

## 5 Steps to a stronger research paper

**Step 1**---Understand the assignment & decide on a topic

**Step 2**---Research topic using a variety of sources, summarize and organize notes, build references list, **develop working thesis**

**Step 3**---Develop outline, write draft, revise thesis, develop conclusion

**Step 4**---Read, revise, rewrite & finalize reference list

**Step 5**---Proofread for diction, punctuation, format

### Step One:

#### Understand the assignment

The key to doing well on an assignment is to understand **the purpose** of the assignment.

- What are you going to achieve?
- What are the requirements and parameters?
- Who are you writing to?
- Can you use first person?
- Can you use interviews, surveys, personal experiences?
- What style of writing is required?
- How do you want the reader to perceive you—pity, analytical, scientific, or humorous?

#### Choose a topic

Now that you understand the assignment, you can choose your topic. How do you decide? How do you come up with ideas?

#### Ways to generate ideas:

- Brainstorm---write any ideas that interest you down on paper. It can be a brief thought, a word, or a picture of something.
- Read an article in a magazine
- Talk to your friends about what you might research...share ideas.
- Try a mind map to help find ideas.
- Ask what is interesting about this topic? What else relates to this topic?
- Pick a random book off the shelf, is something interesting in there?
- Move, look around, and explore things that interest YOU.

#### Ways to develop your topic:

- Outline your topic and the major points that need to be covered.
- Use a mind map, and focus on the topic.
- Ask what else do the reader need to understand about the topic? What is important? What is unique? What is new? Are there new developments in the field that can be shared?
- Interview someone in the field.
- State your idea in three or four sentences.

Decide on your topic and begin thinking about what you want to say, prove, research, develop, investigate, survey, compare, contrast, or argue about your topic.

## **Step two:**

### **Research the topic**

The only way to learn about a new subject is to research the subject. You can utilize books, journals, newspapers, interviews, surveys, online sources, textbooks and more.

#### **Hints for quality research:**

- Make sure the source is creditable.
- Be wary of online sources that have no author name.
- Use several different types of sources---journals and books.
- Keep notes as you read---highlighter, post-its, or index cards.
- Document sources as you read---if you need to re-read something you will know where to find it. (This makes your resource list easier!)
- Consider interviews, videoed interviews, emails to creditable sources.

#### **Avoid:**

- Wikipedia and web blogs
- Unidentified or undocumented web pages
- Biased newspapers/magazines
- Your uncle's opinion

#### **Summarize your research:**

- What do you understand about this source? Can you put it in my own words what was written? How would you summarize this source?
- Write an annotation about each piece of research.
- Write a paragraph on how you plan on using each source.
- How will this support your topic?
- How will this disprove your topic?
- Does this source relate to your topic?
- Will this source enhance your topic or is it just something interesting?
- Write notes as you read the source...ask how does this relate to your topic?

#### **Organize notes:**

- Staple your notes together according topic.
- Write a sentence at the top of each sheet stating what that source covered.
- Prioritize and emphasize each source and label with 1, 2, 3 etc...
- Use color coding for similar topics.
- Use envelopes/folders to keep each section of data/material.

#### **Develop working thesis:**

- Ask questions to help pin-point what you want to say about your topic.
- Who will be reading this and how might that effect your approach?
- Write out several working thesis statements.
- Be sure the research you have can prove/support/argue your point.
- Is the statement concise?
- Does the statement address what you want to say? Is it too general or too specific?
- Is there room in the statement to flex it later as you begin writing?

From here forward you can ask: "How does this tie in with my thesis?" and, "Does it support what I am trying to say?"

## Step Three

### Development and Drafting

The easiest way to develop a strong paper is to spend the time and effort to design an outline and draft. This step helps to focus the paper. The outline keeps you on track. It helps you organize everything you need to cover in the rough draft.

#### Develop outline:

- Using your index cards, color codes, etc...make a headline for each topic.
- Bullet point the supporting data for each topic.
- Re-arrange your sections to find the most logical placement.
- Decide where charts, pictures, survey data tables will go.

#### Write draft:

- Following your outline, begin to write your draft.
- Don't worry about getting it right---just WRITE it.
- Pay attention to how you want the writing to sound.
- If you get stuck on one section move to another.
- Talk to yourself---write down what you are saying.

#### Revise thesis:

- Compare how your working thesis compares to what you have written.
- Do you want to clarify something...or take a different approach?
- How can you strengthen the thesis to support the writing?

#### Develop conclusion:

- Using your draft and your new thesis draw your conclusion(s).
- Jot down your thoughts about what you want to leave your reader thinking about or understanding.
- Is there more to be study? Did you prove your case? Has the data changed your mind?
- A conclusion does not simple re-state the thesis, it summaries, interprets, and synthesis the material.
- How can you explain the findings in a new way? What do they mean to the reader? What might be the draw backs of what you have discovered?

Now that you have the bulk of the work complete, you get to take a rest. Work on other projects, visit with friends, and when you get back to work on your paper you will have a new perspective and fresh eyes to begin the most important step: **revision**.

## Step Four

### Read, revise, rewrite & finalize the reference list

While the bulk of the work is complete you are not finished.

The most important task lies ahead: **REVISION**.

#### Read:

- Read each sentence and ask, “Is this what I mean to say?” or “Is this as clear as I can make it?”
- Read to see if there is a logical sequence, do the ideas move from one to the next?
- Read to see if the transitions between topics make sense.

#### Revise:

- Revise any section that leaves you wondering: *what did I mean to say here?*
- Revise to make sure paragraphs focus on one subject and are understandable to your reader.
- Revise any passage where you assumed your reader knows what you are talking about.
- Work on smoothing out the transitions so they blend into the writing
- Find words that you can improve for meaning and clarity.

#### Write:

- Take the new revisions and put them into your text.
- Write out any new ideas or points that will help support your topic.
- Rewrite points that need to be further developed.
- If necessary, rewrite the conclusion to reflect any changes.

#### Reference list:

- Follow the proper style as assigned.
- Does each entry have author, title, date, etc. in the proper order?
- Check and double check for spellings
- Arrange alphabetically
- The reference list goes at the end of your paper but before any appendix materials.

If you have extra time to spend on your project this is where you need to spend it. The more reading, revising and rewriting you do, the stronger your paper will become. No one gets it right the first time through. No one! Spending quality time on revisions can only strengthen your paper.

## Step Five

### Diction, punctuation, format

Here is where you can make your paper shine and sparkle. You can now polish your work to have it look and sound its very best before you proudly hand it in.

#### Diction:

- Look at your word choices. Can you find a word that is more accurate? A word that has a better connotation? Can you find places to use active verbs?
- Are the meanings of your words clear to the reader? Do you need to define a term?
- Does each word convey the emotion or tone you want?
- Do you use the language of the trade?

#### Punctuation:

- Check each punctuation mark
- Look for run on sentences
- Check for sentence structure...Do they vary? Are some short, some long, some complex?
- Read the paper out loud it helps you see what might be missing.
- Have a friend help you VERBALLY spot errors.

#### Format:

- Does your paper follow the expected guidelines?
- Are all the pages in the right order?
- Is your cover sheet lined-up and centered?
- Are your charts and pictures legible and labeled?
- Is your reference list attached and properly done.

Reading your paper out loud is one of the best ways to make sure everything has come together. Your ears will catch what your eyes might not. Practice is all it takes to become a stronger writer and planning is all it takes to develop the skill you need to turn in a better research paper.