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REPORT writing
SCHOOL reports
RESEARCH -- Study & teaching
TIME management
WRITING

The article presents an overview on how to write a research paper. The steps include: understanding the assignment, choosing the topic, beginning research, taking notes, sorting notes and creating an outline, drafting the paper, revising the paper, and editing and proofreading the paper. Time estimations for all the steps are included.

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Writing a Research Paper

How to Plan

Writing a research paper can be an exciting and rewarding challenge. The key to success is allowing yourself enough time to uncover and gather all the information you need. So before you start researching and writing, create a schedule to ensure that you stay organized and focused.

Below is an example of how much time the average student will spend on each step outlined in this guide. This will hold true for a paper of 5 to 10 pages. For longer papers, add more time to the research and drafting steps.

- Step One: Understanding the Scope of Your Assignment – 30 minutes
- Step Two: Choosing Your Topic – 1 to 2 hours
- Step Three: Beginning Your Research – 10 to 15 hours
- Step Four: Taking Notes – 10 to 15 hours
- Step Five: Sorting Note Cards and Making a Working Outline – 30 minutes to 1 hour
- Step Six: Drafting, Integrating, and Balancing Your Paper – 3 to 5 hours
- Step Seven: Revising – 2 to 3 hours
- Step Eight: Editing and Proofreading – 2 hours
  These are average estimates that will vary depending on the length of your paper, your experience with the research process, your writing ability, and your ability to focus your working time effectively.

Step One: Understanding the Scope of Your Assignment
When beginning a research paper, you first need to ask yourself a number of questions:

1. What are the page requirements for this paper?
- It is important to understand your teacher's expectations and how long the paper should be.
- Teachers may want to challenge your ability to edit the research material gathered and understand how to choose the most relevant information.
- More is not always better. However, keep in mind that meeting only the minimum required number of pages may yield only an average grade at best.

2. Will this paper research a broad topic or specific book or text?
Broad topic:
- If you are researching a broad topic and need to cover a lot of ground, divide your paper into sections before you begin your research.
- For example, if you are writing a broad-scoped paper on Charles Dickens, you may be overwhelmed at the sheer volume of research and reference material available. Choosing and limiting what you hope to cover will make the research more focused and help you avoid wasting time.

Specific text:
- If your paper focuses on a specific book or text, for example, Charles Dickens's "Bleak House," you should brainstorm what information you want to present before researching sources.

- Initial brainstorming will help you focus on sources you are interested in, making it easier to browse for specific titles of books, articles, table of contents and other sources that you would like to include in your paper.

  3. Is this paper argument-based, research-based, or both?

  A research-based paper:
- Provides a variety of informational sources and a balanced view of the topic.
- Gives several sections of information that reflect general knowledge and study of that text.

  An argument-based paper:
- Asks the author to form a thesis and prove a particular point.

  An argument-based research paper:
- Will have a point of view.
- For Example: "Dickens's novel 'Bleak House' was constructed as a direct response to political concerns of the day."

  4. What point of view should be used in writing the paper?
- **First Person Point of View:** Uses "I" and is employed in personal research papers when your experience or opinion is directly desired by your teacher. "We" is a form of first person plural that is often used as a writing "style" (Example: "We see that the characters are not fully developed."). While this is a stylistic choice, it also has implications for the reader: do you really want to suggest that you know how your teacher or any other reader of your paper interprets a text?
- **Second Person Point of View:** Uses "you" and is useful when a teacher wants you to directly address your reader (Example: "You can see that this president made many enemies.").
- **Third Person Point of View:** No visible speaking voice. In this point of view, the author is implied (the implication is that the ideas in the paper are yours, eliminating the need for "I"). Using "I think" or "I believe" usually weakens a paper that is strengthened by impartial statements (Example: "I believe Dickens meant to symbolize the working poor in this section of the story", versus "Dickens means to emphasize the working poor in this section of the story.").

