

Writing Research Papers

Writing a research paper is easier if you break the activity into steps.

Ask a question

Do some preliminary research to determine what material is available on your area of interest. Review your class notes: has your professor or other students raised any questions that have not been fully discussed? Has the professor dropped hints about interesting areas of inquiry? Has a particular class topic stimulated your interest and made you want to know more? Think of your topic as a question you are trying to answer or a problem you are trying to solve.

Conduct research using the library

In the library you will find books, periodicals, bibliographies, and other print resources that will contribute to your research in the library. THOMCAT, PC's library catalog on the Web, to search for books by title, author, subject, or key words. By combining keywords, you can broaden or limit your search as necessary.

Follow the links on the library's homepage for Databases, Journal Finder, PASCAL for books from other libraries in South Carolina, Course Guides with resources for particular courses, which might be related to your research area, and Inter-library Loans for books you cannot find elsewhere.

Get to know the library staff. Check Reference Help on the library homepage and stop by the desk in the library. These librarians can help you learn to use the resources available in the library and online. Ask for help when you need it.

Evaluating Sources

Print sources

When referring to books, take several steps to assess their worth:

- Who is the author? What are the author's credentials? What is the author's affiliation? What other works has this author published on your topic? What is the author's reputation as a scholar?
- Who is the publisher? Works published by university presses such as Yale University or large publishers like Random House come under the scrutiny of editors who are experts on the subjects the books cover. As a result, these presses often publish more reputable sources.
- How extensive is the bibliography? Has the author documented sources, using the most up-to-date and reliable research?

When referring to articles in periodicals, check again for the author's credentials and the sources of the information contained in the article. Check also for the reputation of the magazine or journal in which you found the article. *The Journal of the American Medical*

Association may give you more reliable information on topics related to health than a local newspaper will.

Internet sources

- First, is an author given? If no author is listed, be skeptical. Most authors are proud of work they have written if it is reliable. Failure to include as name with an Internet article may indicate that the article contains unsubstantiated opinions.
- What are the author's credentials? Is the author an expert in the field? Does the author have obvious biases?
- Is there a print copy of the source? Has it also been published in a magazine or journal?
What is the source of the information?
- Is the site associated with a professional organization or university? If so, is the organization devoted to objective study or is it heavily biased?
- Assessing Credibility of Online Sources from St. Cloud State gives some guidelines: <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/research/credibility1.html>

Research on the Internet

Evaluating Internet sources is a bigger concern than with books and journals: whereas book authors and publishers and journal editorial boards control the content of their resources, the Internet is unmonitored. Although much of what you find may be valuable, much may be information that lacks documentation or substantiation. Evaluating the worth of the sources you uncover is perhaps the most important part of research. A paper is strong only if the information it contains is valid.

Helpful links on searching the Internet

- Conducting Research includes a list of search engines and search strategies
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/8/>
- Research and Documentation Online provides helpful suggestions for doing research in various disciplines.
<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/>

Keeping track of source material

If you cut and paste from the Internet into a file or document, use a different font for source material in your early drafts. Put quotation marks around exact words you copy into your own document. Or paraphrase as you go by looking away from the printed page as you type your draft or notes. Give the URL (Internet address) or the full citation for every source you use.

James D. Lester in *Writing Research Papers: A Complete Guide* (New York: Longman, 1999) gives suggestions for creating effective notes for those of you who write longhand before going to the computer.

- Use ink and write on index cards with one size for notes and one for bibliography entries. Write on one side of the card only.
- To **paraphrase**: rewrite the original in the same number of words by reading the passage and then looking away from the original as you rewrite it in your own words. Provide an in-text citation. Use quotation marks to keep exceptional words and phrases from the original source.

1. Write one item per note (or label single files for notes on computer and label them for easy retrieval).
2. List the source on each note with the name, year, and page number.
3. Label each note by describing each one or putting one of your own headings on it.
4. Write a full note in sentence form so that you are already doing the writing for your paper.
5. Keep everything.
6. Label your personal notes: put PER (personal notes), my ideas, or mine.
7. Conform to conventions of research style if you already know which style you will use. Write your citations as you go.