
Writing A Research Paper

I. Get Organized

- A. Identify **all important factors** in the assignment's directions including the due date, paper length, types of sources allowed, and preferred documentation style (i.e. MLA, APA, CMS, etc).
- B. Note the **purpose** for writing (to analyze, argue, compare, contrast, define, describe, discuss, explain, evaluate, show cause and effect, illustrate, summarize, trace, etc.). Consider your **audience** (who? expectations? level of knowledge about the topic?).
- C. Set a realistic **time table**.
 1. Use the checklist portion of this packet to budget your time. If your instructor has not specifically set due dates or time frames for you, you may want to fill in your own dates in the boxes that are provided. When you've completed a step on the checklist, enter a checkmark on the line next to the task.
 2. Post the checklist where you can see it often and stick to it.
- D. Keep all **material** you gather together in one folder!

II. Choose your topic

- A. Find and narrow a topic appropriate to the assignment given by the instructor.
- B. Pre-write to find out what you already know about the topic.
- C. Do some pre-research.
 1. Are there enough sources to consult?

Helpful Hints

Where to find sources:

1. **Bibliographies in your textbook**– at the end of chapters, etc.
2. **Internet sources**- *Google* is one of the best and most user-friendly search engines on the Web to use key word searches on your topic. Also, consult a writing handbook's companion site for research information. For example, at www.dianahacker.com click on **Companion Website for Students**. Choose *A Writer's Reference* and then "Research and Documentation Online" for help with finding sources within disciplines that require formats such as MLA, APA, CMS, and CSE. When starting research to support your thesis statement, use only as many online sources as you are allowed. Also, make sure your Internet sources are reliable.
3. **Books and scholarly journals**. You can search for these using the EBSCO Discovery Service search box on the Library home page. EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) provides access to all Library resources, including books, ebooks, magazines, scholarly journals, and videos. When you search for a topic in EDS, you are **NOT** searching the Web. You are searching a subscription database of reputable sources suitable for college research papers. Whatever you need, you can probably find it in EDS. Contact a librarian at the Library Reference Desk in Lancaster or in Room SV3M-6 at the Palmdale Center for more information about EDS.
4. **Personal interviews** – Never underestimate what your peers, friends, family members, and experts might know about your topic. They may even know where to research the information. Ask them.

Remember, reference librarians are your best friends when you are trying to select and locate sources. Writing Center tutors can offer valuable tips for drafting and revising.

- D. List the ideas your pre-research has prompted.
- E. Reconsider and modify your topic if necessary.
- F. Make a tentative outline from the ideas your pre-research has prompted. You can list ideas and decide which are primary points and secondary points (supportive, explanatory, examples, etc.) or put ideas in chronological order if this fits your purpose better.

III. Write a Thesis Statement

- A. Turn the topic into a guiding question that you want to answer in your research. For example, "What can people do about the problem of smog in the Los Angeles basin?"
 - 1. For help with thesis statements, consult a writing handbook or the AVC Writing Center Web site's *FAQ* page for *Writing*.
- B. Write a thesis statement that answers your guiding question and puts forth the main point of your essay. For example, your pre-research might lead to this thesis statement: To help lessen smog conditions in the Los Angeles basin, average citizens can do three simple things--keep their vehicles maintained, use alternate means of transportation, and limit the use of aerosol products.

Helpful Hints

This is an area where you can save a considerable amount of time if you do it right. Think of writing a paper as building a house; writing a thesis statement is like laying your foundation. If you do it right, the rest of your house will stand; if not, you're going to have a mess on your hands, and you'll waste a lot of time fixing superficial problems that all result from not having a firm support structure. Taking 15 or 20 minutes to formulate and write out a thesis may save you hours worth of work.

IV. Start Research

- A. Gather your sources.
 - 1. Many instructors will want you to use reliable sources such as those found in EBSCO Discovery Services. They may also require a certain number of sources and/or different types of sources (print or Web, articles or books, etc.).
- B. Keep a running list of sources you have found that have influenced or are influencing your research.
 - 1. Use 3x5 index cards or a notebook or pad of paper expressly for research to record the evidence AND the publication information: author(s), title, date of publication, name of the publishing company, volume or edition number if any, and page number(s), as well as dates of access, names of organizations, and URLs (Web addresses) for online sources.

Helpful Hints

This is another area where most people waste a lot of time later on. If you keep a running tab of your sources, you won't have to go back to the library to find books that may have been checked out already or waste time trying to find an Internet site you forgot to write down. Every time you sit down to do research, be sure to have your running bibliography list near you.

