States depends critically on the ability to present one’s thoughts coherently, cogently, and persuasively on paper.” Thus, writing instruction deserves—indeed, requires—our consistent attention as educators.

Preparation for college begins before middle school. The training that students receive in their early years provides a foundation for teachers to build upon during the formative middle school years. The College Board Advocacy admonishes schools that “Developing the kinds of thoughtful writers needed in business, and elsewhere in the nation’s life, will require educators to understand writing as an activity calling for extended preparation across subject matters—from kindergarten through college.”

The National Council of Teachers of English reminds us that “Writing and reading are related.” In order to write well, one must read widely. Research writing combines these activities to promote writing growth and to enhance higher-level comprehension.

Evidence-Based Practices
A research-writing project provides the perfect environment for using evidence-based practices to teach writing. Amy Gillespie and Steve Graham from the Johns Hopkins University School of Education have identified a number of evidence-based writing practices that can be incorporated into an effective research-writing project.

- Students are led through a detailed writing process of prewriting, writing, and rewriting.
- After reading and researching, students summarize the text and synthesize the information gleaned.
- During the rewriting process, students are separated into peer groups to brainstorm revision strategies.
- Students are required to use word-processing software to produce their paper.
- Mini-lessons provide real-life opportunities for students to perfect their editing and sentence-writing skills.
- An effective writing project employs a series of steps that creates a writing-process scaffolding. As writers read to discover, be engaged, and persuade others with their writing, they are immersed in inquiry activities.
- A research project requires a significant amount of prewriting activity, including reading and organizing. During the implementation of mini-lessons, peer review, reading, and research, students come to appreciate the usefulness of models.
- Each of these practices is neatly included within a research-paper project. Thus, the research paper is the project that must be included in every discipline, not just English class.

Writing Instruction Overview
As with any big project, there’s work to be done before the launch date. First, focus on information and preparation—handing out a packet of information detailing formatting expectations, process examples, source requirements, and due dates. Next, emphasize organization. Require each student to purchase a three-ring pocket folder and 100 notecards for the project.

When you introduce the assignment, ask the students to follow these steps:

- Title the pocket folder “Research Paper,” and insert into it both a supply of lined paper and the informational handout.
- Label the lined pages with these headings: “Topic Ideas,” “Thesis Statements,” “Outline,” and “Sources.” Use these pages for brainstorming and notes during the writing process.
- Keep everything together in one folder, which will prevent loss of materials and frustration. Since you will type your draft directly into Microsoft Word, no pages will be needed for drafting.

Once the assignment has been given and the materials are organized, it’s time to dive in. As noted above, every effective writing class must contain intentional elements. This is especially true for research papers. The process can be divided into three main phases: Prewriting, Writing, and Rewriting. Strategically scheduled mini-lessons throughout these phases will provide the necessary scaffolding to ensure that students acquire the appropriate skills.

Summary of Evidence-Based Practices for Teaching Writing

- Teach strategies for planning, revising, and editing.
- Have students write summaries of texts.
- Permit students to write collaboratively with peers.
- Set realistic goals for student writing.
- Allow students to use a word processor.
- Teach sentence-combining skills.
- Use the process-writing approach.
- Have students participate in inquiry activities for writing.
- Involve students in prewriting activities.
- Provide models of good writing.
Research Paper Requirements

The handout on Day 1 should include teacher expectations, guidelines, and other requirements. Clear information should be given on the course formatting style (Modern Language Association [MLA], American Psychological Association [APA], Chicago Manual of Style, etc.). Students should understand that in the future, various teachers will have specific (and different) requirements that must be carefully followed. This handout will contain pertinent information (examples given below) and guide students through their paper.

- 10 pages typed (minimum)
- 12-point Times New Roman font
- Double-spaced
- On each page, a header that includes page number and last name of student
- In-text citations or superscripts
- Works-cited page plus footnotes or endnotes
- Minimum of five sources, including three print sources (encyclopedias not allowed)
- Title page (provide sample format)
- No plagiarism
- No extensions allowed on the due date

The requirements for grades 5 through 7 can be altered by reducing the required number of pages, sources, and notecards (all other requirements and due dates can be identical to those for grades 8 and up).

Phase 1: Prewriting

The prewriting tasks for a research project include the following: selecting manageable-sized topics, identifying quality sources, reading for basic knowledge, compiling notecards, creating an outline, brainstorming a thesis, and beginning a source list. All of these steps should be taught through direct instruction, modeling, peer collaboration, explicit examples, and practice. Each skill must be taught prior to the time when it will be needed, based on the submission dates given in the handout.

During the first week of the project, mini-lessons include topic selection, reading for information, summarizing information, avoiding plagiarism, and creating notecards. Several of these areas deserve more detailed discussion.

Choosing a topic. This is a critical step in the research process. If the topic is too large, the student won’t be able to cover it adequately. If it is too narrow, he or she won’t be able to find enough information. If the topic is too current, it may be difficult to find reliable print sources. The teacher should lead the class in a discussion about how to choose a properly sized, arguable, researchable topic. The topic must be able to be argued within 10 pages (or less for younger grades). Some popular topic suggestions could be: the effects of television viewing on childhood obesity, the benefits of recycling, the health advantages of vegetarianism, the morality of scientific testing on animals, etc.

