

MA Visual Arts (Digital Arts)

Unit 1: Research Paper Brief

For this assignment you are asked to write a research paper engaging with a **research question of your choice**. This question should address an issue or theoretical concern that is **central to your practice** and relates to the **contemporary culture of art and design** and **contributes to knowledge in the field**. Your paper **should not refer directly** to your own practical work. Consider that your paper is to be published and/or given at a conference.

It is important that your paper will demonstrate an **ability to formulate a research question**, research the issue you have identified, **write a coherent argument in which you critically contextualize the issue you are addressing**, and **arrive at a justified and independent conclusion**.

You should contextualise your research question **by using approximately 6 to 10 citations (from research resources such as books, exhibitions, public lectures, web resources...)**. These citations must conform to the Harvard convention of citation (see the PDF Harvard guide from the UAL library website).

Your paper should consist of the following academic structure:

- Front page (providing name, student number, course and email address)
- Title (the research question)
- Abstract (2–300 words a summary of the whole paper)
- 5 key words (the 5 words that summarise your paper)
- Main body of text with approximately 6 to 10 citations (3000 words + or - 300 words)
- introduction
- main argument
- conclusion
- A bibliography (constructed according to the Harvard convention)

Learning Outcomes:

The research paper crosses all 3 learning outcomes for Unit 1 but focuses on the following elements:

- Develop your Project Proposal to plan a challenging and self-directed programme of study (research paper focuses on the 'self-directed' element)
- Demonstrate a critical engagement with practice-based research and contribute actively to debate and discussion (research paper focuses on the 'contribute to debate' element as your paper should have the potential of being of interest to a wider audience)
- Articulate a clear understanding of the methodology and context of your creative practice in both written and verbal forms (research paper focuses on the 'clear understanding of your context' element)

These learning outcomes will be evidenced in the following way: -

Ability to formulate a specific research question - Ability to contextualise that question within a critical framework - Ability to form an independent conclusion - Professional presentation of the research paper adhering to the academic structure and the Harvard convention

Some general tips and important notes:

difference between an essay and a research paper: !essay - subjective
!research paper - objective

but don't try and complicate this to make it sound more 'academic' you should aim for clarity and simplicity

In order to write a successful paper, please....

- choose an issue you want to research and write about and that is important to your practice
- don't leave the writing to the last minute
- don't be daunted by this, don't let it take over all your time, enjoy researching because it is useful to you

1. Rationale behind the brief: **Why write a research paper?**

1. **To deepen your understanding of a theoretical/critical issue** that is central to your practice/profession.

2. **To understand more clearly your own ideas/beliefs** and move beyond subjective assertions (non-critical notions such as 'liking' and 'interesting') to informed judgment.

3. To learn how to **articulate your opinion in a recognisable and accessible way within the intellectual community** in which you are now operating:

- standardised protocols of academic writing to ensure intelligibility/comparability/ transparency/ intellectual rigour etc.

4. Your MA is a research degree, you should be aiming for an '**original contribution to knowledge**'. **Moving beyond description and discursive modes of writing.**

5. Ability to **research and write formally** is integral to any MA Level of study.

Remember you **do not write about your own art but instead you write about the context for your art.**

The relationship between writing/research and practice

Developing a critical dialogue within your practice: its contemporary and historical context. Art is not created in a vacuum or by instinct alone.

The context in which you practice helps constitute its meaning, value, use etc. This paper should help develop an engagement with that context.

Contexts are, arguably, generated rather than found.

Theory can be a stimulus (or trigger) to the production of work and not simply its post-production explanation.

Language is important to the explanation, justification and promotion of work. This paper can be used to aid the acquisition of an appropriate critical language.

2. The Research Question

This should be a question or identify a specific research issue in the context of visual/material culture. (it doesn't literally have to be in the form of a question see some example below)

Your question, if possible, should introduce the relevant issue(s)/concepts the paper addresses.

It should be clear and unambiguous. A badly constructed research question often leads to a poorly written and ill-focused research paper.

Your question should create the right expectation in the reader. It identifies what you are interested in and indicates why someone should be interested in it too.

