

How to Write a Research Paper



Written by Laura Spencer

Laura Spencer
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How many pages do you think a typical college student will write in their four years of college? Probably hundreds or more, some short and some long. It is so important for every student to learn the right way to write research papers. If every college student does not learn how to correctly write research papers, college is going to be very difficult time.

Writing a paper is not easy, but if you develop your own specific technique and follow it then that will make it easier to write papers. Some of you may have taken previous writing classes, and some of you may not have. It is important to start from the beginning when writing a paper. Writing a paper can be fun and very scary. Remember to calm down and try to keep your mind open. You may want to ask others for suggestions, but always make sure you are making the final decisions on your research papers. There are many traditional ways of writing a research paper, but also there is some non-traditional ways of writing a paper. In this paper I am going to use the word "correctly" for some steps to writing a research paper. These steps are correct to me and may not be correct to you. Some of the steps may however also be correct to you. Remember to always develop your way to write a paper and this paper is all about my ways to write one. Certain steps can be followed from the very beginning in writing a paper, which is selecting a purpose and topic, until the very end of the revising, editing, and publishing stages.

There are many prewriting steps that must be completed before you start the writing process. The first step in prewriting is to find the purpose of the paper. You cannot continue writing the paper until you discover the purpose of your writing. Did your instructor decide the purpose, or do you have to determine the purpose?

There are three different types of purposes a writer could take. First, there is an argumentative purpose. The purpose of an argumentative paper is to convince your audience of your point of view. Second, an analytical purpose, where the purpose is to analyze: you must separate the issues, comment on each one, and arrive, finally at a synthesis (Lester 1995 2). Your purpose is to analyze component parts so that you arrive at meaning, causes, or consequences (2). The third purpose is an explanatory purpose. In most of my papers I write have an analytical purpose. I find this to be one of the most enjoyable purposes because you are analyzing something and then saying what it means. The purpose of this is to read and summarize according to your topic.

Now, you have to select the topic of your paper. The best way to select a topic is to think of what you know best. The reason you want to select a topic at this state is so that you have a focus of what your paper is going to be about. I always think that selecting a topic at this point helps me to stay on track with my papers. Selecting a topic this way will make the paper more fun and interesting. There are four exercises writers can use to find a good research subjects. You can reflect on personal experiences, talk to others about your topic, stretch your imagination, and read source materials (Lester 1995 3). Talking to other people about your topic can be a wonderful resource. Other people might have ideas that you may not have thought of. Talk to people at your school or community. Talking to these people may also lead to other topics to explore. If you

choose to stretch your imagination talking to other people can help. It can also help to write ideas down and try to make connections between them. Reading source materials is also a great way to help develop a topic. Reading history text, reference books, biography, or journal articles can all help you understand different ideas for your topic.

When you are done finding a general topic, you will want to narrow your general topic to something more specific. This is something that my English teacher in high school Mrs. Atchison would always say. This way it is easier to research and easier for the audience to listen to. You also must form a thesis sentence. This is a sentence that is a statement of your controlling ideas that will come together in a paper (Lester 1987 8). You may change your thesis multiple times, but it is best to have an initial thesis. If you write your thesis sentence before you start researching, the researching process will be much easier because you have narrowed your topic.

After you have chosen a topic, the first thing you will want to do is make a bibliography of sources of information about your topic. You should probably go to the library to research the topic or use the computer in your house. On a note card, you should write down the following information. First, number each card and put the author's name- last name, middle name. Second, the title of the book or article should go on the card. The title should be underlined once. Then, if the book has several editions indicate that in parentheses. If it is a book you are putting on the note card, you put the name of the publisher, place of publication, and date of publication. If it is an article you are putting on the card, you put the title of the magazine or journal, the volume and the number, the date of the magazine, and the pages where the article is found. The most important thing to remember with writing bibliography note cards is to only have one entry to a card.

