How to Write a Paper

So your instructor has assigned a research paper, and you are unsure how to get started. Research papers can be stressful, overwhelming, and time consuming if you do not know how to do them. However, if you know the steps and do them all, then research papers become a learning experience that enriches your academic preparation.

Before embarking on a research paper, students need to know that writing is a process. A good, quality paper is developed through a series of steps much like a rose develops from a bud into a beautiful flower, and just as that rose does not come into being overnight, neither should a research paper. Research papers need to be well planned, researched, organized, written and revised.

Let’s walk through the three parts of the writing process as well as the steps that go with each part.

*Special note—Even though this document refers to research papers, its information can apply to writing other types of papers as well, such as narratives, compare and contrast, etc.

The Writing Process

I. Pre-Writing/Information Gathering Step
At the start of the writing process, the writer needs to make sure that he/she understands what his/her teacher’s expectations are for this particular assignment. Then he/she needs to develop a topic, focus statement (thesis) and do research

A. Brainstorming
This is a great step that helps get the brain going. Basically in a list format write down all the ideas that come into the writer’s mind. Brainstorming can be useful in generating ideas for a paper as well as for points to support and explain each point. Below is an example of a student’s brainstorming list over possible topics for a health sciences course research paper:

*Topic Ideas for a Research Paper*

- Different types of eating disorders
- Causes of Bulimia
- Causes of Anorexia Nervosa
- Treatments for Bulimia
- Medical treatments for Anorexia Nervosa
- Non-medical treatments for Anorexia Nervosa
B. Clustering
Clustering is also referred to as webbing, mapping and branching. It can be similar to brainstorming in that it helps generate ideas; however, instead of being in a listing fashion, clustering is more visual and helps the writer see relationships between ideas and thoughts. The following cluster is about various treatment options for Anorexia Nervosa:

C. Free writing
Free writing is writing without all of the extras such as punctuation, capitalization, spacing, organization, etc. Many writers find writing without all of these extras to be less stressful and more productive. Free writing is especially productive since you do not stop writing. Writers should free write for a specified amount of time and record everything that comes into thought about their topic. Below is an example of a free write about Anorexia Nervosa:

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder when people do not eat enough food the people do not eat for many reasons and one of the main reasons they do not eat enough is that they perceive themselves as being overweight anorexia nervosa can be a deadly disease if not recognized and treated. There are many differing treatments available. Some treatments are therapy based and others are in the form of medication. Some treatments have been found to be more helpful in certain age groups such as treating adolescents or adults. Primarily anorexia nervosa affects women however there still is a small percentage of men who battle the disease.

D. Purpose
All writing has a purpose. There is a reason behind the written word. For college research papers, the purpose might really be to earn an A; however, most research paper assignments ask students to:
- Inform/explain—review all of the evidence and present an objective overview
or
- Persuade—provide credible and compelling support for a specific point of view
E. Audience
Your audience is who is going to read your paper. Think beyond the walls of your classroom and pretend that if you were writing this paper for “the real world” who would be reading it? Then once that is answered, think about what that audience knows about the topic and what they would be interested in reading. For example, let’s say that you are writing a paper on Anorexia Nervosa to a group of parents whose children have this disease. Obviously they are interested in helping their children get well and would be interested in various treatment options; however, they may not be interested in the chemical makeup of the medicine that their child may be taking for treatment.

In Muriel Harris’ text *Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage*, she outlines four key questions to consider about your audience:
- *What information should be included?*
- *What is the audience’s attitude?*
- *What is the audience’s background?*
- *What tone or level of formality should be used?*

F. Researching
Obtaining high quality research is a goal for all writers, and by using their college libraries and virtual libraries, students should be able to gather information that fits with and supports their focus statement.

To get to the Virtual Library: Login to My Ivy at https://my.ivytech.edu/

Click on the Library tab at the bottom of the left column.

