

Steps for Writing a Research Paper

Writing a research paper involves a series of tasks. It's helpful to know that you don't have to do everything at once. These smaller tasks are going to be much more manageable:

1. **Brainstorm for a topic** that might be interesting to you.
2. Do some **research with keywords** to find out what's been written about the topic. Some databases are better than others. Ask your instructor for help on where to look. Notice that during this process you'll also be generating your **first draft of a bibliography**, so write it down and save it as its own document.
3. Start doing some **initial reading** and **take lots of notes**. Find out in greater detail what people have already written about your topic. This is a way of figuring out where the discussion of your topic currently stands. This is the sort of information that will be summarized in your own research paper. It generally gets placed into your **introduction**. It might even become a bigger chunk of your paper, especially in papers for the social sciences. In this case, there might be a discussion right after the introduction lasting a few pages that reviews the status of a discussion on a topic before introducing your own thesis (or hypothesis).
4. Once you know what's been written already, what the main issues are regarding a topic, and who are the main contributors to a discussion, then you're ready to take the next steps designed to **generate your own thesis**.
 - By carefully reading the articles or books that most apply to your topic, you'll get even more leads on what other sources you should look at. You'll find these leads in the footnotes and bibliography of these pertinent articles and books. This is a key step in making sure you're reading all of the most significant literature on your topic. It's also when you'll create your **final draft of the bibliography**.
 - Now that you've read all the significant literature about your topic, it's time for some deep thinking about ways you can say *something new* or *something that challenges someone else's views* on the topic you're researching. This is where your **thesis** takes shape.
 - In the social sciences, your thesis takes the form of a *hypothesis* and requires that you design a *research project* to confirm or refute your hypothesis.
5. Your thesis provides you with a lot: it tells you what you're going to be arguing for. But it still needs lots of evidence to support it. Thus, the next stage of the writing process is to **design a structure** for the argument you're making. This can take the highly organized form of an *outline* or a *less formal listing* of your main points and the best evidence you have to support it. Some of us hate to outline and feel that our writing is better when we don't have the constraints of an overarching organization. Actually, it's quite true that most of us only figure out the best way to defend our arguments while we're writing (or while we're arguing about something with a colleague). So, go ahead and "*freewrite*" or even argue with a friend. Just be sure to go back and organize your best arguments after you've discovered them.

6. Break down your writing tasks into **smaller sections**. Writing research papers can feel like running a marathon – a daunting task if we tried to do it all at once. Unlike smaller essays, we simply can't write research papers in one sitting (or we might collapse trying, as with unprepared marathoners). Since you already have an outline or structure for your paper, then write only about one of your outline points each time you sit down. You might find that you'll need an hour or more per point. That's fine. Write for an hour or so, finish off the point, then take a long break to refresh and reward yourself.
7. Assemble the pieces of your research paper. Once you've written up the individual parts of your paper, it still may not be in a form that is easy to comprehend for your readers. You'll find that **transitions** from one section to the next will need to be written, so that the paper flows seamlessly from one section to the next. You'll also likely want to rewrite your **introduction** and your **conclusion** now that everything else has been written. These two sections of the paper are in some ways the most critical for drawing your readers into your discussion and showing them the significance of what you're arguing.
8. Be academically responsible and **document your sources**. Every time that you use specific information or take specific quotations from someone else's work, you need to cite them. This is an effort to maintain the original author's intellectual property, and your own integrity is on the line when you decide to use someone else's insights irresponsibly. To cite other works correctly, follow the guidelines provided by your instructor, who will tell you whether to use APA, MLA, or Chicago Style. Style sheets on each of these options are available at the Undergraduate Writing Center.
9. Check your document one last time for **grammar** and **punctuation** issues. In some ways, these issues are not as important as having a good thesis and a good logical flow to your argument. They're also not as critical as having good transitions, so that your reader can follow your argument easily. That's why it's perfectly acceptable to save proofreading for last. However, don't leave this process out altogether. Each of us knows the loss of credibility that comes by way of poor spelling and grammar. Even if these are innocent mistakes on your part, they're still going to make you look bad.