

Shortcuts for Writing Research Papers in Word & Google Docs

Last reviewed: 2026-10-13. College students and first-year composition writers.

Free complete guide — no email required.

<https://keyshortcuts.net/research-paper-shortcuts>

Writing a research paper involves switching between reading, drafting, checking sources, and formatting the finished document. This guide is for college students, including first-year composition writers, who use Microsoft Word or Google Docs. It separates the applications into two tables so that a command from one editor is not mistaken for a shortcut in the other. Each table includes equivalent Windows and Mac actions.

Build your first draft around ideas and sources before polishing every line. Use headings to organise sections, comments to record questions, and footnotes when the required style calls for them. Copying text from a webpage can bring unwanted fonts, colours, and spacing into your document; paste without formatting when you want the destination style. That action removes appearance, not your responsibility to quote and cite the source accurately.

Keep a sample paragraph and a few sample references in a practice file. Try a heading, a comment, a word count, and a hanging indent, then inspect the results before applying the same commands to your paper. The full PDF is available without an email address, while the print button produces a one-page essentials summary. Google Docs saves changes automatically, but sharing permissions and offline access are separate settings that you should check before relying on them.

Microsoft Word: drafting and formatting

Desktop Word shortcuts; keep references in real paragraphs rather than lining them up with spaces.

Action	Windows	Mac
Bold	Ctrl+B	Cmd+B
Italic	Ctrl+I	Cmd+I
Underline	Ctrl+U	Cmd+U
Insert a comment	Ctrl+Alt+M	Cmd+Option+A
Insert a footnote	Ctrl+Alt+F	Cmd+Option+F
Apply Heading 1	Ctrl+Alt+1	Cmd+Option+1
Apply Heading 2	Ctrl+Alt+2	Cmd+Option+2

Action	Windows	Mac
Apply Heading 3	Ctrl+Alt+3	Cmd+Option+3
Find and Replace	Ctrl+H	Ctrl+H
Word count	Review > Word Count	Tools > Word Count
Hanging indent	Ctrl+T	Cmd+T
Double spacing	Ctrl+2	Cmd+2
Insert a link	Ctrl+K	Cmd+K
Superscript	Ctrl+Shift+Plus (+)	Format > Font > Superscript
Clear character formatting	Ctrl+Space	Home > Clear All Formatting
Page break	Ctrl+Enter	Cmd+Return
Undo	Ctrl+Z	Cmd+Z
Redo	Ctrl+Y	Cmd+Y
Select all	Ctrl+A	Cmd+A
Paste text only (current Microsoft 365)	Ctrl+Shift+V	Cmd+Shift+V
Save	Ctrl+S	Cmd+S

Google Docs: drafting and formatting

Google Docs in a desktop browser. Explore has been retired: use Citations and Tool finder instead; the historical Explore keys are not recommended.

Action	Windows	Mac
Bold	Ctrl+B	Cmd+B
Italic	Ctrl+I	Cmd+I
Underline	Ctrl+U	Cmd+U
Heading 1	Ctrl+Alt+1	Cmd+Option+1
Heading 2	Ctrl+Alt+2	Cmd+Option+2
Heading 3	Ctrl+Alt+3	Cmd+Option+3
Insert footnote	Ctrl+Alt+F	Cmd+Option+F
Insert comment	Ctrl+Alt+M	Cmd+Option+M

Action	Windows	Mac
Word count	Ctrl+Shift+C	Cmd+Shift+C
Find and replace	Ctrl+H	Cmd+Shift+H
Hanging indent	Format > Align & indent > Indentation options > Special indent: Hanging	Format > Align & indent > Indentation options > Special indent: Hanging
Double spacing	Format > Line & paragraph spacing > Double	Format > Line & paragraph spacing > Double
Insert link	Ctrl+K	Cmd+K
Superscript	Ctrl+Period (.)	Cmd+Period (.)
Clear formatting	Ctrl+Backslash (\)	Cmd+Backslash (\)
Page break	Ctrl+Enter	Cmd+Return
Undo	Ctrl+Z	Cmd+Z
Redo	Ctrl+Shift+Z	Cmd+Shift+Z
Select all	Ctrl+A	Cmd+A
Paste without formatting	Ctrl+Shift+V	Cmd+Shift+V
Voice typing (supported browser)	Ctrl+Shift+S; allow microphone	Cmd+Shift+S; allow microphone
Research / citations (Explore retired)	Tools > Citations; use Tool finder Alt+ /	Tools > Citations; use Tool finder Option+ /