Now you can begin looking for information about your topic in these books or articles. Start skimming and reading some of the books and articles, and then develop an outline. You want to do this after you make bibliography not cards so that if you teacher requests you to write a working bibliography. I learned in high school that a working bibliography is all the sources you looked at even if you do not put anything from them in your paper. I always like to write an outline right away so that I know the structure of what my paper is going to be about. The outline is basic structure of the paper. This outline may be changed, but it is important to write one at this point. If your outline changes that is fine because it will happen usually during the writing process and nothing else needs to change. While writing the outline, remember your main categories are roman numerals, the sub-categories after that are uppercase letters, and then sub-categories after that are numbers. Also remember that every sub-category has to have at least two divisions.

After the outline is made it is time to take notes. Remember, when you are reading, keep looking back to your outline to make sure you are following it (Sorenson 25). You put only one idea on one card, and do not worry about filling the entire card. Once you begin writing your paper you will want to put the cards in an order, so that it is easier for you to write the paper (25). As you read and find useful information, put one idea on one card and then number the card according which source you found it in.

There are different types of methods of note taking. Summary is the first method of taking notes. You should write a summary note card only when the source material is of doubtful or limited importance (Lester 1987 43). You may or may not use this

information in your paper. Précis is the second method of taking notes. The précis is written in your own words and is a summary differing from the rough summary because it is more polished in style (44). Paraphrase is the third form of taking notes. Paraphrase differs from précis because précis is more concise. When you paraphrase you are restating in your own words what you read. Most of your notes will probably be done paraphrasing. Quotation is the last form of taking notes. When you are writing directly what the author said, then you need to use quotation. Quotations are often overused in papers; they should only be used in about ten percent of the paper (46). When taking notes I like to use quotation and paraphrase. Quotations are just good to put in your paper and then if you paraphrase notes you can write them directly like that on your paper. It is also important not to plagiarize because the consequences of plagiarizing someone else's work are very great. When taking notes you need to remember to avoid plagiarizing. Many students accidentally plagiarize, while other students plagiarize on purpose. "Plagiarism is the offering of the words or ideas of another person as one's own" (47). There should be serious consequences for plagiarizing.

After you are done taking notes, it is time to write a great paper. A good rule of thumb is to start at least one week before your paper is due for every five pages. I know if I start writing a paper early it really takes off a lot stress and I can usually write a better paper. The writing stage is mainly taking ideas from your notes, and elaborating on those ideas to write a paper. It may first be helpful if you put your note cards in some sort of order. The order may include: order of importance, problem-solution, spatial order, chronological order, or comparison-contrast order. You may use have some piles of note cards with spatial order and some with chronological order; that is fine. You want to use whatever order best fits that section of your future paper. Also make sure to check your teacher's criteria for the paper again to make sure that you are meeting all of your teacher's expectations.

When writing your paper you will want to place your title on the top of the page. I like to first write the title of my paper and then start writing my paper. The reason I think this is good is so that when you are writing you can stay on task with remembering what you want to write about. Your title may change after you finish writing your paper but I always like to start with a title and then write. Then start with the introduction. Remember your thesis sentence is your last sentence of your introduction. The main purpose of the introduction is to capture the reader's attention so that they want to continue reading. A great way to start an introduction is to state a shocking story or fact. This will make the reader want to continue reading to find out further about the shocking story or fact. An example of this is: every eight seconds a person dies from smoking. A thought-provoking question is also a great way to start your introduction. Then you just continue talking about your topic in general. Make sure you do not give your entire paper away in the introduction, just discuss your topic with the reader. Discuss the elements of your paper in this section. The introduction may vary in length but make sure it does not exceed three fourths of a page. Once you are satisfied with your introduction paragraph make sure you use a transition work to move onto the body of the paper.

