

# How to Write a Research Paper

The following ten steps are a possible strategy you can follow when preparing a research paper assignment. These steps are general in nature and can be adapted to any subject for which you need to find and present information.

## Selecting and Narrowing Your Topic

### Step 1 - Choose a Subject

For your research paper, you may be assigned a particular topic, given broad suggestions, or you may have to think of your own subject. In the latter two cases, be sure to choose a subject that is neither too specific nor too general and is relevant to the course. It should be one that you find interesting, and one for which there is information available. A quick check of the library will satisfy the last requirement. If you have any questions and/or doubts concerning this or any other step then please consult your instructor, a tutor/mentor, or a librarian.

### Step 2 - Narrow the Topic and Establish a Thesis

Your project must have limits. Within a broad or general topic, you will need to select a subtopic. By reading general information on the subject (in textbooks and library reference sources such as dictionaries, almanacs, atlases, or encyclopedias), you will discover the aspects of the subject and you may choose one of these.

When you have the topic narrowed down to a manageable size, you will need to establish a thesis for your paper. The thesis is a statement of the main idea of the paper -- what point will you prove or disprove in the paper? What is the argument that will be supported by your research? Do not phrase the thesis statement as a question, but rather, the thesis statement is the answer to a question or problem. For example, if your topic is "marriage breakdown," possible thesis statements could be:

- As divorce is easier to get and society becomes more tolerant of single parents, the rate of marriage breakdown goes up correspondingly. **(answer to a question)**
- If divorce laws were tightened up, people might have more incentive to make marriages work... **(solution to a problem)**

- Marriage breakdown has a disastrous effect on children. **(cause and effect)**
- The possibility for divorce has not necessarily lead to greater happiness among adults. **(Refuting an idea)**

## Gathering Information

### Step 3 - Library Research

#### a. *Reference Sources*

On the [Library home page](#), in the search box click on "[Classic Catalogue](#)." Enter your search words or phrase. Scroll down and pick location: REFERENCE. This will provide you with a number of reference works that will provide some introductory data that may be useful in more accurately defining your topic and in making sure the idea is neither too large nor too small. As an example researching 'Women' is much too broad (too many sources). On the other hand having a thesis topic on whether the final meal of Michael Jackson's life played some part in his death is much too specific (No sources).

#### b. *Find Books*

In the "[Classic Catalogue](#)" enter your search words to find books or other resources on your topic.. Open a few items and choose alternate/better words from the subject terms listed in different items. You can use these new words and change the drop down menu next to the search box to indicate 'Subject' to get even more accurate searches.

#### c. *Find Magazines, Newspapers, or Journal Articles*

Magazines, journal articles, and newspapers are good sources for up-to-date information. Use the appropriate journal index or database to locate citations for specific articles on your topic. Many databases are available online at the library and they are listed on the library's '[Databases](#)' page. Try a full-text database like 'Academic Search Premier' first, to retrieve complete articles on your topic. The library has journals available in print as well. If you want to find a lot of content at once, enter your search words into the [Discovery Search box](#) on the library home page. You will retrieve articles, as well as books and ebooks, in one search.

#### d. *Interlibrary Loan*

Books and journal articles that are not owned by CNC Library may be borrowed or acquired from another library. Material can take up to 2 weeks to arrive, so start your research early to ensure the requested material arrives in time for your research.

#### e. *Find other Online Sources*

A lot of "good" and "bad" information is posted on the Internet. Evaluate these sources carefully, to ensure they are reputable, accurate, and relevant to your topic. Try to use online search engines like [google](#) or [bing](#) after you have completed your search for books, reference sources, and journal/magazines/newspaper articles, as these should fill out the bulk of your sources.

#### Step 4 - Prepare a Preliminary Bibliography

Complete this step in conjunction with Step 3 as you use the catalogue, journal indexes and online sources. This working bibliography keeps track of the sources you are using as you review them and provides information for your final bibliography. Different disciplines follow different "style sheets" for bibliographies and footnotes. Consult your instructor for an acceptable style. Information Sheets for APA, MLA, Chicago and ICMJE/Vancouver documentation styles are available in the library, in print or online on the Library's Citations page.

#### Step 5 - Take Notes

Skim through your sources to get the main ideas, making use of databases, tables of contents, and works cited areas. (Why not use research others have already completed for your own project?). Then read the pertinent sections again carefully, asking yourself "what does the author say that's important?" Make notes of the important points. Keep a laptop, tablet/notebook, or physical notepad nearby to keep track of notes. Be sure to note the page number, author and title of each source for points or quotes taken or paraphrased.

