

HOW TO: RESEARCH PAPERS

CREATING A TOPIC

1. Find something that interests you and look closer into it. This may require some extra reading to determine if your topic has been researched before or not. If not, then you may be entering into groundbreaking work, and that's cool! But make sure you're up for the challenge, as you may not always find sources related to your ideas.
2. Name your topic and be specific about what you want to study in relation to the assignment, as specificity relates to *scope*, which can help determine or fulfill length requirements for your paper.
3. Ask an indirect question. For example, "I want to study this because I want to find out who / what / when / where / whether / why / how..."
*Note that the indirect question is oftentimes *why* you are researching this topic.
4. Now that you know why you're researching this topic, ask, so what? Or why does this matter to others?
*Note, this is important regarding the *scope* or *relevance* of a paper, and this can be helpful when writing larger research papers that require incorporating more outside sources and analyzing a broader topic.
5. From here, you can develop a question around your topic that research can help to answer.

FINDING & USING SOURCES

These three types of sources are most commonly used in research papers:

1. Primary sources. The direct subject or material of your investigation. Oftentimes these sources offer the best evidence for you to question, analyze, and use to advance your argument.
2. Secondary sources. Critical commentary, oftentimes on primary sources. These sources are also useful if these help to solve a problem or to create new questions and evidence to support your argument.
3. Tertiary sources. These sources primarily are summaries of primary and secondary sources, and therefore are not the most useful in your argument if you rely heavily on these.

The PC library has great resources for research papers, such as PASCAL, access to many online databases, and the librarians are always accessible and provide great resources. The key to generating a great pool of resources is in the key terms of your research topic, such as certain ideologies involved or persons or historical information, to name a few. Once you've completed a search, you can select the resources most relevant to your research and begin an immersion into what these resources have to offer. Key questions to keep in mind are:

- How does this source inform my research? Does it offer anything new that I haven't considered before?
- What argument is being presented in the text? Does this support or negate my own argument?

CREATING A THESIS

Perhaps one of the trickiest and most difficult parts to writing any paper is the thesis: a quick, to-the-point, broad, yet specific summarization of the whole of the paper. This is the sentence that says, "Here is my interpretation and I'm going to show you why in *this* way." While this may be a simplification of the structure of a thesis, as it can take many various forms, a thesis still

functions in a similar way. Essentially, the thesis is the key to your whole argument. It is your connecting thread, your backbone to your argument, from which your body paragraphs branch off of and depend on.

The UNC Chapel Hill Writing Center developed a wonderful handout that illustrates what a thesis statement does and what a strong thesis statement answers, which will be paraphrased below. A thesis statement:

- Tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion
- Is a road map for the paper, telling the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper
- Directly answers the question asked of you, meaning a thesis is an interpretation of a question or a subject, not the subject itself. A thesis offers a way to understand the text or subject.
- Makes a claim that others might dispute
- Is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph

To know whether your thesis statement is strong, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I answer the question?
- Have I taken a position others might challenge or oppose?
- Is my thesis statement specific enough? Here, specificity can mean answering the question of *why* something is “good” or “successful.”
- Does my thesis pass the “So what?” test? If not, then you may need to clarify, develop new relationships, or connect to a larger issue.
- Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering? If this is the case, then perhaps your thesis needs reconsideration, as it is easier to change a thesis than it is to write an entirely new paper.
- Does my thesis pass the “how and why” test?

If this is overwhelming, think SAS: *Specificity, Argumentative, Significance*. If your thesis checks off each of these points, then you have a great thesis.

PLANNING THE PAPER

Before beginning a paper, especially a larger research paper, you can use outlines of the main points of your argument to help keep track of where you want your paper to go and to remain focused on the central argument. Outlines and plans can take many forms, such as lists, brain-webs, storyboards, or maps. An important thing to note about planning your paper is the relationships between your ideas, as they are your way of understanding your topic and show your process as you go from one idea to the next. In the beginning, you can make broad leaps between your ideas that later you can connect and draw more complex relationships as you come to understand your research topic more. Below are both *poor* organizational plans and *effective* organizational plans for you to consider as you begin your paper.

Poor Organizational Plans

1. Do not organize your paper as a narrative of your thoughts. This means the paper follows your thought process and how you came to your ideas, rather than simply stating your ideas. If your writing features language like “The first issue was...; Then I compared...; Finally I conclude,” then you most likely are using this type of organizational plan for your paper.
2. Do not “quilt” your sources into a patchwork of other authors’ ideas that overshadow your own. This often leads to a paper criticized as “all summary” rather than analysis.

