

Writing a Research Paper

The **main stages** of writing a research paper are:

- 1. Choosing a topic**
- 2. Researching and reading** (You will research and read continually throughout this process.)
- 3. Note taking**
- 4. Writing the paper and compiling the bibliography**
- 5. Revising/Editing** (content and organization)
- 6. Proofreading** (grammar/mechanics)

Carefully budget time for each stage. Do not wait until the week before the paper is due to begin this process. Research takes time. Be prepared to read and sift through numerous sources, many more than are required for your bibliography. Some sources will be useful, and others will not.

Choosing a Topic

1. Find a topic that interests you.

- Review your notes from class, the table of contents in your text, or even the syllabus for general ideas or topics. Your professor may also be a helpful resource.
- Some techniques that may help you develop a topic are brainstorming, freewriting, or clustering.*
- Research questions can also help you arrive at a topic because they enable you to focus your ideas.
Example: To focus a general topic such as global warming, start by thinking about some related questions: What are some causes of global warming? Is global warming a myth? What effects does global warming have on the atmosphere? On agriculture? On human health? Research questions can help you focus throughout your research and writing process.

2. Do some background reading.

- Spend some time gathering background information on your topic.
- The CHC Logue Library's web site (<http://www.chc.edu/library/>) is a more efficient starting point than a search engine such as Google or Yahoo. (Note: Google Scholar may be useful because it links with some databases. Wikipedia is not an acceptable source for an academic paper.)
 - The librarians can assist in your process at the library or through instant messaging. If you are unsure of how to search or what keywords to use, ask the librarians for help.
 - The Logue Library's **Reference Resources** provide helpful background information, and librarians can help direct you to additional resources.
 - You can also search the Logue Library's **Subject Guides and Web Resources**.
 - You might also search the **online catalog for books and online databases** (such as EBSCO or JSTOR) for journal articles.
- Taking time for background reading gives you the opportunity to make sure that there are enough available sources on your topic and that its scope is appropriate for your assignment. For example, a topic such as "the environment" is too broad. Even a topic such as "global warming" is a book-length topic that needs to be more focused for a college-level paper. On the other hand, if you find very few sources during your background reading, your topic may be too narrow.
- You might not use these background sources in your paper, but keep track of them (print, email, flash drive) in case you revert back to them later in your process.

3. Make sure that your topic aligns with the assignment.

- Once you have focused your topic, review the assignment sheet to make sure you are following its requirements. If you are unsure, discuss your topic with your professor. It might also help to visit the Writing Center.



Researching Your Topic

1. Evaluate your potential sources.

- Continue using the Logue Library and the librarians to find scholarly sources. Your professor likely also can share ideas about where to search. **Tailor keyword searches to your topic.**

Example: Searching for “global warming” is very broad. Searching for “global warming” and “role of coal production” and “Pennsylvania” will narrow results. See the librarians for assistance with keyword searches.

- **When researching on the Internet, favor web sites that end in .edu or .gov.** These are most often credible sources.

Examples:

University of Rochester Medical Center, Department of Environmental Science

<http://www2.envmed.rochester.edu/envmed/ehsc/>

United States Department of Energy

<http://energy.gov/>

- **Some .com or .org sites may be biased.** If you use such a site, be careful to research its origin and sponsoring organization and to indicate any bias in your paper. Examples:

- The *Wall Street Journal* (<http://online.wsj.com/home-page>) is a more conservative news source.
The *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/>) is a more liberal news source.
- The National Rifle Association and the Natural Resource Defense Council are biased, advocating particular agendas, but they might have valuable information for a topic.
- The Pew Research Center (<http://pewresearch.org/>) is an example of a .org that is an objective site for research.
- Remember, Wikipedia is not a scholarly source.

- **If you cannot determine a source’s author or sponsoring organization, do not use the source.**

- **Be mindful that there is a difference between scholarly sources and popular sources.**

- Some popular sources may be acceptable for college-level papers: *The Economist, US News and World Report, Discover Magazine, Education Weekly, National Geographic*.
- Many popular sources are not acceptable: *About.com, Ask.com, People Magazine, EHow, SparkNotes*.

- **Favor national newspapers over local ones.**

- National Newspapers: *Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Boston Globe, New York Times, Christian Science Monitor*
- Local Newspapers: *Chestnut Hill Local, Bucks County Courier Times, Cape May County Herald*

- **Books, both in print and online, are valuable sources.**

- Review the table of contents, index, and introduction to determine if a book can be useful.
Books are vetted through an editorial process and often offer extensive information on a topic.
You do not necessarily have to read the entire book; one chapter might be highly useful. E-books are easily searchable.

