

Read, research, write

A first route through academic work

01

5 LESSONS + ANSWERS

1. From a topic to a question
2. Make a source record
3. Synthesise without assembling copies

Before you begin

This short book supports the first stages of academic work: framing a question, organising sources, writing a synthesis, reading data and scheduling tasks. Examples and datasets are invented. Your institution's, subject's and teacher's requirements take priority, particularly for referencing and AI use. None of the activities requires a paid tool.

03 / 1. From a topic to a question

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06 / 4. Interpret a mean with care

07 / 5. Plan a submission in stages

Answers on the final page.

1. From a topic to a question

‘Digital reading’ is a topic, not yet a research question. It covers very different practices, formats, audiences and issues. To move forward, specify what you want to compare or understand.

An initial question could be: ‘How do the students interviewed describe choosing between PDF and EPUB for personal reading?’ It identifies an audience, an object and the kind of information sought. It does not assume beforehand that one format is superior.

Next, define the limits: time period, context, available sources and time for the work. A narrower question is not necessarily less interesting; it may make a supported answer possible.

Before collecting information from people, check your institution’s rules, required permissions and personal-data safeguards. For this book’s exercise, use only the fictional examples supplied. No real survey is requested.

YOUR TURN

Turn ‘students and time’ into a precise question without assuming the answer.

2. Make a source record

A useful source must be traceable and understood in context. Record its title, author or organisation, date, publication venue and a stable link or identifier where available. The final reference format depends on the required style.

Add the question the source can help answer, its method and its limits. An essay, testimony and empirical study provide different kinds of material. Their usefulness depends on what you are trying to establish.

Keep three sections separate: paraphrased notes, any exact quotations and your own comments. Record page numbers for quoted passages. This prevents you from losing track of a phrase's origin while drafting.

A source may also challenge your hypothesis. Keep it if relevant and examine what it changes. A research file is not a collection of confirmations; it should show how a conclusion was developed and questioned.

YOUR TURN

Design a blank record with six fields for locating, describing and discussing a source.

3. Synthesise without assembling copies

A synthesis organises several sources around a question. It is more than summarising the first source, then the second, then the third. Start by identifying agreements, differences in definitions and disagreements.

Fictional example: one document describes how easily digital books can be carried, while another examines reported concentration difficulties during certain reading activities. They do not necessarily contradict each other; they address different dimensions. Your paragraph should make that distinction clear.

Write a guiding idea in your own words and attribute each contribution to its source. A paraphrase must preserve the meaning and be referenced according to the assignment's rules. Replacing a few words in a sentence does not create a synthesis.

If an AI tool helps you, check your institution's rules and verify every reference in the actual document. A plausible title or fluent summary does not prove a publication exists. You remain responsible for the work you submit.

YOUR TURN

Using the two fictional documents described here, write two synthesis sentences distinguishing portability from concentration.

4. Interpret a mean with care

A mean summarises a series but does not describe every observation. In the fictional series 2, 3, 3, 4, 18, the sum is 30 and the mean is 6. Yet four of the five values are below 6.

The median is the middle value in the ordered series: here, 3. The difference between mean and median invites you to examine the distribution. The value 18 pulls the mean upwards; do not remove it without a documented reason.

Before calculating, check the unit, missing values, possible duplicates and the meaning of zero. An empty cell is not automatically a zero.

In your discussion, state the dataset's size and whether it is fictional or real. A small teaching example helps explain a calculation; it cannot describe a population. Numbers are useful when their scope remains visible.

YOUR TURN

For the fictional series 2, 4, 4, 6, 14, calculate the mean and median. What can you say about their difference?

5. Plan a submission in stages

Start with the assignment and deadline. List the requirements: length, documents, format, bibliography, appendices and submission method. Clarify uncertain points before producing something difficult to adapt.

Divide the work into intermediate results: a question, selected sources, a provisional outline, a first draft, a review and the final file. Set a date for each stage while leaving room for difficulties.

Review in several passes. First, check the answer to the question and the logic. Next, check sources, calculations and claims. Finally, review headings, references, spelling and the required format.

Open the exact file you intend to submit. Make sure it is the correct version and contains no accidental personal notes. Keep a copy and the submission receipt if your platform provides one. These steps do not guarantee a good grade, but they can prevent some submission problems.

YOUR TURN

For a submission in seven days, propose four stages and leave at least one checking session before submission.

Answers and suggestions

1. Example: 'How do students in a specified group describe their study-time allocation during an exam week?' The group and period then need defining.
2. Possible fields: full reference; link or identifier; relevant question; method and scope; notes with page numbers; limitations and personal comments.
3. Example: the documents address different dimensions of digital reading. The portability described in the first does not, by itself, allow a conclusion about the concentration discussed in the second.
4. Sum 30; mean $30 \div 5 = 6$; median 4. The value 14 raises the mean above the central value. This supports no conclusion about real students.
5. Example: days 1–2, question and sources; day 3, outline; days 4–5, drafting; day 6, checking and corrections; day 7, final-file check and submission. Adapt the schedule to the actual workload.

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