  5. What kinds of sources are acceptable for your topic?
- While searching an academic database or the World Wide Web, you may find information that is not "academic enough" to be included in your paper and counted as a source. This usually includes plot summaries, reviews, and articles in trade publications, personal websites and popular magazines.
- There are, however, some topics, such as sports, current events, popular culture, etc. You will need to determine what kind of balance between academic and popular sources your essay requires.
- You will also need to determine whether you can use electronic information exclusively, or if you will have to look at an actual book/journal. Your teacher may also give you guidelines on the number of citations expected in the paper.

  6. What citation style does your teacher prefer you use (APA, MLA, Chicago)?
- Do not assume that you will be able to use whatever style you are most accustomed to.
- Knowing the citation style will affect not only how you research and take notes, but also how you construct your paper's content.

  Step Two: Choosing Your Topic

  A teacher may simply give you a topic, in which case you don't have the burden of choosing. Alternatively, your assignment may be "open-ended," with a general statement like "write a research paper based on something we have covered in class." Another open-ended possibility is a teacher providing a list of possible topics to be chosen on a first-come-first-served basis.

- If you have an open-ended assignment, choose your topic as soon as possible. You don't want to put off deciding what to write about until the last minute.
- Do some preliminary research and then decide. You should discuss your idea with your teacher to make sure it's appropriate.
- The open-ended assignment requires that you act quickly to secure the topic you feel most comfortable with. Because a paper is almost always better when a writer is actually interested in the topic, it is a good idea to choose what you like rather than waiting until the last minute and taking a topic by default because it's the only one left.

  Step Three: Beginning Your Research

  Finding Information:

- Take time to visit to the library, as it is the best place to start your quest for information. In a school library it should be easy to find a reference librarian. Find the reference desk and ask for guidance. A public library may necessitate more patience on your part, as staff is usually quite busy.
- If the library is not convenient, you may be able to access the catalog and databases from your home computer.
- Expect to have some difficulty obtaining sources and plan your work accordingly. Gather source material as early as possible.

   Preliminary Research:
- Do some very simple searches on an online search engine.
- "Googling" your topic can be done in several quick sessions, and often requires much less attention and note-taking.
- A reference librarian can also be of great help in pointing out general and specific resources.

   Secondary Source Searching:
- Secondary source searching requires more organization. You should ideally go to the library or a database with a list of some titles from your preliminary searches. Database searching will yield far more information than you will likely need, so it is important to be focused. At the same time, as you locate information, you should revise elements of your paper's content depending on what you find and what interests you.
- You can begin by searching for titles or authors. Then, browse plot summaries and reviews. After this, focus on criticism, interviews, and essays that will provide support for your paper. When using a database, skim each source directly via the full text link before printing them out. At the same time, you can start processing your "working bibliography," which is a list of information on each source you are evaluating.

   Step Four: Taking Notes
- Many writers resist taking actual physical notes on their subject, since it can be time consuming. However, this is one of the most successful ways to keep your information organized and avoid a paper that gives information by source rather than by topic.
- An alternative to note cards is to simply highlight important information on printed copies of sources and then try to assemble this in some coherent way as you are drafting the paper.
- Another method often used is to do the entire process electronically. In this method, you read the online text, never print it out and simply cut and paste what you think is important into another document. However, this approach is not recommended because it will almost always lead to some form of plagiarism.

   Be Careful with Citations:
- A common mistake in taking notes and citing sources is failing to differentiate between an editor and an author. If you aren't paying close attention and miss the "ed." either before or after the name, you will cite the source incorrectly.
- An editor has an essential job in creating the text, often writing an introduction, compiling essays from various writers and perhaps contributing a chapter. But, in such volumes, each chapter of the book is probably written by a separate author or authors. These names should appear in the table of contents and at the start of the chapter.
- A similar mistake is failing to give credit to an authored entry in an encyclopedia or dictionary, noting only the publisher or editor instead. Authors of these entries are usually listed at the end of the entry in small print and are easy to miss.

   Step Five: Sorting Note Cards and Making a Working Outline
   Once you have completed your research, sit down with your stack of note cards in front of you. The number of note cards you gather for your paper will vary significantly depending on your topic and assignment. A rough estimate is that you may need 50 to 100 cards for a 5 to 10 page paper.