Plagiarism. This topic warrants several mini-lessons to cover the legal and moral issues relating to intentional and unintentional plagiarism. The current digital age has created problematic areas concerning the originality of work. It’s easy to cut and paste, and then take credit for someone else’s work. Students may think that copying word-for-word is the only way to plagiarize. However, according to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, to “plagiarize” means to steal and pass off as one’s own; to use another’s production with-out giving credit to the source; to commit literary theft; or to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source. Teachers must stress the importance of avoiding all types of plagiarism.

Students must recognize that even though they change a few key words from a book or a Website before inserting the information into their essay, if they fail to give proper credit to the source, this is still plagiarism. Teachers can reduce plagiarism by educating their classes about what constitutes plagiarism, outlining steps for eliminating plagiarism risks, and requiring the students to complete at least part of their writing in class under supervision. This will also help to prevent students from submitting papers written by another person or purchased from a “term papers for hire” organization.

Proper source citations are critical, even when the student is summarizing. Two useful Web sources: http://www.plagiarism.org contains information specifically created for teachers and

Sample Submission Schedule (Grades 5-12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Submissions</th>
<th>Date Due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Topic Selected</td>
<td>January 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Begins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Notecards (fewer for grades 5-7)</td>
<td>January 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Thesis Statements Composed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 Additional Notecards (fewer for grades 5-7)</td>
<td>January 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 Additional Notecards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Final Notecards</td>
<td>February 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Pages of Rough Draft (or half of final paper)</td>
<td>February 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Rough Draft (10-page report plus cover page, outline, and Works Cited)</td>
<td>February 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper Due</td>
<td>February 22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students; http://turnitin.com provides support for teachers and students (a school license is required). Teachers can upload a piece of writing to be evaluated; the site will compare the writing to thousands of publications and Websites to determine the level of originality. Every writing instructor should thoroughly familiarize himself or herself with the various forms of plagiarism and take steps to prevent and reduce this unethical and illegal behavior.  

Sources. It’s also vital during this stage to teach students how to use sources appropriately. Instruction should include the definition and appropriate use of primary and secondary sources, and ways to identify reliable sources.

A mini-lesson could cover how to locate online sources containing reliable information. Students should be wary of .com sources and should evaluate Websites carefully. Show your students

Throughout this article, the author’s students depict the process of writing research papers. Above: Kimberly illustrates on the whiteboard the information that should be written on the front of a notecard. Below: Zachary helps Ethan organize his paper.
how to identify the authors and sponsors of the Websites they use for information. They will discover, for example, that veterinarians are great sources of information concerning animal health, whereas a personal blog by a stay-at-home mom would likely contain less-reliable information on this topic. For a helpful article on this topic, see Lauren Matacio and Bruce Closser’s 2008 JOURNAL article entitled “Guiding Students Through the World Wide Web.”

It’s important to introduce students to the variety of printed resources available as well as to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each type of source. A mini-lesson can demonstrate for young writers the advantages of solid primary sources. I introduce my students to professional journals as a reliable source of original research, current issues, and recent developments.

**Thesis Statements.** Guidelines for creating a thesis statement, as well as a list of quality thesis statements, can be found online. These can be included in each student’s informational packet, with illustrations of both flimsy and solid thesis statements. Students should be reminded that a research paper is not the same as a biography or an informational summary. They are to develop a thesis statement (such as “The nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki helped save both American and Japanese lives” or “All defects in society can be linked directly to the defects within human nature”) and then defend it. They are doing persuasive writing, which requires them to “take a stand” and support it with facts, examples, information, and statements from various authors.

Throughout the prewriting time, students should read as much as possible about their main topic. They need to know what other authors are saying and to become part of the bigger discussion. Optimally, over several weeks, they will locate and read a variety of opinions and facts. As they read, they are to formulate a defensible conclusion about the topic they have chosen. As they find ideas, they should jot them down on the “Thesis” page of their project notebook, along with their thoughts and facts to include in the research paper.

**Writing Notecards.** During the first week of the project, provide your students with instruction and practice in creating notecards. After completing the sample card that is included in their packet, they should practice by writing additional quotes from their history or science textbook. They should formulate subtopics as they read and write their cards, since it will be more challenging to do this as the number of cards grows larger.

Specific information should be entered in set locations on every card. The front of the card: one quotation with page number, subtopic (top left corner), student’s initials, and card number (top right corner). The card back: Website address or book title. This trains the students to create a source list for their research paper folder by entering bibliographic information on every card they write. Remind your students that organizing one’s information is the key to success!

**Outlines.** During the week before the outlines are due, show the class how to sort their notecards to create an outline. Since each card contains a subtopic, this makes it easy to sort and organize the cards. Once sorted by subtopic, the cards provide a physical “list” for creating a first outline draft (in
their notebook) before students create a typed final version. The thesis statement should be part of the introductory paragraph. Encourage the class to write a thorough outline—full sentences rather than topical outlines. Skimp outlines provide little support during the writing phase.