The body of the paper is where you really get into the topic of your paper. The body of the paper can be two pages all the way up to twenty and more. This is of course depending on how long you or your teacher wants the paper to be. You also want to

make sure you have transitions from each paragraph to the next. This is very helpful to the reader and more interesting. First you want to start with a topic sentence for what the paragraph is going to be about. “Remember this general rule: A paragraph should seldom contain source material only; it needs at least a topic sentence to establish a point for the research evidence” (Lester 1987 94). Then you want to continue writing about your topic sentence in depth while having it relate to what your paper is about. Your paper is finally almost over, the biggest bulk of the paper is done.

The conclusion of the paper is where you want to continue to keep your audience interested in your paper. I always like to remind my audience of things you talked about. Highlight the important topics that you talked about. You want to begin with a restate of your thesis. Then summarize what you talked about. I also always like to end my conclusion with something memorable. You want to end your paper with either a memorable word or sentence. You want to also end the paper “with a general statement finalizing the discussion” (Virginia Tech 1). If your paper is long the reader may only remember your conclusion well so make sure you have a good conclusion and that is also why it is important to restate your paper in the conclusion. Just briefly discuss what you talked about in your paper.

It is important to decide what voice your writing is going to be in. I learned all these different writing voices in high school. It can be in third person where you are writing like you are a fly on the wall and watching everything. The benefit to this type of writing is that the reader can see and hear into what is going on, and the reader mainly reads the facts. When writing a research paper in third person you will avoid using “I believe” or “in my opinion.” These are not third person voices; instead you want to just stick to the facts. You can also write in second person voice. This is when you are talking directly to the reader, as I am in this paper. The benefits of this way are that the writings become very personal to the reader. The reader can usually identify more with the writer. In this voice you use the phrase “you”. You can also write in a first person voice. This is where you are actually experiencing, or have experienced something and writing about it. In first person, you can talk about your beliefs and opinions. The benefit to this type of writing is that the reader feels like they are having the experience. The reader is also introduced to the feelings and thoughts of the writer. In this writing voice, you will want to use a phrase such as “I think.” I like to write in second person because I feel like I am talking directly to the reader. Whichever voice is chosen, make sure it fits the paper and is beneficial to the reader.

You will also want to make sure you write your research paper in proper tense. You can either use past, present, or future tenses. You will want to try and stick to that tense throughout the whole paper. If it must be changed, you will want to introduce the change and make sure it is obvious to your readers. If this is not done, the paper will seem confusing and the reader will not understand it. For example in the novel, *The Stones of Summer*, the writer used italics to change tenses. This is not obvious to the reader though, and it becomes confusing to the reader.

When writing your paper, you need to have unity and coherence so that everything fits together. In your research paper you also want to use unity and coherence so that the paper makes sense to the reader. If your paper has “unity it explores on a topic in depth, with each paragraph carefully expanding upon a single aspect of the narrowed subject” (Lester 1995 96). If you have an outline, the unity in your paper should be

perfect. Your paper also has to have coherence which is when your “ideas and evidence function as an interrelated whole” (96). In order to make sure your paper has coherence, writers use clear transitions and phrases. Clear transitions are first, second, third, therefore, and in the end.

When you are done writing your research paper you will want to revise and edit it. You may want someone else to revise it, or you may want to revise the paper on your own. Always make sure your paper is revised once but more than once is even better. The benefit of having someone else revise it is that they will have different ideas than you do. They can give you feedback that you may not have thought about. Having someone else revise your paper can also help with grammar errors. You may catch some grammar errors on your own, but chances are if you made a grammar error you will not be able to correct it. You will not be able to correct it because you may not know that it is a mistake. If you are revising your paper, the benefit is that you can understand what you are trying to say in your paper. You can fix anything that was not how you intended it to be. Where as other people revise your paper, they may just think it sounded fine because they do not know what you intended to say. If you revise your paper yourself and then have someone else that is capable of revising peer edit your paper, you will cover all of these areas of revising and your paper will turn out better. You may also want to revise your own paper a couple of times and at different times. If you revise your paper on another day than the last, you may have a different perspective on the topic or be able to come up with other ideas.