If you have any questions, please contact a librarian at http://ivytech.libanswers.com/lafayette

G. Focus Statement
Before a writer develops his/her focus statement, he/she needs to keep in mind their focus and audience, as these two important pieces to the puzzle might affect how a focus statement is developed.

A focus statement is generally a sentence or two that explains to the reader what the main idea of the paper will be about, and it is usually presented in the introduction. Sometimes it may be implied; thus it will not be stated. A focus statement is also the same thing as thesis, main idea or main point. Below is an example of a focus statement for a paper on Anorexia Nervosa:

*Adolescent women struggling with AN need effective treatment, and today, after four decades of research, there is an increasing number of treatment options ranging from counseling, to nutritional therapy, to medication. Yet, some researchers and victims still advocate that there is a need for further research in this area.*
This focus statement clearly lets the reader know the topic, the direction the paper will be taking as well as what points the paper will address to explain and support the focus.

There are a few types of problems students sometimes encounter while writing focus statements. The two most common problems are stating topics instead of focus statements and creating announcements. Topics are broad, generalized statements such as my paper will be about Anorexia Nervosa or eating disorders. Both are good starting points on topics to brainstorm about, but neither is specific enough to write a quality-focused paper.

The other problem of creating announcements should be avoided as well. Announcements sound like they are public service radio statements such as My research paper will be about Anorexia Nervosa and ways to treat this disease. The first part of this sentence, my research paper will be about, is the part that makes this sentence an announcement and not a quality focus statement.

However, some students may struggle with developing focus statements; therefore, it might be necessary to seek additional assistance. Muriel Harris’ text the Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage is available in the Reserve section at the campus library. Pages two to three address thesis writing. In addition, the Learning Resource Center, LRC, is located in Ivy Hall 1157, and the Academic Skills Advancement Department offers free drop in writing tutoring in the LRC. Please check the schedule to see when the tutors are available.

II. Writing Step

Now the student should be ready to develop his organizational plan and write their first version of their research paper.

A. Organizational Planning

Organizational planning is the same as outlining. Many writers’ papers benefit from being well planned out and organized. There are many ways to develop an organizational plan. Below is an example of how to do so.

I. Introduction

A. Attention Getter
B. Focus Statement
C. Preview of Major Supporting Points that will explain and support the focus
   1.
   2.
   3-5. Each paper usually has between three and five points

II. Body

A. Point One from the Major Supporting Points
   1. Minor Supporting Details that support, explain, and rationalize the explain each of the Major Supporting Points
   2-4. Expect to have between two and four Minor Supporting Details
B. Paper Writing
Before you begin you might want to take a look at some resources that will help you with formatting your paper and citing your sources. They are available on the Citing Sources - APA/MLA page.

III. Revision Step
Finally the writer should revise their work through peer revision, self-evaluation and finalization of their paper.

A. Peer Revising
It is recommended to have one or two peers evaluate your work after it is initially written. Some instructors have specific guidelines to follow while doing this process, but in general by reviewing the initial assignment guidelines as well as any grade sheet that might have been provided, peers can check to see if the student has:
• met the needs of the assignment
• focused the paper
• organized the paper
• explained each point sufficiently
• used standard and proper English language—here are some of the most common grammatical errors according to The Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage:
  - fragments
  - comma splices
  - pronoun reference
  - omitted commas
  - spelling errors
  - unnecessary commas
  - subject-verb agreement
  - misplaced apostrophes
  - omitted words
  - verb tenses
  - run-on sentences
  - missing transition words

B. Self Revising
After seeking out peer evaluation, reflect on your paper just as your peers have done; however, it is usually best if you look at your paper after it has been put aside for a while. Then look at the same guidelines as when peer revising. Also it can be beneficial to read your paper out loud as well as paragraph-by-paragraph backwards. Many times students will “catch” little errors when they read their papers aloud and backwards that they would not have recognized otherwise.
C. Finalizing Paper

Finally, type in all revisions. Read through the paper one last time to ensure that everything is just the way that it needs to be in order to hand in the assignment.