

Writing a Research Paper

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What is a research paper?

A research paper is **not** a list of facts or even a well written summary of information collected from various sources. The goal of a research paper is **not** to restate what is already known about your topic. Instead, a research paper requires you to investigate what others have already discovered or argued about a topic, critically analyze the data and perspectives you find, and generate your own unique conclusion on the subject. Your purpose isn't to just gather as much information as possible but to think critically about the sources you find and use them as evidence to inform and justify your thesis.

A strong research paper:

- ✓ Has a unique and well supported thesis and stays focused on that thesis
- ✓ Flows logically from one point to the next
- ✓ Supports every point with facts and examples from credible sources
- ✓ Addresses and refutes any counterarguments
- ✓ Includes a variety of source types
- ✓ Demonstrates a strong understanding of both the topic and the research being used
- ✓ Provides correct citations for any words or ideas that are not the author's own
- ✓ Is clearly written with proper grammar and free of spelling or typographical errors

Step 1: Understand the Assignment

Read the assignment multiple times to be sure you understand it thoroughly. If you're unsure about anything, ask your professor for clarification. E-mail or meet with your professor *before you get started* to discuss your ideas for your paper. In the event that you've misunderstood or forgotten something, you'll want to be informed of that early on to spare yourself additional work.

Step 2: Plan Ahead

Time management is an important part of being a good researcher and writer. Break your assignment into pieces and set deadlines for each task. Budget time for each of the following steps with the bulk of your time devoted to research and revision. Every researcher occasionally runs into unforeseen obstacles, and that's even more likely for students who are new to the process. Therefore, it's important to plan on completing the assignment ahead of the official deadline so that you have sufficient time to get help when something unexpected happens.

Step 3: Choose & Refine Your Topic

Your professor may assign a topic for your research paper. If not, you'll need to come up with one on your own. If you're struggling with this, reflect on material covered in class that you'd like to learn more about or even themes from a movie you've seen or a news article you've read recently that interested you.

3a. Finding the Right Fit

Whether your professor provides a topic or you choose one on your own, you'll probably have to refine your topic to ensure that it's of an appropriate scope for your paper. Consider the number of pages required for your assignment. Your topic should be one you can explore in depth without leaving out important aspects of the issue or being too repetitive. If it doesn't meet these criteria, you'll need to either broaden or narrow your topic.

You may also need to broaden or narrow your topic to ensure that there will be a sufficient and manageable supply of information available. Run some preliminary searches in the library's catalog and databases to make sure that you'll have access to plenty of information on your topic but not so much that you'll be overwhelmed trying to find what you need.

3b. Narrowing Your Topic

A broad topic like "climate change" will be impossible to explore in depth in a 10-page paper without leaving out lots of important information. If entire books have been written on your topic, it's too big to tackle in a research paper.

When narrowing a topic, try using some of the "5 Ws" of journalism (Who, What, When, Where, Why) to make your topic more specific. If your broad topic is climate change, perhaps you'd be interested in learning more about new laws (*what*) that the United States government (*where*) could enact in the next ten years (*when*) to reduce the negative impacts of climate change (*why*) on independent farmers (*who*). If you have trouble thinking of more specific facets of your topic, you'll need to start with some background research. Try using encyclopedias to learn more about the history and context of your chosen subject.

3c. Broadening Your Topic

If your topic is *too* specific, you may not be able to find enough information or enough to say to meet your minimum page count. If, for example, you find yourself struggling to write 10 pages about the impact of ocean acidification on the migratory habits of the East Pacific red octopus over the last 20 years, you may need to branch out a little. You can use the "5 Ws" here as well, but this time try to make each answer more inclusive. For example, you might ask: *Who* else (which other species) might be affected? *What* other impact, besides changes to migratory patterns, has ocean acidification had on marine habitats?

3d. Who Cares?

In addition to the scope of your topic, you'll want to think about its significance. Your topic needs to be one that will be important and interesting to your audience.* Don't waste your and your readers' time rehashing topics that have already been written about extensively if you have nothing new to contribute to the subject. Nobody is interested in reading a paper about whether drunk driving is dangerous, for example; we already know the answer.

*Keep in mind that your intended audience is rarely limited to your professor and classmates. Your audience may be other scholars in your discipline, professionals working in a field other than your own, or readers of a particular publication. Ask your professor if you're unsure about the intended audience for your assignment.

Step 4: Research

Once you've found a suitable topic, you're ready to start your research. You may want to start by creating a list of keywords (the main ideas of your topic, usually nouns) and brainstorming some related words and phrases that you can use as search terms. You may have to try several combinations of search terms before you start to see results that will work well for you. It's a good idea to keep a list of keyword combinations you've tried and note which were the most fruitful so that you don't waste time repeating unproductive searches. Be sure to use only keywords in your searches, not full sentences.