Demonstrate briefly how to select cards based on topic support. Students should earmark a couple of quotes to use in the introduction and conclusion as well as for each subtopic in the paper. They will find it helpful to use a marker or highlighter to color-code the edges of their notecards by topic for quick identification. This will also help them to identify areas in their papers that contain inadequate support. They can then go back to their sources and find more information.

**Phase 2: Writing**

The schedule ensures that students have completed specific steps prior to writing a first draft. At this point, they will have read several books and/or journal articles, checked a variety of Websites, written 80-100 notecards, drafted an outline, and written their thesis statements.

Mini-lessons at the beginning of the writing phase should contain reminders about writing strong leads, incorporating a thesis statement, integrating quotes into the paper, using an engaging writing style, staying on topic, following the outline, inserting proper referencing, and writing strong conclusions. Helpful strategies during the writing phase include: allowing ample time for peer recommendations, creating writing samples, allowing time for brainstorming, and student-teacher conferencing.

**Writing Strong Leads.** The first paragraph of the paper either invites the readers in or slams the door on them. Just before students begin the writing portion of the project, distribute examples of interesting ways to begin a research paper: a shocking comment, a strange reflection, a bold statement or quotation, a rhetorical question or intriguing definition, etc. Students will benefit from writing sample opening paragraphs that creatively integrate a strong thesis statement. It’s important for them to also practice writing paragraphs that smoothly transition into and introduce the thesis.

**Formatting.** This is a good opportunity to teach students about MLA formatting. Spend some time with them on these requirements during the first day of the project, and refer back to the guidelines frequently. During the writing phase, show them how to properly cite sources. Provide several examples, and allow time for practice. One good strategy involves having students practice writing a paragraph about a history or science topic that they’re studying. They should integrate a quote into their paragraph and properly cite its source. Be sure to provide immediate feedback to ensure proper learning.

**Technology.** Technology can be both a blessing and a curse. It’s important to provide students with plenty of support in setting up their files and folders properly, in order to reduce the chances of data loss. My class probably wakes up at night hearing me say: “Save! Save! Save!” Frustration and tears come quickly when hours of work are lost through a computer crash or a lost flash drive. Insist that your students save *in triplicate* on the hard drive and on a flash drive, and then send the latest draft to their own e-mail account. This process ensures document security at all times.

This is also an appropriate time to make sure your class understands how to create a Works Cited page. I have all my students open accounts at [http://www.bibme.org](http://www.bibme.org) and we spend a class period practicing with the history or science textbook. This site allows the user to select the formatting style and to download his or her Works Cited page as a Word document when complete.

**Phase 3: Rewriting**

Once the class members have completed their first draft, it’s imperative for their growth in writing that they edit and revise. Through student-teacher conferences and peer collaboration, students should learn to combine sentences, strengthen their paragraphs, and correct any structural errors.
Spend some mini-lesson time brainstorming with your students, on a whiteboard or poster paper, complex words for which they can substitute more common nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Provide time for them to come up with variety, color, and flair to draw from while editing.

Peer evaluation and conferencing are powerful tools if the class members are accustomed to providing positive, helpful, and specific feedback. Small groups whose members are carefully chosen and monitored by the teacher can provide valuable assistance to young writers.

Here is one strategy for peer review. First, assign the class an area on which to focus, such as organization or word choice. Then, provide time for the students to evaluate that specific element in their peer’s writing. Provide a rubric to use and remind the students to be specific, helpful, and kind when giving written feedback. Encourage them to check for clarity, grammatical usage, and voice.

Get Started!

Writing a research paper can provide valuable knowledge, experience, and growth. The teacher is directly involved in this writing project through a variety of instructional modalities; it is critical that the class view this as an assisted project. With peer and teacher assistance, the students will be able to make tremendous strides in their writing growth and achieve a satisfying feeling of accomplishment.

Writing instruction has been crucial for my students in middle school and junior academy. My 5th and 6th graders have been incredibly successful with research papers, and the second-year research writers have demonstrated enormous improvement. My research unit packet can be downloaded and printed from CIRCLE (http://circle.adventist.org) using the key words: “Teaching Students to Write a Research Paper.”

Let’s be honest—a project of this magnitude requires time and commitment from you, the teacher. Many hours are spent in conferences and assessing the finished product. However, this time is critical to ensure the growth and vital skills that each member of your class will need in subsequent levels of education. “Your primary task with student writers is to enter their writing process at various points, assess strengths and weaknesses, make suggestions for improvement, and monitor progress.”

Each student in every Adventist K-12 school deserves to have an edge when entering higher education. They may not be grateful during the writing process; in fact, they probably will be terrified and frustrated while trying to create their first research paper. However, as they meet the task head-on with gumption and tenacity with the help of their teacher and peers, they will grow and achieve success.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES
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5. The Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee, Beliefs About the Teaching of Writing: http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs.
7. Ibid.
10. Ibid.