**What is a research paper?**

A research paper is one in which you have identified a topic, have research what others have written about that topic, and then have taken a position of your own about this topic. This position is the basis for your paper's thesis statement. You support your thesis by presenting referenced information from reliable secondary sources, such as books, periodicals, journals, newspapers, on-line databases, web sites, etc. All referenced material, whether paraphrased or quoted, must be cited properly following one of the recognized formats, such as the [Modern Language Association (MLA)](http://www.mla.org/) or [American Psychological Association (APA) Guidelines.](http://www.apa.org/apa-style/)

**Where should you begin?**

Writing the research paper is not a simple task, but one that is quite manageable as long as you develop a plan and stick to it. Your plan should start with the creation of a realistic time-line, detailing all your researching, pre-writing, writing and proofreading activities. By having a time management plan in place, you will know exactly when you have to begin each task and how long you have for that task, thus eliminating that last minute rush just before the paper is due. Check your timeline periodically to see if you are adhering to your plan. Make adjustments as you progress through the research and writing stages.

**Ten Basic Steps to Writing a Research Paper**

1. **Identifying your topic -**The first step in the research process is identifying your topic. Your topic must be broad enough so that it allows for an in depth investigation and discussion, yet narrow enough for you to address within the confines of your assignment.
2. **Researching your topic -**Once you have identified your topic, you are ready to begin gathering information about your topic from the various reference materials, i.e., journals, magazines, books, newspapers, databases, and web sites that are available to you. As you read, you will begin to get a better understanding of your topic and will be able to formulate your thesis, the position that you will take about your topic.
3. **Taking notes -**As your read, you should record key ideas and supporting details from your source material. Recording each point on a separate note card allows you to keep track of all the information you are gathering, as well as the source of this information. You should write your notes in your own words, paraphrasing your sources. Record quotes carefully and sparingly. You will learn more about your topic if you can put your information in your own words. Be sure to include all source information for all the material you use. Source information includes, title, author, publication, date of publication, publisher, and city of publication. Electronic sources must include the URL address and date of access.
4. **Brainstorming and Concept mapping -**Using your notes, identify all key points or main ideas about your topic. Cluster all supporting points around each main point identified. Do not edit yourself. This will be done later when you develop your outline.
5. **Developing a working thesis statement -**Once you have completed your initial research and brainstorming activity, you are ready to review your notes and determine what you want to say about your topic. In other words, the point you are making about your topic that you want your readers to understand after reading your paper. This then becomes your initial thesis statement. You may use this thesis statement as the central point from which to build your case.
6. **Writing an outline -**Writing an outline helps you keep your thoughts organized and ensures that you are staying on topic. It also helps you develop the key points and supporting details that prove up your argument. Using your concept map and note cards, organize your information into logically grouped sections. List all your main ideas and then the supporting ideas and details that support your thesis. Remember that your outline is there to guide you along as you write your paper. You can modify your outline and your paper's organization as you begin writing if necessary.
7. **Writing a first draft -**Using your outline as a guide, you can begin to write your paper. Remember, that this will be a first draft of the paper and not the final product that you will turn in for a grade. The first draft allows you to get your ideas down on paper. This draft is a place for you to experiment with the way in which you want to present your information. It allows you to see if you have presented your thesis clearly and have developed your ideas in a way that your reader will understand.  
     
   All papers begin with an introductory paragraph or two. Your introduction should not only present your thesis, but it should also entice your reader into reading your paper. [Writing a thought provoking introduction](http://www.proquestk12.com/curr/homework/reference_strats2.shtml) takes time and some creativity. This is the place where you engage your reader and want him/her to continue reading.
8. Your body paragraphs present information that supports your thesis. You will develop main ideas that state your position on your topic and support this position with information you gathered from your reference material. Referenced material, either paraphrased or quoted must be threaded into your paper. You must develop transitional sentences that tie this information to your own thoughts and conclusions. You must never just drop a quote into the body of a paragraph without making the necessary connection to your other ideas.  
     
   All referenced material must be cited using one of the approved citation styles, such as [MLA (Modern Language Association)](http://www.mla.org/) or [APA (American Psychological Association)](http://www.apa.org/apa-style/). Each style has a specific structure and format for citing paraphrased and quoted materials for all types of print, electronic, and multi-media sources. Be sure to refer to the appropriate style manual when inserting this material into your paper.  
     
   The [concluding paragraph](http://www.proquestk12.com/curr/homework/reference_strats3.shtml) brings closure to your paper. While ending your discussion, it can also present ideas for further research into your topic. A well-written concluding paragraph allows you to re-visit your thesis statement without restating it or your introductory paragraph.  
     
   The final section of your paper is a list of referenced material. Your References (APA) or Works Cited (MLA) page is the last page of your paper. This is where you list all the sources you used for your paper. The structure of this section depends on the stylistic format that you are following. Using either the MLA or APA Handbook, follow the layout dictated by the type of source material you used.  
     
   If you have any supplemental material that clarify or add to information in the body of the paper, then you may include this information as an Appendix to your paper. The Appendix must be clearly labeled and is inserted after the Reference or Works Cited page.
9. **Revising/editing your first draft -**  
     
   After writing your first draft you should set it aside for a day or two before re-reading it. When reading your paper, read it aloud, thus using your visual and auditory senses. This way you will be reading the paper from a fresh perspective, and will be able to identify through sight and sound areas that need clarification and re-wording. You will also identify any undeveloped thoughts, as well as sections that are too wordy. While rereading your paper, you should check for grammatical and structural problems. Using the spell-check program incorporated into your word processing program is a must. After revising this draft, you should ask someone to read your paper to see if your thesis is clear and if you have developed your points so that he/she understands your position.
10. **Proofreading -**Writing your final draft does not mean that you are ready to turn your paper in to your instructor. You must always proofread your paper one more time making sure to check for grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure. Using a [research paper checklist](http://www.proquestk12.com/curr/homework/reference_strats6.shtml) will insure that you identify all key elements of your paper.
11. **Using a submission checklist -**Using a submission checklist ensures that the paper is ready for submission. Be sure you have included all the necessary paper elements and have followed the stylistic guidelines.

**Checklist:**

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1. | Does your Title Page include title, author (your name), course, and date? |
|  | 2. | Are the page margins 1" on all sides of the paper? |
|  | 3. | Are the pages numbered and double-spaced throughout? |
|  | 4. | Are punctuation and typing rules followed? |
|  | 5. | Have you avoided [plagiarism](http://www.proquestk12.com/curr/homework/reference_strats4.shtml) by referencing all sources? |
|  | 6. | Does the Reference or Works Cited page follow strict style guidelines? |
|  | 7. | Are Appendices labeled and numbered properly? |