

The Research Paper

Choosing a Topic

Choose a subject that interests you and is not too broad. A 10-page paper on the history of pest extermination could not provide adequate detail to engage the reader. Since the reader is giving you a grade, it is in your best interest to captivate your audience. You could narrow your topic to something like “Chlordane in Residential Buildings: Who Must Die?”

Try to find a subject that has not already been the topic of two zillion research papers. It would be quite an achievement, for example, to write a paper on abortion that would stand out among the crowd. A more mundane topic will often make an interesting research paper. For example, a paper on the best way to kill roaches could be both amusing and informative. Don't be afraid to have fun with the subject. Professors don't enjoy reading page after page of monotonous information any more than you do.

If the topic was assigned by the professor, try to find a thesis that interests you. The thesis is the basic argument you are presenting. If nothing about the topic interests you, try to find a thesis that interests the professor. If the professor argued passionately in favor of roach bait over roach spray, a paper on the superiority of bait in pest control might be a good choice.

Source Materials

Once you have chosen your subject, consult the computerized card catalog, computerized and print indexes, and Readers' Guide in the library to find out what reference material is available. New technology is constantly bringing new and faster ways to retrieve information. Ask the reference librarian for guidance. Notice the copyright date; some material may be out of date.

Keep in mind the difference between original and secondary sources of material. For example, in writing about a person, his or her letters would be an original source of information, and a printed collection of his or her letters would generally be almost as good as an original source (remember, however, that letters are sometimes edited). A secondary source would be the opinions of another author about the person under discussion. For important papers, original sources should be used when available.

You've already narrowed your topic, but with the new electronic search systems available you could still find yourself with an overabundance of sources. Evaluate the sources critically to find the ones that will be of greatest use. A research paper should present a logical narrative or argument, not just an impressive show of how much information you managed to acquire. Weed out any material that does not support your thesis, fit neatly into your outline, sound interesting, or is outdated. Of course, if something doesn't support your thesis but is extremely interesting, you can simply change your thesis and outline to accommodate the new gem. You have to be decisive enough to complete the paper on time, but changing your mind once or twice shouldn't hurt you too much.

Source Cards

List each source on a separate card-usually 3 by 5 inches. Include:

- Author's name, last name first, or the editor's name followed by the abbreviation "Ed." If no author is given, list the title first.
- Title. Underline the title of a book, magazine, or newspaper and put quotation marks around the title of an article or chapter. (Note: according to the MLA style guide, you should underline, rather than using italics, in your paper even if you are using a word processor.)
- Publication data. With book titles, include the city where published, name of publisher, and copyright date.
- Library call number. Include the call number so you won't have to look it up again.

Outlines

Start with a working outline—showing clearly the topics you expect to write about. As you gather material, you may want to change this outline, omitting topics about which you find little source material and adding others that appear to be interesting or significant. After you have gathered all your information, you may make your final outline to guide your writing.

Outlines help you organize your material in a logical fashion. Simply copying unrelated pieces of information in outline format will do nothing to enhance your paper. Occasionally, this process inspires great leaps of creativity. There's nothing wrong with creativity, but you should worry if you end up with a transition that reads: "The above discussion of brain surgery shows it is no fun. Likewise, ridding a house of insects can be a real trial sometimes."

Taking Notes

The best way to gather material is to take notes on 3 by 5 inch or larger cards that you can keep in a file box. These cards will enable you to organize your material and refer readily to your information on each topic as you write. If you're collecting disparate kinds of information, you may want to organize it on colored index cards. The following are helpful suggestions for taking notes:

1. Use a separate card for each note. This enables you to file your cards under the proper topic. Sometimes you'll need more than one card for a topic.
2. Take thorough notes on all of the points you hope to cover. Many students find that three or four good notes are required for every page of the research paper. Don't keep repeating information, even if it is found in different books, and don't take notes on material you don't plan to use.
3. List the topic at the top left corner of the card. This enables you to refer to your notes quickly as you write and helps you to organize your material.
4. Be accurate. Your notes must report facts, figures, opinions, and quotations accurately. Double-check every word and every figure with your source. Give enough detail so you can understand what you've written.
5. Mark each direct quotation clearly. Put quotation marks around each short quotation. Longer quotations are shown by leaving larger margins. Take down the exact words, punctuation, and capitalization. Use three dots to indicate the omission of parts of a quotation. Use direct quotations only if you plan to give the exact opinion of an authority or if the same idea cannot possibly be expressed in your own words. Too many quotations will make a weak paper. Express your own ideas in your own way.
6. Identify the source and give the page reference for each note. This information will be necessary for your footnotes and your bibliography. You should have some key for connecting your note card with its source card. You may make up your own abbreviation for each source card, or you may number your source cards in order and put the proper source number on each note card.