- **Use the bibliography or reference list in a source to help you find other sources.**



Researching Your Topic...Continued

2. Take accurate, orderly notes on sources. Do not skip this step! *

- Write down key quotations or concepts from each source, either directly or through summary and paraphrase. Keep track of all page numbers for proper citation.** Ask questions such as the following to help guide your note taking:
 1. What is important from this source?
 2. What questions do I have? (Revisit these later as you research more.)
 3. How does this information connect with my topic?
 4. How does this source relate to other sources (support, contradict, etc.)?
 5. What experts are mentioned in this source? Do they warrant further research?
- **Important:** As you take notes, put quotation marks “ ” around any words you borrow, and cite these quotations. You must also cite any summaries or paraphrases (because they are not your own original ideas).
- Include the bibliographic information with your notes, so you know where each quotation or summary/paraphrase comes from. Doing so will help you save time, stay organized, and avoid plagiarism. If you are unsure about which citation system to use (MLA, APA, Chicago), ask your professor.

3. Organize your notes.

- Once finished taking notes, organize them to suit your learning style. Some options:
 1. Note cards
 2. Research notebook
 3. Computer file or blog (Save multiple back-up copies—print, email, flash drive.)
 4. Inspiration software (in the Writing Center, computer lab, Student Learning Services)
 5. Photocopies (for short sources)

4. Write a thesis statement.

- The thesis can be informative or argumentative, depending on your paper's genre (type) and your specific assignment. The thesis states your topic. The thesis establishes the paper's overall organization and is generally placed at the end of the introduction. * **
- Each supporting paragraph will further develop or prove the thesis.
- Remember, your thesis may change as you write your paper. This is common.

Thesis for Argumentative Paper → Conveys what you will prove about the topic (your claim) and general reasons for supporting the position.

Sample Argumentative Thesis: The reality television industry should be subject to more stringent government regulation because these programs encourage youth to engage in behaviors that can have negative consequences on viewers' and participants' physical and mental health.

Thesis for Informative Paper → States what you will explain about the topic.

Sample Informative Thesis: Some researchers contend that reality television should be subject to more stringent government regulation because these programs encourage youth to engage in behaviors that can have negative consequences on viewers' and participants' physical and mental health.



Outlining Your Paper

Now that you have taken notes on numerous sources and developed a thesis, begin to organize your ideas into an outline. Making an outline is crucial to staying organized.

1. List the paper's main points and supporting details in your own words. Also list which sources and concepts will back up your main ideas.

- For each source, write key quotations, summaries, or paraphrases from your notes, so are beginning to integrate your notes and sources.
- Remember, your ideas drive your paper. Do not organize it source by source.
- Writing topic sentences (see below) is a recommended strategy for outlining your paper. You may need multiple paragraphs to fully flesh out a main idea.
- Ask a tutor about Inspiration software to help outline your paper.
- See the sample outline. →

2. Topic Sentences and Supporting Sentences

A topic sentence is written in your own words and should not be a quotation. The rest of the paragraph consists of supporting sentences that develop the topic sentence. All details in a paragraph must be closely connected to the topic sentence and further develop that topic sentence. When you begin to discuss a new idea, start a new paragraph with a new topic sentence. *

What are the purposes of a topic sentence?

- Conveys a paragraph's main point
- Connects back to the thesis
- Establishes organization

What are the purposes of supporting sentences?

- Must relate to and develop the topic sentence
- Consist of:
 1. Summaries, paraphrases, and quotations from sources
 2. Your explanation of this material

Hint: Use your notes as the basis of your writing.

- **Supporting sentences take the form of:**
 - Facts
 - Statistics
 - Examples
 - Expert opinions
 - Your explanations and analysis of material from your sources
- **Paragraph Length:** A well-developed paragraph must include sufficient supporting details to develop the topic sentence. A well-developed paragraph is usually 6-10 sentences. This length will vary.



Sample Outline

Paragraph #1: Introduction and Thesis

Body Paragraphs

I. Topic Sentence: Reality television can expose participants to situations that are harmful to their physical health and can encourage similar behavior among young viewers, for instance, excessive drinking and drug use as well as the physical aggression that can accompany it.

A) Supporting details/evidence/examples from research and your explanation:

1. Heavy drinking and drug abuse are depicted as entertainment on some reality programs such as *The Osbournes* and *Jersey Shore*. Young viewers may associate being famous and popular with these potentially destructive behaviors. Use this article: Blair, Nicole A.; Yue, So Kuen; Singh, Ranbir; Bernhardt, Jay M. "Depictions of substance use in reality television: a content analysis of *The Osbournes*." *British Medical Journal*, Vol 331(7531), Dec 2005, 1517-1519.
2. Airing deeply personal addiction problems exploits participants and also glorifies this behavior. Use as support: "Cable show on 'celebrity rehab' draws NAATP (Natl. Assoc. of Addiction Treatment Provider) criticism." *Alcoholism & Drug Abuse Weekly*. 2/4/2008, Vol. 20 Issue 5, p4-6.
3. Viewers are likely to imitate physical aggression viewed on reality television, as opposed to fictional programs. Make sure to connect directly to drug and alcohol use. Refer to Coyne, Robinson, and Nelson's article: "Does reality backbite? Physical, verbal, and relational aggression in reality television programs." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, Vol 54(2), Apr 2010, 282-298.

II. Topic Sentence: Some reality television programs engage participants in dangerous physical activities, for instance surgery or potentially harmful exertion.

B) Supporting details/evidence/examples from research and your explanation:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

III. Topic Sentence: Reality television may contribute to mental health problems in participants and viewers, such as lower self-esteem.

D) Supporting details/evidence/examples from research and your explanation:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

IV. Topic Sentence: As a result of excessive exposure to reality television, viewers and participants who develop lower self-esteem are also prone to other mental health problems, for instance, distorted views of intimacy and other social behaviors.

E) Supporting details/evidence/examples from research and your explanation:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

V. Opposing Viewpoints: An ethical argument acknowledges multiple perspectives, even the opposition's arguments. Weave opposing viewpoints throughout multiple paragraphs or include them in one paragraph, either the first or last body paragraph.

F) Supporting details/evidence/examples from research and your explanation:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Conclusion Paragraph

Writing Your Paper

Integrating Sources with Your Voice: Three Methods

Remember to use multiple sources in each paragraph. Do not organize your paper source by source, but by your ideas. Summaries, paraphrases, and quotations should be integrated with your own voice when writing your paper. **Balancing summary, paraphrase, and quotations creates an organized and synthesized paper.**

Method #1: Summary

- Summarize to provide a general idea of the source's points or main point in your own words. A summary can cover several pages of material, an argument, or a whole article.
- See the Writing Center's handout for specific conventions on writing a summary. * **

Method #2: Paraphrase

- Paraphrasing involves restating specific ideas from a source in your own words. Paraphrase when you need to maintain the logic and organization of the original source. * **
- Paraphrase is more specific than summary and usually covers a particular passage or concept. Summarize when you wish to express a more general idea from a source.

***Important Notes:**

1. For both summary and paraphrase, your language and sentence structure must differ sharply from the original source.
2. Always cite summaries and paraphrases because they are not your original ideas.

Method #3: Quotation

- **A word for word restatement of a source enclosed in “ ”**
- The majority of the paper should be written in your words and voice. **About 10-20% of a paper should be quoted material.** Using summary and paraphrase will help you avoid saturating your paper with too many quotations. Avoid strings of quotations and multiple block quotations (lengthy quotations).
- **Use the “sandwich technique” to contextualize quotations.** That is, introduce quotations and follow them with explanation or comment.
 - 1) Use signal phrases to integrate quotations. Give the credentials of the source as a way to introduce the quotation and to lend credence to your experts.

Examples:

Lisa Jackson, Scientist and Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, claims, “....” Researchers from the National Institute of Health advocate for “....”

According to Thomas A. Gasiewicz, Professor and Chair of the Department of Environmental Medicine with the University of Rochester’s Environmental Health Sciences Center, “....”

***Note:** See the Writing Center for more examples on how to integrate quotations, particularly the books *The Writer's Reference* and *They Say, I Say*.

2) Insert the direct quotation.

3) Follow quotations with your own comments or explanation. Do not drop a quotation into a paragraph without introducing it or explaining it!

- **Carefully cite your quotations because they are exact restatements of a source.**



Revising Your Paper

1. Edit your paper for content and organization.

- Editing is a separate step from proofreading. Editing focuses on content and organization.
- Once you have completed your rough draft, reread the assignment and then your paper multiple times to make sure that you have followed the guidelines.
- We recommend using the Writing Center's handout, Checklist for Revision: An Approach to Reviewing a Paper's Structure, Content, and Grammar/Style. This resource guides you through a comprehensive revision of content. *
- Editing involves considering questions such as the following:
 - Is my thesis consistent and developed throughout the paper? Or, does my thesis change by the end of the paper? If so, don't panic. You are learning as you read and research. The thesis may need reworking, so it covers the scope of your paper and aligns with your argument/report.
 - Does each paragraph have an accurate topic sentence that conveys its main idea? Does the body of each paragraph support, explain, or provide sufficient evidence to develop this topic sentence? Does each topic sentence directly relate back to my thesis and support it?
 - Do my paragraphs follow a logical order (coherence)? Or, do I need to rearrange them to make my writing more organized or to avoid any repetition?
 - Does the introduction provide sufficient background for my reader to understand the remainder of my paper? Does my introduction include the thesis statement? (Note: If you are writing a classical argument, your thesis may belong at the end of the narration section. See your assignment sheet.)
 - Does my conclusion wrap up my ideas and explore their implications? Remember, a conclusion should do more than just repeat the introduction or the main ideas verbatim. A conclusion should be a full paragraph. The Writing Center has a handout with several models and hints for writing conclusions.

2. Proofread

- Proofreading is a separate step from editing that concentrates on grammar, mechanics, and formatting.
- Read your paper slowly and carefully for clarity and grammar: punctuation, sentence structure, word choice. If you have a particular issue with grammar, such as run-on sentences, read your paper twice for that issue only. Doing so will help you focus on that specific concern.
- Make sure that your writing aligns with the required formatting and documentation system for your course: MLA, APA, or Chicago.
- If you need assistance identifying grammatical issues in your writing or using MLA, APA, or Chicago style, arrange an appointment with the Writing Center. * **
- The Writing Center also has a handout on additional proofreading strategies. *

*Additional resources are available at the CHC Writing Center and its web site: <http://www.chc.edu/writingcenter>.

**Additional resources are available on the Purdue Online Writing Lab: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>.