

Research Papers: Start to Finish

Writing research papers can be intimidating. A lot goes into them, and you may have to familiarize yourself with online resources that you've never used before, like the college library database. Have no fear, however! Below we have outlined a step-by-step guide to writing research papers to help you through the process.

Read the Prompt

When writing a research paper (or any paper for that matter), one of the most important things to do is read the prompt first. This way you'll know exactly what guidelines you'll need to follow to complete the assignment. If you have any questions about the prompt, you should contact your professor via email or arrange a meeting during your professor's office hours. It is vital to understand the prompt; otherwise, you may put a lot of time and energy into an assignment that won't meet your professor's expectations.

Choose Topic

The next thing you'll want to do is choose your research topic. Sometimes professors will have a list of topics you can pick from (usually pertaining to whatever class you're taking), or they'll ask you to pick one and notify them of your choice to get their approval. Whatever the case may be, it's best to avoid broad topics. You'll want to narrow down your scope to something that you can write about in the appropriate number of pages. The more familiar you are with the topic, the better. Many professors will also encourage you to write about something that you're already interested in or passionate about, and this is wise advice! As you spend more time researching and delving into your topic, you might find that you gain interest and passion, even if you weren't as interested at first.

If you get stuck, check out our [Brainstorming Tip Sheet](#) for different ways to brainstorm!

Create a Working Thesis

After you've chosen your topic, you'll want to create a working thesis so that your research will be focused around your claim. For example, if your thesis was something like, "Avocados are so expensive because they are the best fruit of all time," you would want to base your research around avocados and their cost as well as avocados compared to other fruit. Do not research avocados in general or you will be sifting through a lot of irrelevant information. The specificity of your thesis will help keep your research focused. Upon doing more research you might discover that avocados are actually more expensive because there's currently an import ban on them. Stay calm; this is totally fine! It's why we call it a *working thesis*: you can adjust it as needed. You can learn more about how to create a thesis statement [here](#).

Research

As soon as you have your topic and working thesis, you'll want to start on research. For most assignments, the best sites to use are those that your professor considers credible, like JSTOR and EBSCO. You will probably be told to avoid sites like Wikipedia because the information there can be somewhat unreliable. You can find reputable sources through the [Yuba College Library Database](#). Once you've picked out a site (or more) to search, use the advanced search option. Type in 'Avocados' in one window and 'costs' in another. This will help you find more relevant information than if you simply typed in 'avocados' in the basic search window. You will also want to make sure that you check 'full text' and 'peer reviewed' options if available. It's also important to keep track of your sources as you acquire them; you can try copying the links and pasting them at the bottom of your document alongside quotes that support your thesis. If that's a little too disorganized for you, maybe try creating bookmarks of your sources so you can come back to them later when it's time to make those citations. If you need additional help with research, the Yuba College librarians are more than happy to provide their assistance.

Outline

Once you have created a working thesis, done your research, and gathered your quotes, you can begin to outline and create a plan. This will look different for every individual. Some might want to dive right into the next step of starting a draft of their paper, while others may want to do some additional planning. Creating an outline can help you when you go to write your draft. This is a time when you can revise your working thesis based on the research you found. Here, you can also organize your quotes. You can also group quotes to form body paragraphs. Remember, your outline can be as limited or robust as you want. You can simply put all your quotes on a page with your working thesis, or you can have a detailed plan with your body paragraphs, grouped quotes, and quote explanations.

Start a Draft

After creating a plan/outline, if you choose to do so, you can begin writing a draft of your essay. You can break your essay into three rough parts: your introduction, your body paragraphs, and your conclusion. Because the introduction is at the beginning, you might think to start writing it first. However, sometimes that can be really difficult to do. Just like it's hard to introduce a person you've never met, it can be hard to introduce an essay you haven't written. If you're stuck when starting your introduction, feel free to just start writing your body paragraphs. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence that will be followed by information, which can include quotes (and quote sandwiches), narratives, examples, anecdotes, etc. Once you have your body paragraph drafts written, then you can go back and write your introduction and conclusion. Remember, this is supposed to be a draft! It won't be perfect, and you will likely need to edit it. This is a time for you to get all your words and ideas out. It is often much easier to remove and edit words than add words so it's okay if your draft feels like a bit of word vomit.

For more information on introductions and conclusions, see this [tip sheet](#). For more information on [paragraph development](#), [signal phrases](#), and [quote sandwiches](#), see the linked tip sheets.

Get Feedback & Revise

Once you have your draft finished, you can begin revising it. It may be helpful to get feedback on your draft so you know what to revise. Your professor may assign peer reviews so you can give and receive feedback. You can also meet with your professor or a tutor to get feedback. This is a phase in which you go back over your draft to improve your clarity and organization. You can move paragraphs around, add or remove explanations, and find better ways to word your sentences. You will likely move between the drafting and revising process multiple times as you continue to improve various elements of your paper based on feedback. Each paper will be different, so if you're unsure of what you need to revise, meet with your professor or a tutor!

Works Cited Page

If you have sources that you reference and quote in your essay, you will need to cite them. You will need to do in-text citations in your essay, which you can learn how to do [here](#) for MLA format, but you will also likely need a Works Cited page at the end of your essay. This page will be an alphabetized list of citations in the format requested by your professor (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). For details on how to do this, review the [MLA tip sheet](#).

Proofread

A final step in writing your paper is to proofread. This is different from editing and revising. Editing and revising involve looking at major issues in your paper such as organization that needs to be improved. Proofreading involves looking at the smaller issues. Perhaps you have sentences that need commas or words that need to be spelled correctly. Sometimes it can help to read your paper out loud or have someone else read it to you. This helps you hear where sentences aren't clear or where you might need punctuation. Tutors and professors won't proofread for you, but they can help explain concepts that will help you do so on your own!

Turn in Your Paper!

Before you turn in your paper, review your professor's instructions and rubric to make sure you've done all that you need to. Make sure you have added the proper header and page numbers to your paper. Check to see if your works cited page is at the end of your paper. Look to see if your paper needs to be double spaced, which it will be if it's in MLA format. When you go to submit it, check that it's in the right format. You may have to download it and upload it in a specific format such as pdf, doc, or docx. Once you submit, take a moment to acknowledge all the hard work you've put into your paper!