As you research, also keep in mind your professor's requirements for your paper. Are you required to use a certain number or specific types of sources? If you're unsure of the differences in resource types or where to find certain types of sources, consider attending some of our **library workshops**. Additional research help can be found through our online **Research Help Guides** which provide useful tips for searching the library's catalog and databases as well as web sources. Try our **Research 101 Guide** at

<http://researchguides.elac.edu/Research101> to get started.

Take notes as you research. Keep track of where you found each idea, including the page number, so that you can correctly credit the source with citations. Critically evaluate every source to be sure that the information you cite is credible. If you're unsure if a source is trustworthy, ask a librarian.

Step 5: Decide on a Thesis

After you've conducted some research, it's time to analyze your sources, synthesize what you've learned, and draw your own conclusions. You'll summarize your conclusion as a thesis: one or two sentences that clearly state an arguable position on a topic. Your thesis should **not** be an objective fact or merely an announcement of the topic your paper will cover.

Here is an example of a **bad** thesis:

- × In this paper, I will examine some of the ways that male characters in Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* depart from the expected behaviors of their time.

An improved version might look like this:

- ✓ In *The Conscious Lovers*, Richard Steele attempts to redefine for contemporary audiences the proper position of gentlemen in polite society. Steele prescribes behaviors for men, especially in their relationships with women and members of lower social classes, that would have been especially progressive at the time that the play debuted in theaters.

Once you've formed your thesis, you may need to conduct further research to ensure you have sufficient evidence to support it.

Step 6: Outline

An outline is an organizational plan for your research paper. Outlining helps you determine how your ideas fit together, the best order to introduce each idea, and whether you have sufficient evidence to support each point you want to make. Following an outline will help keep you on topic and ensure a logical flow of ideas in your final paper. See our "**Outlining an Essay**" **handout** or visit the Purdue OWL's guide at www.bit.ly/owloutline for details on creating an outline.

Step 7: Write

This step should be one of the quickest and easiest. At this point, your goal is to expand your outline into a full-length paper. Using your outline as a map, put your ideas into full sentences and add transitions between thoughts. Add introductory and concluding paragraphs to introduce, summarize, and provide context for your thesis. Any time you reference an idea from your research, cite the source. If you take breaks during writing, each time you come back to your paper, re-read what you've already written to get back into the same flow of thought, but resist the urge to revise at this point.

Step 8: Cite

Go through your draft and double (then triple) check that each and every idea you've used that isn't your own (opinions, statistics, quotations, etc.) has been attributed to its correct source. Make sure that the format of your paper as well as your in-text and end of text citations match the citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago Style, etc.) that your professor has requested. You can pick up MLA or APA handouts at the library or use our online guides at <http://researchguides.elac.edu/Citation>

Step 9: Revise & Proofread

Although writing your paper should be quick, thorough revision takes much more time. Revision should not be confused with proofreading. Proofreading refers to identifying and correcting errors in formatting, punctuation, grammar, and spelling. When revising, you are examining the content, clarity, and flow of your paper. Both revision and proofreading are vital parts of the writing process. For the best results, visit the **ELAC Reading and Writing Center** for help with proofreading and revisions.

When revising on your own or with a peer, consider the following questions:

- Does your title give the reader a good sense of what your paper is about?
- Is your thesis statement clear and easily identifiable?
- Do your transitions flow smoothly? Are your ideas presented in a logical order?
- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence that supports your thesis?
- Are your paragraphs too short or too long? Do you have a good variety of sentence lengths and structures?
- Have you provided sufficient evidence and clearly explained how all of your research supports your thesis?
- Have you included enough examples? Are they clear and convincing?
- Are all sources properly introduced? Is it apparent why you have included each source? Is all of your research credible?
- Has everything not essential to your argument been cut out?
- Have you drawn a strong conclusion that leaves a lasting impression?
- Does your paper adequately prove that you understand the topic and the research sources you've used?

It's a good idea to revise multiple times with plenty of time between each revision. The longer you go between writing and revision, the more objective you are likely to be in your assessment of your writing.

Looking for more help?

- For more information about writing a research paper, visit the Purdue OWL at <http://www.bit.ly/owlwriting>
- For one-on-one help from a librarian with research, citations, incorporating sources into your paper, and more, call or visit the **Research Help Desk**.
 - Monterey Park Library: **(323) 415-4134**
 - South Gate Library: **(323) 357-6214**
- To learn more about finding and identifying different types of sources, evaluating sources for credibility, and incorporating research into your paper, attend a library workshop. You can view the schedule and register at <https://researchguides.elac.edu/InstructionServices/libraryworkshops>
- For help with editing and revision, visit the ELAC Reading and Writing Center online at <https://elacreadingwritingcenter.org/> or in person at **E3-220**.