Process of formulating a question:

1. Find a broad subject area
2. Narrow this interest to a specific topic
3. Question that topic from several viewpoints
4. Choose the question whose answer is the most significant to you

Better not to attempt an all-encompassing narrative spanning centuries of art production and interpretation.

If you are having trouble narrowing your subject area **ask yourself why you consider this topic to be an important and significant cultural issue and derive your research question from this.**

Examples

(In these examples the specific artists are not important it is the structure of the research question that is the important thing to look at)

Example of imprecise and unhelpful question:

‘This paper addresses the issue of appropriation.’

!what issue? !in which context? (music, literature, photography?)

!which artists are relevant? !how will it be answered? !what is this paper about?

Example of a more precise and clearer question:

‘Through the art of Dubuffet and Tapies this paper examines the epistemic and ethical implications of appropriating visual languages from other cultures’

the scope of this question can be further defined in the abstract

Another example:

‘By contrasting the work of Rineke Dijkstra and Philip Lorca diCorcia this paper will argue that the consent of the photographed subject is central to an ethics of photographing others. This analysis will take place within Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy of ‘care’ for the other.’

Again don’t worry about the specific subject on this title or the artists used, **it is the structure that is important.**

This example is even more precise and gives a clear indication of the research issue and position argued for and the theoretical context in which argued.

Two Basic Structures of a Research Question: ! Researching issue A / by contrasting the practice of x and y / in order to find out B Or
Contrasting x and y / in order to research issue A / in order to find out B

!- what you are writing about (topic) !! am researching... [x and y]

!- what you don't know about it (question) !!because of... [A]

!- why you want to know about it (rationale) !!in order to understand about... [B]

So in the example above:

'By contrasting the work of Rineke Dijkstra and Philip Lorca diCorcia this paper will argue that the consent of the photographed subject is central to an ethics of photographing others. This analysis will take place within Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of 'care' for the other.'

- what you don't know about it (question) ! because of... [A] ! A = CONSENT (the writer is interested in the issue of people giving consent to be photographed)

- what you are writing about (topic) ! I am researching... [x and y] ! x & y = Photographers (the 2 named artists the writer will look at)

- why you want to know about it (rationale) ! in order to understand about... [B] ! B = ETHICS (the issue of ethics when taking photographs of other people)

Some recent examples from students:

‘People in a crowd: the cityscape and its meanings, a comparison between L.S. Lowry’s An Accident 1926 and Edward Bawden’s Liverpool Street Station 1960’

This is not as complex as the example above but follows roughly a similar format, the writer wants to know more about ‘the cityscape and its meanings’, she will compare only 2 pieces of art so that she can better understand ‘people in a crowd’.

‘Importance of doing: A look at social media through the eyes of Fluxus’

This is probably too simple but the abstract and the paper overall was very good and well focused. The writer could have written a more precise title for example:

‘By applying the theories and methodologies of George Mancunius’ Fluxus Manifesto to the social media collaborative art making of ‘The Johnny Cash Project’, this paper will show the importance of doing as a core value of social media art.’

‘Dwelling poetically in modern technology: Exploring Heidegger’s theory of dwelling.’

again this is quite simple but the abstract went on to expand on the focus of the paper:

Abstract The focus of this paper is to analyse the relationship between ‘dwellings’ and modern technology. It starts by giving some information about Heidegger’s understanding of the term dwelling and then goes on to look at technology and other relevant theories. The paper’s major finding is that technology transforms humanities’ way of life and controls the nature of a dwelling. Finally, it comes to the conclusion that we should keep poetic thinking to free our humanity, which is the best way to maintain the original meaning of dwelling within the technological era.

(Important to note that this paper was written by someone with English as a second language, she worked hard on this and achieved a very high mark.)

It is also interesting to note that although this paper had no specific artists that are researched, the student who wrote this paper found the research significantly influenced her art practice. She had previously been using poetic visual elements in her work and her final piece used these extensively. In the image below you can see how she used an archway to represent the idea of dwelling and the pendulum as the potentially damaging effects of technology, along with other subtle poetic elements, including the nature of the materials she used.