   Sorting Cards:
- One by one, read the notes you have written and sort each one into a pile reflecting a topic or area of research.
- Ideally, you should have at least five piles, since less than that will make it difficult to create a paper with enough divisions.
- Make sure to designate one pile for your introduction and one for your conclusion.
- Focus on having the same number of cards per pile to help add balance to your paper.
- If you have a lot of piles with only one or two cards in them, you can either eliminate them or try to fit them into another pile by broadening that pile's "topic."

- Do not remove cards from a pile that duplicate the same information from two sources. This, in fact, will be used to add balance and support to the paragraphs, illustrating that you researched several sources.
- Your piles should generally never have information from only a single source, since your report will end up being more like a book report than a research paper. An exception to this is if the pile contains the primary source information.
- Keep a pile of "leftovers," or cards that you think are important but don't really fit into your other piles. You may decide later that they are actually relevant to one of your piles and/or your introduction and conclusion.
- If you have a pile with too few cards that you think reflects an important aspect of your paper, you can now return and do some focused searching to add information to that area.
After you are satisfied with the quantity and divisions of your pile, begin to decide the best order in which to present this information.
- Think logically about what a reader needs or wants to know first, and play around with this order until satisfied.
- Make some notes for each pile that generally describes the topic addressed on the cards and put them on the pile.
- Number each pile to determine the order in which the information will appear in your paper.
- Use a rubber band or envelope to keep piles separate from one another
Creating a Working Outline:
- To create your working outline, begin with the first pile and fill in that topic heading as the introduction.
- Continue with each pile until all the major headings for your outline are complete.
- Go back pile by pile and fill in the subdivisions of the main topic heading to reflect your notes.
- You may want to ask your teacher whether a full sentence outline is necessary or if short phrases will work.
Step Six: Drafting, Integrating, and Balancing Your Paper
Now, you can begin drafting your paper. Unless specified by your instructor, you should always use fonts and colors that are easy to read and standard margin and spacing options.

- With your outline and note card piles in front of you, begin to draft your paper section by section.
- A good way to do this is to review all the note cards, and then put them away as you begin to draft.
- Work on at least one section per sitting to maintain continuity in writing and thought.
- You may decide to leave the introduction until last, and begin with your first main topic. This is often a good idea, because you don't really know exactly how your paper is going to turn out until it is drafted
- After you have written your basic paragraph(s), then go back to your note cards to supply the specific support you need to fill in the gaps.
- You may feel like you need more information for some paragraphs. Wait until you have drafted the entire paper before you return to research your gaps.
- Put your paper away for at least one day (ideally two) before you try to revise it.
- Plan for computer malfunction, just in case. Save a copy of your draft on someone else's computer, or on a network drive, burn a disk or email a copy of the paper to yourself.
- Save grammar, spelling and sentence editing for the final step.
Step Seven: Revising
Revising can be a difficult idea to grasp, but if you take the time do to it, it will most certainly result in a higher-quality paper. In this step you are still not concerned with spelling, grammar and sentence construction – you are focusing on the content and organization of your paper.

- Did you follow your working outline?
- Do you see a better organizational system for your paper? Don't be hesitant about switching paragraphs around if needed.
- Do you have enough evidence to support your conclusions?
- What can you do to make your paper even better?
Step Eight: Editing and Proofreading
Editing your paper is one of your final steps. In addition to reviewing your paper yourself, it can also be useful to have a third party review it. Print your paper at least a day early to avoid last minute glitches, such as running out of ink, paper jams, printer breakdowns, network problems and possible long lines at school computer printing stations.

- When you edit, concentrate on sentence structure, length and variability.
- Are all your sentences of the same length and do they use the same syntax (subject/verb)? If yes, try to vary this.
- Have you correctly cited all material in your text?
- Are you over-citing a single source? If so, find other sources that provide similar information and substitute one for another.
- Is your paragraphing right? Do you have paragraphs that are more than a page long? Do you have introductory and concluding sentences in each paragraph and transitions that link one idea to the next?
  Proofreading:
- When proofreading, check for grammar and spelling mistakes. Do not rely solely on your computer's "spell check" or "grammar check" function.
- Be careful when using a thesaurus: often, substituting words will not make sense in the context of your sentence.
- Ideally, you should do your final proofreading after a day or so of not looking at your paper.

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