

Research Papers

A research paper can be an intimidating project for any student. However, by following a clear plan of action and understanding the parts of a paper, it can be a manageable and enjoyable process. Think of this as a roadmap. A person cannot drive down the street and expect to end up at his or her final destination. The driver needs a map, a plan to get where he or she wants to go. Similarly, If a writer understands the basic principles of research papers and plans out the project ahead of time, he or she will end up at the final destination—a great paper.

So what is the point?

By understanding the objectives for these kinds of assignments, writers will be able to figure out how this all fits together. In fact, the skills that a person learns while researching and writing will be invaluable in other courses, as well as in his or her future career.

The objectives for writing research papers are

- To make and defend a reasoned argument;
- To display critical and analytical thinking;
- To find and correctly use credible sources to further the argument;
- To correctly cite sources so other researchers can find and use those sources for their research; and
- To write a coherent, well-organized, grammatically correct paper.

If a writer understands the objectives for the project, then it will make more sense as he or she is working on it.

How does one get started?

1. Identify the **research question**. The research question is the question that the paper will answer. For example, if writing a history paper about Napoleon, the writer might want to know about Napoleon's childhood and its impact on his life. So the research question would be, "How did Napoleon's childhood affect the success of his military career?" The research question can then be transformed into a thesis statement.

Research Question: How did Napoleon's childhood affect the success of his military career?

Thesis: Napoleon's difficult childhood had a detrimental impact on his military career.

All of the points in the paper would then be used to substantiate/prove the thesis statement.

2. Decide what points should be made in the paper. Remember, only one point per paragraph. Example outline:
 - I. Introduction
 - II. Early childhood events
 - a. Facts
 - b. How it affected his military career
 - III. Relationship with father
 - IV. Conclusion

By outlining the points ahead of time, the writer will be able to focus the research and ignore things that do not apply to the topic. With limited time, do not spend it wandering aimlessly through the library.

3. Draw up a timeline. Be sure to follow it to ensure that enough time is available to revise, edit, and proofread the work before turning it in for a grade.

Writing the paper

A major problem most students have is that they do not understand how the points should fit together to form a whole. Think of the paper like a math problem. All of the parts add up to form a conclusion, just like adding $1+1+1 = 3$.

- I. Introduction
 - a. Background
 - b. If Bill has 6 cats, Suzie has 12 cats, and Bob has 9 cats, how many cats do they have? (This is the research question—what the writer is trying to prove in the paper. The thesis statement is the answer to this question.)
- II. Point 1: Bill’s cats
 - a. How many cats?
 - b. Sources?
 - c. Significance?
- III. Point 2: Suzie’s cats
 - a. How many cats?
 - b. Sources?
 - c. Significance?
- IV. Point 3: Bob’s cats
 - a. How many cats?
 - b. Sources?
 - c. Significance?
- V. Conclusion (Tie all points together. Also, think of it as the “therefore” of the paper.).

Notice how each of the points in the paper directly relates to/helps prove the thesis statement. The small points/arguments add up to the overall project.

Now, what would happen if Point 2 were about dogs rather than cats? Would that make sense to the reader? See how staying on topic makes the writing more understandable and the writer more credible?

Within each point

Not only is it important to have related points, but the writer must also explain his or her reasoning to the reader (how he or she came up with the conclusion). For example, suppose an argument is that the moon is made of cheese (Yes, it is crazy but memorable). The evidence or proof for this argument is that the moon is round, yellow, and has holes in it. Now, if that were the extent of the paragraph, has the writer convinced the reader? Does the reader understand how this evidence proves the writer’s point or how it might relate to the writer’s thesis? No.

The writer must explain how the evidence proves his or her point. An explanation may be that if object A visually appears to have characteristics similar to object B, then it must be object B. So, if the moon looks like cheese, then it must be cheese. Can you see the difference? Think of it this way. If a man explained to a friend a point he has written about in his paper and what the man said to his friend has not come up in his paper, then he has not explained his reasoning.

For Research Papers

Good Strategies	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare in advance. • Make a plan and stick to it. • Use an outline to keep the paper organized. • Use credible sources to support the ideas. • Incorporate quotes effectively. • Do not be afraid to talk with the instructor about specific questions. • Leave time to revise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiting until the last minute. The instructor will always know by the quality of writing. • Plagiarism—correctly cite all sources in the paper and on the Works Cited page. • Informal language—using slang or first and second person (I, me, you, etc.). • Saying too much—keep the topic narrow.