

How to start a research paper | Sample PDF

Sometimes the most difficult part of writing a research paper is just getting it started. Contained in this packet, you will find a list of six steps that will aid you in the research paper writing process. You may develop your own steps or procedures as you progress in your writing career; these steps are just to help you begin.

Step 1: Understand the Assignment and Set a Schedule

One of the biggest problems students have when beginning a research paper is that they don't understand the assignment. Make sure that if you have any questions you ask the professor, other students, or come into the Writing Center. Some specific details you should know are:

- How long the paper has to be (pages, number of words)
- The type of citation preferred by the professor
- Number and types of sources that are allowed (websites, books, articles)
- Whether specific aspects of the paper have different due dates or is it due in full on a specific date.
- Other formatting details (footnotes, subtitles, heading, double-spacing)
- Set a schedule according to the due dates and how long it will take you to complete each task. (Day-by-day, week-by-week)

Step 2: Finding a Topic and Question

Once you have figured out what the assignment is about, it is time to choose a specific topic or question to research. Some things to consider when choosing a topic:

- Is this topic appropriate? – You may want to have the professor approve it.
- Narrow the focus of your paper. (try to make it as specific as possible)
- Choose a topic that not only interests you, but will also be interesting to the reader.
- You may want to choose a question that your paper will answer. That way, when you are researching, you are looking for something specific.
- The answer that you find to this question may ultimately become your thesis statement.

Example: Topic - Pay equality in the workforce.
Question- Do women still get paid less than men do for completing the same amount of work?
Thesis - Women get paid less than men in certain jobs.

Step 3: Begin Research

After you have decided the direction you want to take for the paper, it will now be time to begin researching the topic.

NOTE: Just because you have chosen a topic and question does not mean you have to stick with that one for the rest of the paper! After you have started researching, you may find information that makes you want to change your focus. It is fine if you change your question, but make sure your paper answers the new question and not the old one. Some things to keep in mind when researching:

- Make sure you use a wide variety of sources (Internet, books, journals, video, interviews, etc.)
- Allow yourself enough time to research. This will be the most intensive part of the paper, allow at least two hours per researching session.
- Keep records and copies of all of the information you obtain. Get all of the bibliographical information while you are researching so you do not have to go back. Make sure you also make note of where you found the information in case you have to retrieve it later.
 - Such information includes:
 - Title of the article or book
 - Date it was published or copy written
 - Author(s) and publishing company
 - Pages used
- Try to put information into your own words. It is helpful to paraphrase the information in your own words while you are taking notes to avoid plagiarism later. If you do take quotes directly from the source, make sure you make a note of that.

- You should also be making notes about specific conclusions that you are drawing from the material.
- Look specifically for details that support your thesis or question. Sometimes background information is also necessary.

Step 4: Construct an Outline

Once you have collected all of the research, it may be helpful to organize your thoughts with an outline. To construct an outline, you must group your notes together and match information that fits together. An outline should be formatted in this manner:

- I. Introduction (Thesis Statement)
- II. Main heading/idea of paragraph #1
 - a. Supporting detail 1
 - b. Supporting detail 2
 - c. Supporting detail 3
- III. Main heading/idea of paragraph #2
 - a. Supporting detail 1
 - b. Supporting detail 2
 - c. Supporting detail 3
- IV. Main heading/idea of paragraph #3
 - a. Supporting detail 1
 - b. Supporting detail 2
 - c. Supporting detail 3
- V. Conclusion

Try to ensure that each paragraph contains approximately the same amount of information. Depending upon how organized your outline is, you should be able to write your paper directly from the information in your outline.

Step 5: Write a Draft

Now that you have organized your research material, the next step will be writing the first draft. Keep in mind that you will write multiple drafts, so do not put excessive pressure on the first one. Some things to keep in mind when writing a draft:

- Try to write with your own voice. Don't just spit out researched information. Add your own conclusions and thoughts.
- Remember to cite your sources when you use them, even in a draft.
- Try to keep your information as organized as possible. That will help the reader understand what you are trying to say.
- Once you have written a draft, proofread it! Have a peer respond to it or bring it to the Writing Center to have a tutor help you with it.

Step 6: Write a Final Draft

After you have revised your initial drafts, you should compose a final draft. This draft should have very few errors, have a clear organization, and be formatted correctly. Before you hand in your paper, you should make sure you have the following elements:

- 1) A cover page stating the course information, the title of your paper, and your name.
- 2) The final, revised, copy of your paper with any formatting necessary (Footnotes, page numbers, citations, etc.).
- 3) A works cited page listing the bibliographical information for each of your sources.