

Crime in Canadian Context 4e

A Primer for Writing a Criminology Research Paper

Before this review begins, it is worth noting what material is not included in this primer. The points bulleted below are not inconsequential—they clearly are if you wish to get a good essay grade. They are excluded because libraries at Canadian post-secondary institutions—and many Internet sites—have excellent resources that are designed to help students write generic term papers. However, while these resources include many important pointers, the majority do not address the specific concerns of first-year students taking a criminology or criminal justice course who are required to prepare an LRP (library research paper). It is for this reason that the following points will not be discussed in this brief primer, but should be explored elsewhere:

- How to avoid plagiarism
- What is “Turn-it-in.com”?
- How to use a library (including accessing electronic journals from home)
- How to properly use quotations
- What to include on a title page
- Creating and alphabetizing a “works cited” list
- Properly citing sources in the body of your paper
- Grammar and writing style (e.g., APA format)
- Principles of composition

Many introductory courses require students to write an LRP. An LRP presents the results of your original investigation about a topic related to the course. Unlike other types of assignments, an LRP does not involve the collection or analysis of primary or secondary data. In other words, there is no need to interview people, make observations of people behaving in public, or conduct statistical analysis. To carry out research for an LRP one has to closely read, synthesize, and critically assess what others have written about a specific topic. This information is generally available in scholarly books and journal articles.

There are many learning objectives accomplished by writing an LRP. One of the most important is that it allows you to work independently on a topic that you can explore in some detail. This exercise is intended to teach you to read and comprehend new ideas, critically synthesize these ideas, and then write them up in such a way as to support an argument. In high-quality research papers, ideas are not only described, but critically analyzed. This means that writing an LRP is not just about collecting information, memorizing facts, or restating what other people have written. Rather, it is a developed skill that involves your ability to understand a topic well enough to craft an even-handed and well-communicated argument. With this in mind, a clear understanding of a topic more often than not results in a well-written paper.

Where to start?

As you can tell from reading through your textbook, there are many different topics in the field of criminology. In fact, you may have asked yourself the question: “How could I write an original criminology essay when so much has been written in the field by those with much more experience and knowledge than I have?” This task need not be as daunting as it may first appear if you consider the following steps before writing your paper.

An obvious starting point is to closely read the instructions of your assignment. These instructions may be given out in class in hard copy, contained on the course outline, or posted on your class website. It is extremely important to follow the directions of the assignment. These directions can include a list of suggested topics, a minimum or maximum page length for the paper, formatting requirements, due date, penalties for papers submitted late, and the weight of the assignment—the percentage of your final mark that is based on the assignment. Before setting out to begin your research, you should be totally clear on the requirements and deadlines related to the assignment. If you are not clear about any of these expectations, it is up to you to contact the instructor (or possibly a teaching assistant assigned to the course) to clarify what the expectations are, well in advance of the due date of the assignment.

A research paper needs to begin with a topic where there is adequate amount of scholarly information. Often, students are interested in writing about current and newsworthy events that are related to criminology, but if the topic is new, there is a high likelihood that little scholarly information has yet to have accumulated on that subject. By scholarly information I mean sources that have been written by professional criminologists that have published in peer-reviewed outlets. Normally, these outlets come in the form of scholarly journals¹, books, and sometimes reports written by government agencies or by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While this can depend on the nature of your research question, as a rule, information from opinion columns, newspaper editorials, magazine articles, and blogs should be treated with caution, since this style of writing most often stems from personal opinions—which are usually biased—and are not based on careful reviews of previous research or on systematic observations.

Beginning to Write

Once you decide to write about a topic where you have found ample amount of information, the next step is to focus on a particular aspect of that subject by formulating a research question—which may, at a later stage, become a thesis statement. For example, you may be interested in writing a paper about gun control. This is a very general topic that has been addressed by many different researchers for decades, using an array of different perspectives and research methods. Narrowing this topic down to a point of a focused research question is best accomplished by immersing yourself in the research literature on gun control. In most cases, it is advisable to begin with the most up-to-date material and then work backwards. Doing this won’t take long before you are able to identify the key debates and different types of research that have been carried out in this area. Once you are in this position, and have been taking notes on what you have been reading, it is time to try to develop a relevant research question or thesis statement related to the broad topic of gun control.

It is important to note that a research question and a thesis statement are different. In some cases your instructor may require you to begin the paper with one or the other. A research question in criminology normally begins with the words “why” or “how.” Think of it as a problem: Why did a particular court case have such a profound impact on policing in Canada? Why does most criminal behaviour reach a peak at the ages of 17 to 18? How has the level of homicide in Canada changed from the mid-1970s to 2011? In most cases, the more specific your research question is the clearer and more focused your paper will be.

An LRP may also set the stage by posing a thesis statement, rather than a research question. Unlike a research question, a thesis statement is composed in the form of an argument. For example, rather than asking the question that was posed above regarding the relationship between age and criminal offences, formulating a thesis statement from that research question could look something like this: The reason why criminal behaviour peaks in the mid- to late-teens is because social controls become stronger at this stage of the life course.

A thesis statement, then, takes a position on an issue while a research question does not. In many cases an LRP will begin with a research question, but by the time the research is complete, students are able to turn the research question into a thesis statement as they feel they have collected a suitable amount of evidence to make an argument.

Normally, there will be more than one position related to your research question or thesis statement because the research literature on your topic may not share consistent findings. Not to fret...this is not an unusual situation. At this point a good option is to discuss what you have found with a person with some expertise in the area. This is when it is a good idea to meet with your instructor or teaching assistant (in universities “TAs” are usually MA or Ph.D. students) to discuss the range of research findings in your area of interest.