- C. Take lots of notes
 - 1. Look for evidence that supports your thesis statement such as examples, opinions of experts, facts, statistics, definitions, historical information, illustrations, maps, charts, analogies, and even opposing arguments to strengthen your own argument.
- D. When looking for evidence, avoid plagiarism by giving credit for an idea that is not your own. Be sure to write the page number(s) on your 3 x 5 card, notepad, or "hard" copy.

1. Summarizing – If you intend to restate in your own words the main point of an author's opinion or idea and omit his/her original statement for the purpose of saving space, you must still give credit to the author and cite him/her as the original source.
2. Paraphrasing – Where summarizing gives only the essence of the original text, paraphrasing is much more detailed. Putting the meaning of the original opinion or idea in your own words can lead to a longer explanation than the original statement itself. You can, of course, use part of the original in your paraphrase as a partial quotation (see below). Again, the author is always cited and given credit for the original statement.
3. Direct Quotation – If you place what an author said, word for word, in your paper, you must put quotation marks around a short quotation and cite the source properly. For long quotations, margin indentations rather than quotation marks are required along with proper citation. *Note: Within a summary or a paraphrase, you may want to use a distinctive phrase or sentence used by an author that you cannot easily re-word. In that case, insert quotation marks around it, always giving credit to the author.*

Note: Instructors generally know when plagiarism is intended and when it is not. If you intend to plagiarize something, be warned that at the very least you will probably receive an "F" on your paper and may be referred to the Vice-President of Student Services, especially for repeated instances of plagiarism. Be very careful to cite work that is not your own.

E. Write a more formal outline

1. Your outline can be as structured as this one, or as simple as a list of points. Try to write down at least the thesis and the major points that support and refer to your thesis.

V. Start Writing

- A. Double-space the draft so that you have room to add things and to make corrections.
- B. Write a strong introduction. Be thoughtful and take your time with it.
 1. Tell a story or anecdote, offer an interesting fact, create a scenario, or ask a question to grab your reader's attention.
 2. Start broad with your topic (i.e. background information, a general understanding of what you will be writing about) and get more and more narrow to the focal point of the topic you have chosen. Finally, state your thesis and cue readers in on the specifics of what you have to say and the order you will be presenting your points in the paper.
- C. Start writing the body paragraphs.
 1. Remember, this is only the first draft; say what you want, but try to stay focused on organization. For each body paragraph, be sure to use a topic sentence, provide evidence to expand the point made in the topic sentence, and write a concluding sentence.
 2. Introduce borrowed material with signal phrases. See the MLA examples below. Smith states, "Keeping vehicles maintained reduces the amount of gas fumes in the air" (76).

OR

According to Smith, "Keeping vehicles maintained reduces the amount of gas fumes in the air" (76).

If you do not name the author in a signal phrase, place his/her name in a parenthetical citation:

One expert states, "Keeping vehicles maintained reduces the amount of gas fumes in the air" (Smith 76).

OR

A yearly smog check goes a long way to limiting "the amount of gas fumes in the air" (Smith 76).

3. Use your outline when you don't know what to say next, or if you feel like you are getting off track.
4. When you are through, or think you are through, put your paper aside and forget it for a day or two. A week might be better depending on your time frame.

Helpful Hints

Avoid common errors:

1. Don't string together one quotation after another. This is your thinking – not merely a repetition of someone else's words.
2. Don't forget to use quotation marks when you quote.
3. Summarize or draw conclusions. When you quote something, analyze it and tell your audience why it is significant or what the information indicates or how it connects to the point being made, etc.

B. Write your conclusion.

1. The idea is not to re-word your introduction; it is to assert your thesis once more, but this time based on all of the evidence that you have just presented. Also, remember that you should not be adding any *new* information at this point that cannot be substantiated.
2. It is a good idea to end on the same note with which you started; it gives a certain cadence and balance to your paper. For instance, if your essay is about how to spot and curb road rage and you started your paper with an anecdote about the stress you experience of driving in rush hour traffic, re-use the anecdote, giving it a sense of completion.

VI. Revise, Edit, and Proofread

- C. Re-read the paper. You may find that the organization can be improved by moving certain parts to other sections. You don't have to re-write the whole thing if you need to change the order of the paper. You can cut and paste.
- D. Re-write in final form. Your instructor may have had you involved in peer review by this time, or may have edited your paper him/herself. Be sure to use any suggested changes that help with your paper's structure or coherence. Consult a Writing Center tutor.
- E. Don't forget to type your Works Cited (MLA) or References (APA) page at the end. Use proper format!
- F. Edit for grammar errors and proofread for punctuation, spelling, and capitalization errors.