Writing the Paper

If you have your purpose and viewpoint clearly in mind, you may start by writing an introduction. Otherwise, save your introduction to the last and start with your first topic. Follow your final outline to arrange your notes. This way, your material will be logically organized; however, you still must supply transitions-sometimes whole paragraphs-to make your paper a unified, coherent whole. Try to make your sentences sound smooth and connected, not like a miscellaneous assortment of sentences hastily thrown together. A first draft may be written rapidly, but be careful of the mechanics of your writing in your revised final copy.

Notes on Style

Many style guides (or style "sheets") are available. For English or literature courses, you should assume the professor wants you to follow the guidelines of the *MLA Handbook*, the style guide of the Modern Language Association. If the professor wants you to follow a different style guide, he or she will tell you. For other courses, the *MLA Handbook* is probably safe, but it wouldn't hurt to ask the professor just in case. The American Psychological Association, for example, has a style guide that is routinely used by psychologists.

Many technical fields also have their own style requirements. Some professors are more concerned with accuracy and consistency than with what style guide you use.

Works Cited

General information such as you have found in a number of different books usually does not have to be credited, but any specific information should be credited. According to MLA style, footnotes and endnotes are no longer used for citations. You may still use footnotes to provide additional information if you wish. Citations are given parenthetically (Thus 1991). Simply put the last name of the author and the date of publication.

Proofing and Editing

Computer spell check and proofing programs are extremely helpful, but they don't replace a thorough proofreading. You will need time, concentration, and attention to detail to successfully catch all the errors in a paper. Even after reading and rereading, don't be surprised if you notice an obvious error just before you turn in the paper (or worse, just after it is handed back to you).

Read your paper out loud. This can be painful but enlightening. If you have an audience (friend, spouse, relative), it's even more effective. You will find yourself editing as you speak.

When reading your paper, check for:

- Vocabulary—if you don't know precisely what a word means, either look it up or use another word. Few things (pertaining to research papers, that is) are more embarrassing than using incorrect or nonexistent words.
- Awkward sentence structure—If you have to stop to read the sentence, so will your professor. Simplify the sentence to make it clear.
- Fancy talk—Some people mistake flowery, pretentious, complex, or confusing writing for good writing. Impress your professor with clear, lucid thoughts, not with jargon and showy writing.
- Spelling—Look up every word you aren't sure about.
- Grammar—Obviously, you have to know something is wrong before you can proofread for it. Familiarize yourself with proper usage, punctuation, and grammar. Also, ask someone you trust to read it as well.
- Sensitivity—Be sure you are sensitive to issues of gender, race, disability, ethnicity, and religion. In short, don't generalize about any group of people. A statement like, "Since wedding dress fastener manufacturers tend to be macho and stupid, . . ." is just as offensive as a racial slur. It would be acceptable, however, to say (if it were true) that in a survey of 100 wedding dress fastener manufacturers, 90 reported that they agree with the statement "women should work only inside the home."
- Double words—Frequently, a word will be repeated at the end of one line and the beginning of the next. If you're using a computer, this is less likely to occur.

Completing Your Paper

If you use a word processor, your paper should be almost complete already. You may need to add your name and so forth, pull together supporting documentation, and generally just get things in order. If you're not using a word processor, you probably have a fairly large typing job ahead of you. Each new typing gives you a new opportunity to make additional errors. The good news is that most professors don't grade too harshly for obvious typographical errors, unless the paper is altogether sloppy. Accidentally typing "teh" for "the" one time will probably not lower your grade.

Loosely adapted from: Walsh, J. Martyn and Anna Kathleen, *Plain English Handbook*, 5th revised ed., McCormick-Mathers Publishing Co., 1966.

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