3. Do not reword the assignment question into your main argument. This shows a lack of originality or creativity with the assignment, and a research paper should be fun and insightful from a new perspective, not a rehash of the same ideas.

Effective Organizational Plans:

1. Free-writing just to get your ideas down. Broad leaps between ideas can happen here, or you can further develop the relationship between your ideas. There is no pressure to make this sound like “an essay”—you are writing for you and your own understanding.
2. Write your ideas on notecards—big ideas, smaller ones, questions, epiphanies—and spread them out and play with the order that you think makes the most sense when going from one idea to another. One thing teachers like is grouping subjects (think, authors or works) under one idea, so one tactic for organizing your paper is to pair multiple works or authors together because they share a similar message, theme, or whatever else connects these works together. You can get pretty creative with the connections, just so long as you make them clear in the final draft!
3. Draw pictures or storyboard your ideas. Similar to the notecards method, this can help in visualizing how the paper will come together. A well-organized research paper should flow like a story or a film, with the ideas following each other in a natural progression. Likewise, a brain-web can function like a map of where your ideas begin and where they move as you consider different ideas throughout your process.

DRAFTING THE PAPER

Introductions

- Most teachers recommend writing an introduction last, once all your ideas have been put together. But it can also be helpful to write down those main ideas up front before you dive into some nitty-gritty detailed analysis. However, this early introduction acts only as a first draft, and once you have written your paper, it is always best to go back and edit and determine if a better introduction would serve your paper better on the whole.
- Some helpful organizing methods for your introduction:
 1. Contextualizing background
 2. Statement of the problem
 3. Response to the problem

Body Paragraphs

- Organization of information is key to the body paragraphs, and, as this is the meat of your paper, is the best part of it. Some helpful methods for organizing your central ideas in a way that lets your reader easily follow along are as follows:
 - Part-by-part
 - Chronological
 - Short to long, simple to complex; such as identifying key terms and concepts that are relevant and important to your research
 - More familiar to less familiar
 - Less contestable to more contestable
 - More important to less important (or vice versa)
 - Earlier understanding to prepare for later understanding
 - General analysis followed by specific applications

Conclusions

- Similar to introductions, these summarize the research and findings within your paper and can even lead to a broader application of the significance of your research. In a way, the conclusion is a mirror to the introduction, as the conclusion begins with specifics and opens these ideas to a wider understanding.
- A strategy to structure your conclusion:
 1. Start with your main point, but do not repeat it word-for-word
 2. Add new significance or application; a new “so what?” answer to your question
 3. Call for more research

OTHER HELPFUL TIPS

Deadlines

- Check to see what deadlines, if any, your instructor has laid out for you in the syllabus. Sometimes research papers have one ultimate deadline or many deadlines for smaller portions of your project. Either way, beginning the process and knowing when certain deadlines are coming up can help you keep track and stay relatively stress-free during dreaded finals.
- Start thinking about your topic early. A few weeks, if possible, is a good time to start brainstorming or thinking about a topic or text you would like to work with some more.
- Once you feel ready to start drafting, the best thing to do is to start. Writing a paper over the course of several days or weeks, writing a page or a paragraph or a topic at a time, is a helpful way to manage a large paper on a deadline.

Resources

- Knowing the right amount of resources for a research paper can be tough. Depending on the assignment and the scope of your paper, resources for papers of certain lengths can vary. Your professor most likely will let you know how many resources they expect, and always refer back to your professor’s expectations. But as a general guideline, this list may help. For papers of:
 - 4-5 pages: 1-3 sources
 - 5-7 pages: 3-5 sources
 - 8-10 pages: 5-8 sources
 - For larger papers, such as Capstones or Honors Research, 12-15 sources, or as required by your professor

CITATIONS

Depending on what academic area your research falls under, citations can range from MLA to APA to Chicago/Turabian style. For more help with these, please consult the handouts available at the Writing Center or Purdue OWL.

**Resources used to create this guide include:

Booth, Wayne C. and Gregory G. Colomb. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008. Print.

The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “Thesis Statements.” *The Writing Center*, The Writing Center at UNC Chapel Hill, 2014. 26 March 2015.