Instructors will often post a set of office hours with times and locations for essay consultation. While students are not generally required to attend these office hours, it is important to know that they are an excellent resource that should not be overlooked simply because attendance is not mandatory. Meeting with your instructor, or teaching assistant, and talking to them about any questions you have about the paper will provide you with advice that is not available elsewhere. It is important to keep in mind, however, that you should come to these meetings prepared; background preparation is required. This means spending time researching your topic in advance. Doing so will make the meeting much more useful and productive than if you drop by with a “blank slate.” You should not expect that the instructor or teaching assistant will give you a research question and a list of relevant sources. These tasks are the responsibility of the student. However, if you come to the meeting well-prepared and with a research question in mind, the person you meet with will be in a much better position to help you focus your research and will likely be able to help you locate other valuable references for your paper. More often than not, you may also have a chance to meet with your advisor for a second round of consultations at a later date, in case you feel that you need more help and direction with your paper. Do not expect that the person who is advising you will be able to read a complete draft of your work—they simply do not have the time to do this. Nevertheless, a reasonable course of action would be to provide your advisor with a one-page outline that contains your key research question, a list of your main sources, and an outline of your argument in point

form. In most cases this would be ideal material to present at your meeting and you should expect on-the-spot feedback.

The First Draft

Now it is time to prepare a first draft. This, of course, suggests that term papers normally require at least two full drafts before they are in shape for final submission. Composing a first draft is more difficult than it is to work on subsequent drafts of an LRP. To complete a first draft a student needs to have taken notes from all the material that you have read on your topic. Taking clear, well-organized notes on what you have been reading is a very important step in preparing the first draft of an LRP. A helpful tip while taking notes is to make sure that what you are recording is directly related to your research question. In essence, the notes you are taking will translate into evidence that you will include in your paper to support the points that you wish to make—again these points are going to be used to address your key research question or to support your thesis statement.

Once you feel that you have systematically addressed the research question/thesis statement posed at the beginning of your paper, it is time to write a conclusion. A conclusion to an LRP need not be longer than one page (12-point font, double-spaced). The first issue to address in the conclusion is to summarize without repeating what you have written in the body of the paper. It is also important not to include new material in a conclusion. Depending on what your research revealed, a conclusion can also briefly state what research on the topic needs to be done in the future. Since many issues in criminology are relevant to public policy, you may add a short commentary on how the findings of your research can address current or future policies on the topic you explored. Finally, it is also important to conclude the paper with an effective closing statement. In other words, do not leave the reader “hanging” after your last sentence. Oftentimes this can be achieved by re-emphasizing why this is an important topic, or end with an appropriate quotation or a clever and relevant remark.

After the First Draft

Once you have completed your first draft, the next step is to take a break. Depending on the time frame you are working with—and working on a first draft the night/morning before the paper is due is never a good idea—take at least a few hours (or longer) and do something else: read a book, listen to music, watch TV, play a video game, take a nap, etc. This will give you time to think about something other than your term paper. The reason why this is an effective thing to do is that it allows your mind to “de-brief,” so when you start working on your second draft, you will be able to do so with a “fresh mind.” Trust me, this is a good idea.

Assuming you have done a thorough job with the first draft, then your second draft will be much less work. Here you are to read through what you wrote earlier with the goal of trying to catch problems like: repetition; irrelevant material; muddled or unclear writing; incorrect citations and quotations; and illogical paragraph flow.

If all seems to be in order, then it’s time to have someone else read your work. This can include a friend or family member—just about anyone who you trust would take the time to read your work.

Often, a second set of eyes is able to catch minor mistakes that you may have overlooked. Having another person proofread—and perhaps edit your paper—can only make for a more polished final product.

If you are still not satisfied with what you have produced or would simply like to have another qualified person read over your work if you are not confident about your writing abilities, most post-secondary institutions provide essay writing services. Here a qualified writer—not necessarily one who is familiar with your topic or even the field of criminology—can read over your work and provide you with constructive feedback. The key to going about this, however, is to make sure an adequate amount of time is taken between the time you submit your paper to the writing centre/learning commons and the paper's due date. Very rarely can one expect a 24-hour turnaround from a university writing service.

A Final Word of Advice

Make sure that you submit your paper on time and at the appropriate location. Most university courses have late penalties for papers that are not handed in on time. Depending on the course, late penalties can range anywhere from 1 per cent to 20 per cent for each day overdue. The only exceptions to this rule are for papers that are handed in late due to health-related problems, which require documentation from a doctor. It is important to remember that you may have term papers from different courses that are due during the same week—plan ahead so that each of these papers is handed in on time.

I hope that the tips provided in this primer will help you to prepare an interesting and successful library research paper. As mentioned earlier, the points raised here are by no means a complete list of what should be taken into account when writing a first-rate criminology essay. Yet, if you take the time to review these pointers, along with help for the more technical aspects of writing papers, which can be found elsewhere, then you will be at a significant advantage compared to some of your classmates who may take a less-strategic or less-serious approach in preparing their criminology library research papers.

¹The following is an incomplete list of scholarly journals that cover a wide range of material related to criminology that students can use as resources for a Library Research Paper: *The Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*; *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*; *The Canadian Review of Sociology*; *Criminology*; *Crime and Delinquency*; *Social Forces*; *Social Problems*; *The British Journal of Criminology*; *Youth and Society*; *Police and Society*; *Crime and Public Policy*; *Punishment and Society*; *Law and Society Review*; *Theoretical Criminology*; *Justice Quarterly*; and *Contemporary Justice Review*.