Write a Research Paper in Six Steps

One of the most difficult parts of writing a research paper is just getting started. Here are six steps to help you with the writing process.

**Step 1: Understand the Assignment and Create a Timetable**

The first step in writing any research paper is to understand the assignment. Before you begin writing, make sure you ask your professor about any questions you have. Some details that are important to know:

- How long does the paper have to be (pages, number of words)?
- How many sources do you need? What kinds of sources are allowed (e.g. books, articles, Websites)?
- Does your paper need to answer specific questions or be arranged in certain sections?
- What type of citation format does the professor prefer?
- Are there any other formatting details that need to be applied to the paper (e.g. double-spacing, headings)?
- When is the paper due? Do specific aspects of the paper have different due dates or is the complete paper due on a certain date?
- What tasks are involved in writing this paper? – See Steps 2-6 outlined below.
- How long do you think it will take you to complete each task?
- Create a daily and weekly timetable based on the due dates and how long it will take you to complete each task.

**Step 2: Choose a Topic and Come Up with a Question**

Once you understand the assignment, it is time to choose a topic for your research paper. Think about these factors to help you select a topic:

- Is the topic interesting to you? Is it something that you are passionate about, or would like to learn more about? You may be working on this research paper for several weeks; it is hard to stay with it if you don’t find the topic interesting.
- Is the topic appropriate? Has the professor approved it?
- Will other readers find this topic interesting?
- If it is a very broad topic, e.g. pollution, can you narrow the focus of your paper to a smaller sub-topic, e.g. ocean pollution?
• Try to write a question that your paper will answer. When you are researching, look for information that is either related to this question or answers it.

• The answer that you find to this question may ultimately become your thesis statement.

**Example:**

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

### Step 3: Start Researching Your Topic

After you pick a topic for your paper, it is time to start researching it.

a) **When you start researching your topic,** you may find that:

- There is not enough information available on this topic. If that is the case, instead of spending an excessive amount of time trying to find information, it may be best to change your topic.
- There is too much information available on your topic. In that case, narrow the focus of your topic and zero in on a specific aspect of your topic.
- You don’t find the topic interesting anymore. In that case, it is best to change your topic.

b) **While you are researching your topic:**

- Start early and give yourself plenty of time to do the research. Even if you don’t have time to read or write your paper at that time, collect all the resources and information you will need.
- Use different kinds of resources -- books, journals, Websites, video, etc.
- Keep copies of the information you find and/or use. Make a note of where and how you found this information just in case you have to locate it again. Record bibliographical information about your resources – you will need this for your works cited page. Bibliographical information includes:
  - Author of the article, book, or Website
  - Title of the article, book, or Website
  - Date the article, book, or webpage was published/last updated
  - Name of journal, magazine, or Website article was published in
  - Publishing company or Website URL
  - Pages used
c) **Taking notes** as you find information:

- As you read the information you find, highlight relevant parts or take notes.
- Try to paraphrase the information in your own words and write the source in which you found this information.
- If you quote directly from a source, put the words in quotation marks, and write the source from which you are quoting.
- Write down the necessary background information to introduce and explain your topic.
- Look specifically for details that support your research question or thesis statement.
- Write down specific conclusions that you are drawing from the resources.

**Step 4: Construct an Outline**

After doing all the research and finding the sources, create an outline of your paper to organize your thoughts. Look at your notes and group all the information that fits together. For example, if you found information about a person’s childhood in three different sources, group all this information in one section of your paper. Format your outline in the following way:

I. **Introduction** (Thesis Statement)

II. **Main heading/idea of section #1**
   a. Supporting detail 1
   b. Supporting detail 2
   c. Supporting detail 3

III. **Main heading/idea of section #2**
   a. Supporting detail 1
   b. Supporting detail 2
   c. Supporting detail 3

IV. **Main heading/idea of section #3**
   a. Supporting detail 1
   b. Supporting detail 2
   c. Supporting detail 3

V. **Conclusion**

- You may break each section into multiple paragraphs. For example, in section #1 you could have three paragraphs – each one providing more information about one supporting detail.
- Once you have the outline, you should be able to fill in the information for each section to create the first draft of your paper.
Step 5: Write the First Draft of Your Paper

Great job getting this far! You have now organized your research materials and are ready to write the first draft of your paper. Consider these things as you write:

- Write your first draft without worrying too much about it being completely organized and correct. You will probably be revising your first draft a couple of times before submitting it to your professor, so don’t put too much pressure on yourself with the first draft.

- Find your own voice. Unless the information is factual and must be included as is, don’t just copy the information from your research directly into your paper. Try to let your personal thoughts and opinions come through in your paper, and draw your own conclusions.

- Try to keep the information organized. Don’t mix different thoughts and ideas in one section or paragraph. Don’t scatter the same type of information throughout multiple sections of the paper. It is easier for users to follow along if the information is arranged in a logical order.

- After writing your first draft, proofread it. Check grammar and spelling mistakes. Check that the information is organized. Check the formatting and citations. Revise as needed.

Step 6: Write a Final Draft

Congratulations! You are now ready for the last and final step for writing a research paper. After you have revised your first draft a few times, you should prepare your final draft. This final version of your paper should:

- Be clearly organized.
- Have very few or no spelling and grammatical mistakes.
- Be formatted correctly (margins, running headers, spacing, page numbers, citations, etc.)
- Have your name, the course and professor information, and the date the paper is due.
- Have a separate works cited page that has the bibliographical information for each of your sources.

The content for this module was adapted and modified from the original text created by the Writing Center at the State University of New York at Potsdam: