

How to Research a Topic

What is a research paper?

A research paper is an investigative, written report based on information gathered from a variety of sources.

How do I start?

First you must plan out the process of completing the research paper. See the checklist below for guidance.

Steps	Date Assigned	Due Date	Completed
1. Choosing the Topic			
2. Selecting Resources			
3. Writing Bibliography Cards			
4. Taking Notes on Facts			
5. Writing the First Draft			
6. Editing the First Draft			
7. Reediting the First Draft			
8. Writing a Final Draft			
9. Preparing the Final Bibliography			
10. Writing the Final Paper			
11. Completing the Final Touches			

Construct a timeline for yourself with dates by which you must have certain tasks completed. Then search for resources in the library and online. A good topic will have many resources for use in research. If you don't find a lot of resources for your topic, consider choosing a different topic.

What are bibliography cards?

Bibliography cards are a way to organize the sources of your information, and can help you with your footnotes. When you find a resource, write the following information on a 3 x 5 index card:

1. Name of the author (last name first)
2. Title of the book (underlined)
3. Place of publication (city)
4. Name of the publisher
5. Year of publication (most recent)

Your cards should look like the cards on the next page.

For a book:

Source 1	(Footnotes 1, 5)
Kuoche, Lawrence David. <u>The Bermuda Triangle Mystery – Solved.</u> New York: Harper & Row, 1999.	

For an encyclopedia:

Source 2	(Footnotes 2, 3)
Burgess, Robert F. “The Bermuda Triangle.” <u>World Book Encyclopedia.</u> 2003 ed.	

For an article:

Source 3	(Footnote 4)
Gordon, James. “That’s the Truth About The Bermuda Triangle.” <u>Kids Discover.</u> July, 2004: 74-79.	

How do I take notes?

As you read material about your topic, you will need to take notes about facts that are relevant. Use 3 x 5 note cards and organize your material around a subtopic (a part of your topic). Suggested organization and subtopics for this project are:

- Family and early life
- Education
- Accomplishments
- Later life
- Why this person is significant

Remember that you will need to have direct quotations from the biographee or another person who has written about your topic. The direct quotations must be properly punctuated. See the section on quotation marks in your Write Source 2000 book for examples.

I have notes, now what?

Once you have notes on note cards, you are ready to list all of the points you wish to make in the paper, keeping in mind the main idea of your paper. If you are discussing the early education of Benjamin Franklin, it is off-topic to discuss his position as Ambassador to France at this time. Your preliminary outline serves as a guide for writing your paper. Begin by thinking about your topic and asking yourself questions to discover the **major divisions** (main topics) and **subdivisions** (subtopics). Using your main topics and subtopics, you can begin writing your outline. As you begin to write your outline, you may find that in your research, you found some unimportant points that don't fit into your paper. This is the time to eliminate those facts.

What's an outline?

Okay, you've seen them several times in class! This is an **EXAMPLE** only! Yours doesn't have to follow this guide exactly to be correct! To jog your memory:

Title

- I. Main Topic
 - A. Subtopic
 - 1. detail
 - 2. detail
 - 3. detail
 - B. Subtopic
 - 1. detail
 - 2. detail
- II. Main Topic
 - A. Subtopic
 - 1. detail
 - 2. detail
 - B. Subtopic
- III. Main Topic
 - A. Subtopic
 - B. Subtopic

Footnotes?

“If you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere else.” ¹

See the little “1” at the end of the quotation? That is a footnote (end note). That means that came from somewhere, and since it's illegal to copy someone else's work and take

credit for it, we give credit to the person whose work it is with an end note (foot note), so, to keep myself out of prison, I will give credit as follows:

¹ Yogi Berra, "MLB Goals for the Season," The New York Times, (March 16, 1982): Section E 5

This is a end note for an article. Books are end noted this way:

² Lawrence David Kusche, The Bermuda Triangle – Mystery Solved (New York: Harper & Row, 1998) p. 17

Encyclopedia articles:

³ "Yogi Berra," Encyclopedia Americana, 2001, Vol. 23, p. 576

How do I write my first draft?

Use your note cards and and preliminary outline to write a first draft of your research paper. As you write your first draft, concentrate on getting your ideas down on paper. Schedule your time wisely so that you will have enough time to examine your work to see what needs to be revised and deleted.

Introduction: May be one or two paragraphs.
Must include your main idea somewhere.
Keep in mind that the purpose of the introduction is to make the reader interested in what you have to say.

Body: Your next step is to separate your note cards according to the main topics and subtopics as shown on your outline.
Begin by reading your notecards aloud. If you discover that two or more notecards with similar information, place them together.
Read the cards for logical order. Turn the notecards over as you use them in your draft. Do not discard them, you may need them later.

Documentation: Make sure your sources are properly documented in the paper. You should use the MLA format of parenthetical documentation. For more information, you can go to www.mla.org.
If you use a word-for-word quotation, be sure to enclose it in quotation marks and identify the source.

Conclusion: The conclusion, signaling the paper is coming to an end, may be one or two paragraphs and should summarize the main ideas given in the paper.

Then, edit your draft for clarity, flow, spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage. After you have edited it, re-edit it. Everyone ALWAYS misses something the first time.

Final draft?

If, after carefully reviewing your note cards and preliminary draft, you realize that no further research is needed, it is time to write your final draft. Complete this checklist before turning in your paper.

1. I have carefully proofread my paper and made necessary corrections. I have run spell check and grammar check.
2. I have numbered each page in the middle of the bottom margin, starting with page 2. I have not numbered the title page or the bibliography page.
3. I have made changes to improve word choice using a thesaurus where appropriate.
4. I have checked my paper for errors in sentence structure, and corrected the errors.
5. I have checked to make sure that my documentation is in the correct form.
6. I have checked my facts and quotations for accuracy.
7. I have included transition words and phrases in my paper.
8. I have checked my bibliography to make sure the sources are in alphabetical order according to the authors' last names, if given). All sources used in the text of my paper are list on the bibliography. Each source is correctly written and punctuated.

Icing, anyone?

Once you have your cake, you may now add the icing! If there are any extras that you wish to add using your computer you may now add them.