



# How to Write a Research Paper

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The following 10 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.

## A. 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 relevant to the course, one that you find interesting, and one for which there is information available. A quick check of the library will satisfy this last requirement.

**STEP 2: Narrow the topic & establish a thesis.** Your presentation 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 books such as encyclopaedias), you will discover the main aspects of the subjects and you can 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. A thesis is a statement of the main idea of the paper - what point will you prove in the paper? What is the argument that will be supported by the research? Do not phrase the thesis statement as a question, but rather, the thesis statement is the answer to a question or problem. E.g., if your topic is "marriage breakdown", possible thesis statements could be:

As divorce is easier to get and society more tolerant of single parents, the rate of marriage breakdown goes up correspondingly. (Answer to question)

If divorce laws were tightened up, people might have more incentive to make marriages work. (Solution to problem)

Marriage breakdown has disastrous effect on children. (Cause and effect)

## B. GATHERING INFORMATION.

**STEP 3: Library research.** Find books. Using the Library Catalog, look up several subject headings that describe your subject. Check the subject headings of the best books you find, to find more possible subject headings. Find periodical articles. Magazines and newspapers are excellent sources for up-to-date information. Use the appropriate periodical index in print format or on CD-ROM to locate citations, or full text articles on your topic.

Check other library resources around town or use the interlibrary loan service for books and periodical articles not available in Yukon College Library. This material may take up to three weeks to arrive, so start your research early. You are entitled to five requests free-of-charge for each topic; if you want more, you will be asked to pay \$3 for each additional one upon receipt.

**STEP 4: Prepare a preliminary bibliography.** Complete this step along with Step 3 as you use the Library Catalog and periodical indexes. This working bibliography keeps track of the sources you will consult and provides information for your final bibliography. Different disciplines follow different formats for bibliography and footnote preparation. Consult your instructor for an acceptable style. The library provides guide sheets on MLA and APA styles.

**STEP 5: Take notes.** Skim through your books and articles to get the main ideas, making use of indexes and tables of contents. Then read the pertinent sections again carefully, asking yourself, "What does the author say that's important?" Make notes of the important points. Be sure to put the page number and author with each point.

When you are taking notes, try to make them as short 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. Remember to be accurate and honest in your note-taking. Record facts that refute your thesis as well as support it.

### **C. ORGANIZING INFORMATION.**

**STEP 6:** Read through your notes and determine the major points. Be sure to go back and fill in any gaps in your research. When your research is finished you can finalise your thesis statement and revise it if necessary. Your final thesis statement may be the same as your original statement or it may be quite different, depending on the findings of your research. You may find that constructing an outline will help you organise 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.

State the thesis in a sentence, and sketch an outline as follows:

I. First major point

A. -----

    1. -----

    2. -----

II. Second major point

A. -----

    1. -----

B. -----

    1. -----

        a. -----

III. Third major point ...

**STEP 7: Write the first draft.** Double-space the first draft of your paper. Write the introduction, telling the reader what the essay is about. Include your thesis statement in the introduction. (If you are experiencing a writer's block the introduction can be left until later.) Write the body of the paper following your outline and sorted note cards. 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. When you are writing the first draft, concentrate on content and logical organisation of ideas, not on grammar and writing style. You can worry about these later during the editing process. Lastly write a conclusion and decide on a title. If you are including diagrams, decide on which ones you will use and where you will 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 another? 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 capitalisation. Remember how you say it is as important as what you say.

**STEP 9: Write the final copy.** Type your final copy neatly. Be sure that this copy is double-spaced and typed on only one side of the paper. Prepare the footnotes, bibliography and a title page. Document your sources of information carefully. When you use facts or opinions from somewhere else, give the original author credit with footnotes. Even when you put the idea in your own words, you must still acknowledge the source. If you don't, the result is plagiarism.

**STEP 10: Proof-read.** Read over your final copy carefully, especially looking for typing errors. Neatly, make all needed corrections before handing in your paper. Ideally, have someone else proof-read your work as well.

Yukon College Library, August 2002.