Another editing piece of advice is to check the citations in your research paper. Make sure if you have the direct quotation, both quotes are in place, you have the author’s last name, a comma, and then the page number where you got the information. Both the author’s last name and page number should be in parentheses at the end of the sentence. If the last citation was the same book, then do not put the author’s last name just put the page number in parentheses. If something is a well-known fact, which usually means you have seen it in five or more books, then you do not need to cite it in your paper. If you paraphrase something in your paper then you need to cite it the same as the quotation but, do not put quotation marks around the sentence.

After writing the paper, you will also want to write your reference page. This should be easy because all you have to do is look back in your paper to see what sources you cited, and write them in the correct format on your reference page. The most important thing about the reference page is that you want to make sure you include every source that you used to write your paper. You also want to make sure to have a page or a website that tells you how to put everything you used to write your paper in the correct format on the reference page. If you used a book, book with two authors, magazine, interview, video, or many other different types of sources you will need to know the correct format for each. This is not hard, but it is just time-consuming to look at an example of how to put a source on the reference page and to copy your source like that one. But that is the easiest way to write a reference page. A reference page is very important to the reader, and to your professor who is grading this paper to know where you got your information from and to make sure nothing was plagiarized.

There are many other format and mechanics of your paper. When you are done with revising and editing you will want to make sure your research paper is perfect before you turn it in for a grade. Always make sure everything in your paper is double spaced

even the title and heading. You will want to have a page number on each page. This will make it easier for your professor, if your paper comes out of order. In high school by my English teacher Mrs. Atchison I learned that you want the page number to be one-half inch or three spaces from the top of the page and should be on the right of the page. You must have your name on the page along with the course and date. All of these things should be on the left of the page one inch from the top or three spaces after the page number. Then you should have one space in between your name and the title of your paper. Then quadruple space after the title of your paper, and then your typed paper.

There are also some non-traditional ways of writing a paper. In Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* he promotes a philosophy that is often called "writing to learn". Elbow would disagree with the traditional way of writing that you need to discover your purpose of your writing and then you can write your paper. He thinks that you can start writing and through writing you will think of other ideas and then you have the purpose of your paper. Elbow believes that the prewriting stage is a great way to come up with the purpose of your paper.

Peter Elbow does not believe highly on structured writing to make you a better writer. He believes that freewriting is very important. "The most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly" (Elbow 3). He said to write at least three times a week and for ten minutes. Then as you do this often you increase the time limit. In this freewriting exercise you put whatever is on your mind on paper. Do not stop writing at all. Never stop writing to look back at what you wrote or to correct anything. You also never want to think about how to spell a word. Just write the first things that come to your mind. He also thinks this can help you find the topic of your paper. I tried this writing method and for me it did not work for me. I think it may however be useful to other students. I felt that I stayed on one topic and therefore it did not help me discover my topic. It may help people with their writing skills. He believes this dramatically helps your writing skills.

Peter Elbow says, "Editing means figuring out what you really mean to say, getting it clear in your head, getting it unified, getting it into an organized structure, and then getting it into the best words and throwing away the rest" (Elbow 38). Elbow also feels that instead of editing and outlining your paper in the first steps of the writing process, he thinks you should use a non-stop or free uncensored writing, without any editing first, followed much later by the editing or peer editing. He believes when you outline your paper you are only limiting yourself and the potential you have to write. Elbow thinks deciding the structure of your paper before you have written it is not a good writing technique.

There are certain steps that can be followed from the very beginning of writing a paper, which is selecting a purpose and topic, until the very end of the revising, editing, and publishing stages. Whether you are writing your paper in a traditional or non-traditional way make sure you feel comfortable with it. Also make sure it is fine with your professor or whoever you are turning it into. Writing can be very challenging and there is no right or wrong way to write as long as in the end you have a piece of writing that satisfies you and has structure. Remember continue to write and see where the world can take you!

Work Cited

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