Formatting your Works Cited / References page

Put each reference in its own paragraph and select the entries you want to format. In Word, apply a hanging indent with Ctrl+T on Windows or Cmd+T on Mac; use the Paragraph dialog's Special: Hanging setting when you need an exact measurement such as 0.5 inch. Apply double spacing with Ctrl+2 or Cmd+2. Set paragraph spacing before and after to the value required by your style guide, commonly zero for a uniformly double-spaced list.

In Google Docs, select the references, choose Format > Align & indent > Indentation options, set Special indent to Hanging, enter the required amount, and choose Apply. Then choose Format > Line & paragraph spacing > Double and remove extra paragraph spacing if your instructions require it. Do not create a hanging indent with spaces or repeated tabs. Alphabetise and proofread the references separately: formatting does not check authors, dates, titles, or missing citations.

Use the current research tools

Google's Explore tool has been retired, even though some older shortcut lists still show its keys. Use Tools > Citations for supported citation workflows and Tool finder to locate current commands. A citation generated by software still needs checking against your assignment's style requirements. Voice typing requires a supported browser and microphone permission; review its punctuation and transcription carefully before submitting work.

Check the document before submission

Use a page break rather than repeated blank lines when a section must start on a new page. Run Find and Replace carefully: a global replacement can also change quotations and references. Open the exported PDF to check page breaks, superscripts, indentation, and links. Keep an editable copy so that corrections do not require rebuilding your paper from the PDF.

Frequently asked questions

Do Word and Google Docs use identical Mac shortcuts?

No. For example, Word inserts a comment with Cmd+Option+A, while Google Docs uses Cmd+Option+M. Read the table for the application you are using.

How do I create a hanging indent in Google Docs?

Select the references, then use Format > Align & indent > Indentation options > Special indent: Hanging. Enter the required amount and choose Apply.

Is Google Docs Explore still available?

Explore has been retired. Use current tools such as Tools > Citations and Tool finder rather than relying on the old Explore shortcut.

Does double spacing fix an entire reference list?

No. You must also check hanging indents, paragraph spacing, ordering, source details, and the citation style required by your assignment.

Related guides

More Word keyboard shortcuts

<https://keyshortcuts.net/word-shortcuts>

More Google Docs commands

<https://keyshortcuts.net/google-docs-shortcuts>

Check your exported PDF

<https://keyshortcuts.net/acrobat-shortcuts>

Navigate research tabs in Chrome
<https://keyshortcuts.net/chrome-shortcuts>

Official sources

Microsoft: Word keyboard shortcuts
<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/keyboard-shortcuts-in-word-95ef89dd-7142-4b50-afb2-f762f663ceb2>

Microsoft: Show Word count
<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/show-word-count-3c9e6a11-a04d-43b4-977c-563a0e0d5da3>

Microsoft: Superscript and subscript
<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/format-text-as-superscript-or-subscript-in-word-507cdffd-8169-4872-96ec-909ea5888dc6>

Google: Docs keyboard shortcuts
<https://support.google.com/docs/answer/179738?hl=en>

Google: Paragraph formatting and indentation
<https://support.google.com/docs/answer/1663349?hl=en>

Google: Type and edit with your voice
<https://support.google.com/docs/answer/4492226?hl=en>

Google: Add citations and a bibliography
<https://support.google.com/docs/answer/10090962?hl=en>

Apple: Mac keyboard shortcuts
<https://support.apple.com/en-us/102650>