3. The Abstract

An Abstract is a summary of your research paper. It should be about 2/300 words in length and should include the following:

- A brief explanation of the question/topic and the problem it addresses.
- A brief description of the practical, theoretical and historical context in which the question is situated.
- A brief explanation as to how you are going to answer that question. Eg. the research methods and theories you will use.
- A statement concerning the aim or result of your research. Eg. what your research hopes/does prove and the limits of your enquiry

IMPORTANT: An Abstract is not an introduction but an overview of the entire paper including the conclusions reached. It gives a snapshot of the paper to a prospective reader.

Basic Structure of an Abstract:

Problem - Context - Solution/Conclusion OR Context - Problem - Solution/Conclusion

Abstracts are important as increasingly readers and researchers decide what to read, or download through e-journals on the basis of an abstract.

The abstract is not counted in the word count.

The abstract is usually written when you have finished your research and finished writing the paper but it is also a good idea to write a draft abstract early on to help you focus your research and outline where you think your research is going.

4. Introduction

The introduction should show what has prompted the research, what attracted you to the topic, the context for the topic and why it is important. The introduction should indicate how the topic will be approached, its methodology. This can include a quote from one of the key texts used. It should be clear and concise indicating what the paper intends to do. It is useful to refer to key texts that will appear in the paper.

5. Main body of the paper

This is where you develop an argument in a coherent way. This should be demonstrated with reference to, and analysis of your sources – visual, theoretical, historical or philosophical. In a short 3000 word paper like this it is important to focus in depth on a narrower topic don't wander off, stick to what your research question says you will do. Assume that you are writing for a reader inside the field of art and design but not necessarily a subject expert in your area so don't assume they know things that are important to your argument.

Section headings These are useful for organizing and structuring the essay and establishing the argument. You could break down the word count of 3000 words like this:

You are looking at 3 different artworks as case studies:

3 x 900 words = 2700 + into & conclusion

or you are contrasting 2 artists use of video:

2 x 1300 /1400 words = 2600 + intro & conclusion

6. Conclusion

The conclusion should summarise the issues initially raised in the introduction and **bring together the main points developed through the paper**. An important aspect of the conclusion is to let the reader understand that the paper is finished and to indicate that the purpose of the writing has been achieved. The **conclusion should be brief and return to the points outlined in the introduction**, and developed in the main body of the paper. **Don't introduce new ideas in the conclusion**. It is important **to be concise**.

7. Bibliography

This should include all the material you used in the research not just the sources you have cited in the text.

You must follow the Harvard system.

Keep a record as you go along of all your reference material, it can be time consuming to try and find all the correct details for the bibliography at the end

Use the e-library, particularly the journals, for example the journal 'Digital Creativity' uses a very similar format for their papers to what

you need to do for this. Always look at the bibliography of other interesting papers as you can find really useful sources there.

The bibliography is vital in showing what you have read and researched to get to your findings, it also gives due credit to other people's work and avoids suspicion of plagiarism.

8. Final advice

Some characteristics of a successful research paper:

- A specific question is identified and contextualised within a critical framework != research
- Research material is edited to present a coherent argument != synthesis of information - finding connections between new and existing research material/ thoughts
- Develop your own informed judgment, in relation to the research, to produce an independent conclusion != transformation of information
- criticality - independent conclusion

Sources

- One good source is worth more than many mediocre ones • Choosing good sources is often dependent on having a clear sense of the question you are addressing • Websites are perfectly valid but anyone can say what they like on a website – a book or a journal are worth more due to their peer reviewed nature, be aware of the quality of your sources

Some things to avoid:

- Describe rather than critically analyse your topic
- Claim something and not justify it
- Practice of 'Quilting' - that is, quote endlessly to no apparent purpose

- 'Subjective' justification - be aware of the status of the claims you are making
- Plagiarise (stealing others' ideas)

Small but important details:

- number your pages in case the assessor wants to print it
- Use British spelling
- Common mistake – if a quote is longer than 2 lines it should be longer quotes should be indented, see the Harvard reference guide PDF
- Use artists last name not their first name
- Include date of an art work or example
- Centuries – (it is a common mistake to get this wrong): 1500 – 1599 = 16th century 1600 – 1699 = 17th century 1700 – 1799 = 18th century 1800 – 1899 = 19th century 1900 – 1999 = 20th century 2000 – 2099 = 21st century

Don't leave the writing to the last minute and don't let it dominate and take over your life, keep making work and find a good rhythm that balances reading and researching with making.