When you are taking notes, try to make them as exact as possible. Be prepared to shorten and rearrange the author's words. If you quote the author's exact words, use quotation marks to remind yourself when you are writing your paper that this was a direct quotation. Do not forget to keep track of where you are getting your information from as you go along. It will help you with citing your work later. Remember to be accurate and honest in your note-taking. Record the facts that refute your thesis as well as support it. This will help to produce a better and more complete paper. In addition, don't be afraid to look outside of your discipline for information. For example, for a history paper on 'Women of the Yukon Gold rush', look in non-history sources like ones dealing with 'feminism, or gender studies', as material taken from sources like this are rarely used for a history paper and can often turn a B level paper into an A level paper.

#### Important

It is important to consider the types of information that you are taking notes from:

- a) Primary information includes, eg.) Original Research from periodical journals, first person observation or narrative materials, a diary, letters [a person on a battlefield presenting their observations].

- b) Secondary information includes, eg.) Research that examines original research to attempt a conclusion, a commentary on people observations from a battlefield, books that analyze research.
- c) Tertiary information includes, eg.) Encyclopaedias that summarize information, books that include handbooks, atlases, dictionaries etc.
- d) Ephemera includes, eg.) collection of material like stamps or coins, a stuffed doll from Shirley Temple, or a coat worn by Jean Chretien.

## Organizing Your Information

### Step 6 - Sort the Notes

Read through your notes or Word document and at the top of each group put a heading that describes its contents. Sort the notes into groups that seem to go together (e.g. those with the same or similar headings). Discard those that stray from the topic. Now put these into a logical order that fits your thesis, for example, chronological order, content grouping, cause and effect, order of importance of points, problem and solution, or comparison and contrast. You may find that there are gaps in your information; that is, some areas have few notes or references. Now is the time to go back to the library and look for information in these areas.

When your research is finished, you can finalize your thesis statement and revise it if necessary. Your final thesis statement may be the same as your original statement, or it might be quite different, depending on the findings of your research.

Constructing an outline can help you organize your notes and thoughts. An outline is especially useful to guide you in the right direction when you are writing the first draft of the paper. The headings of your note groups will serve as the major divisions of your outline. Points within each group will become the subsections of the outline.

State the thesis in a sentence

1. First Major Point

- a) \_\_\_\_\_
- i) \_\_\_\_\_
- ii) \_\_\_\_\_

2) Second Major Point

- a) \_\_\_\_\_
- i) \_\_\_\_\_
- ii) \_\_\_\_\_

3) Third Major Point...

# Presenting the Information

## Step 7 - Write the First Draft

Double-space the first draft of your paper using an easily readable font (for example, Times New Roman, 12 Point). Write the introduction, telling the reader what the essay is about. Include your thesis statement in the introduction. (If you are experiencing writer's block, the introduction can be left until later). Write the body of the paper following your outline and notes. Write down the source and page number of each idea from your research notes as you use it regardless of whether you quote or paraphrase the information. You will need this information later on to make a footnote (or bracket in-text reference). When you are writing the first draft, concentrate on content and logical organization of ideas, not on grammar and writing style. You can worry about these later on, during the editing process. Lastly, write the conclusion and decide on a title. If you are including diagrams, decide which ones to use and where you'll put them.

## Step 8 - Revise the Draft

If possible, let your first draft sit for a day or so. Then read your draft over, several times! Each time you read or "sweep" through the paper, concentrate on revising a different aspect. During the initial sweep, concentrate on content -- Has your point been made? Does your paper have unity? Next, look at the composition of the paper -- Does one paragraph follow the other? Is each paragraph complete? Examine the sentence structure for run-on sentences, awkward phrases, etc., and consider your choice of words. Lastly, examine the paper for the small but important details such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Remember how you say it is as important as what you say.

## Step 9 - Prepare the Final Copy

Prepare your final copy. Be sure that this copy is double-spaced and presented on only side of the paper. Prepare the footnotes (or bracket in-text references), bibliography and a title page. Make sure these are in the format recommended by the style guide you are using (see Step 4). Document your sources of information carefully. When you use facts and opinions from somewhere else, give the original author credit. Even when you put the idea in your own words, you must still acknowledge the source of the idea. If you don't, the result is plagiarism.

## Step 10 - Proofread

Read over your final copy carefully, especially looking for typos and grammatical errors. Make all needed corrections before handing in the paper. Ideally, have someone else proofread your work as well. They will likely pick out mistakes you may have overlooked.