

Guide to Research and Writing

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Whenever you write a piece for a class assignment, there are several points to keep in mind to help the finished product appear polished and readable and accomplish your writing goals.

Picking a Topic

First, consider what you want to write about and how many words will your paper be. A research topic should be narrow enough that you can cover it in the amount of words that you have allotted. A five-paragraph essay, for example, must cover a very narrow slice of a topic because you have so little time in which to write something meaningful. A ten- to twenty-page research paper, on the other hand, requires a broader topic because you have much more time to develop your ideas. Your topic also needs to have a purpose or point. What point do you want to make? Knowing this will also help to narrow your research field. (And coming up with a clear title will help you stay focused on the topic.)

Here are two examples that clearly state the ideas that will be explored:



- Biracial Adoption Helps Children
- Gay Marriage Should Be a Civil Right

Neither topic is overly broad. In the first example, the researcher will focus on bi-racial adoption's effects on children rather than looking at all aspects of adoption. In the second, the researcher will focus on the legal arguments for gay marriage rather than looking at all aspects of this topic.

Here are two other examples that would be difficult, if not impossible, to research:



- Society Should Approve of Biracial Adoption
- Gay Marriage Is Good for America

Both of these topics are overly broad. What's more, they use terms that are difficult to define (what constitutes "society," for example?) or make statements that cannot be proven.

Papers on historical, biographical, and literary topics must also have a purpose or a point. A paper on *Moby Dick*, for example, should not just be titled “*Moby Dick*” because that does not reveal a purpose or point. Instead, pick an aspect of the book to discuss: “What Does the White Whale Represent in *Moby Dick*?” Similarly, a paper about Abraham Lincoln should not just be titled “Abraham Lincoln” because it lacks a point. A better title, one that has a point that can be explored, would be “Why Did Abraham Lincoln Choose to Make the Civil War More About Abolishing Slavery than States’ Rights?”

Writing a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement presents the theme, or purpose, of your paper. It should sum up the main idea in one to two sentences. Though this sounds like a simple task, it is often difficult to achieve. A thesis statement should do more than simply regurgitate the paper’s title, and it should avoid references to vague terms such as *society* or *culture*. The thesis statement should present your take on whatever it is you are writing about or setting out to prove.

For example, in a paper titled “The United States Should Abandon the Electoral College for a Majority Vote,” the thesis statement might be as follows:

The Electoral College must be abandoned to restore the concept that every vote counts. By returning to a majority vote, voters would be assured that their presidential candidate of choice was elected or defeated by a vote of the people.



Many students (and even professional writers!) have a hard time writing strong thesis statements. Here are a few examples of weak thesis statements:

- The Electoral College is unfair.
- Society should eliminate the Electoral College.
- The Electoral College is not based on a majority vote.

These sentences fall short of being thesis statements. The first two, though they offer a point of view, do not put forth what the writer is attempting to prove. The last is a statement of fact and does not provide a point of view that can be developed.



A thesis statement should also use your own words. Taking a quote from another individual does not achieve your purpose, which is to give your own take on the topic you have chosen.



It is also possible that your thesis statement will change once you have completed your research. Oftentimes research will lead you to another topic or enable you to further narrow your research and change what you want to write about. In addition, you may find that there is very little research or data on the topic you chose, forcing you to choose a new topic.

Writing an Outline

An outline is essential to organizing your ideas and focusing your research. (There are many excellent examples of outlines on the Internet.) Even if your research leads you to change your outline a bit, starting with organized, prioritized ideas will keep you from going astray in your research and writing. At first, an outline is no more than a rough list of points you want to make in your paper. Think of this first step as brainstorming. Write down any ideas or points you would like to have in your paper; all of these ideas should relate in some way to your thesis statement. Narrow your list down. Try for at least five ideas you think are worth discussing in your paper. There is no wrong or right way to do this.

For example, in a paper titled “Gun Control Laws Should Focus on Making Assault Weapons Illegal,” you might have many ideas:



- Are there any legitimate civilian uses for assault weapons?
- Defining an assault weapon—what is it?
- Why are they so dangerous? What types of crimes are they involved in?
- Why should we want to focus on reducing these particular crimes?
- What horrible crimes have assault weapons been involved in?
- How would making assault weapons illegal help eliminate or reduce these particular crimes?
- What obstacles would there be to making them illegal?

Next, you would organize these ideas in logical order. Here, the ideas are pretty logical, but maybe the point about civilian use should go after the definition of an assault weapon. In other words, organize the ideas in such a way that your ideas will progress logically, and you will not have to backtrack or repeat yourself. In the examples above, two ideas focus on what crimes assault weapons are used in. This might be repetitive when you actually write the paper. Decide

where this idea should be discussed. Now that you have some idea of which points you would like to cover, your research will be a lot more focused.

How to Research Your Topic

Your teacher may have very specific ideas about what constitutes an acceptable source, and it is important to find out what is suitable before beginning your research. Many different sources can be found. Books, online newspapers and magazines, blogs, organizations, online television news reports, and many other sources are available to the researcher today. To begin, a researcher casts a wide net, starting with the topic to research and further fine-tuning as the research goes on. Do not neglect bibliographies and notes in books and articles; these may provide further resources for your research. For some topics, a plethora of material might exist. For others topics, you might find very little. While sifting through your research, you will find it useful to keep a few important criteria in mind:

What Is a Qualified Source?

When using Internet websites in particular, this question should always be paramount in your mind. A quick analysis of a website is important if you want to cite the information you find on it in your paper. Consider the following questions to evaluate your sources.

- **Why Can't I Use Wikipedia?**

This omnipresent source is written by many different people. Some of those people truly want to provide valuable information. Others actively try to undermine its accuracy. The problem is that you often do not know which is which. Although Wikipedia can be used to give you a quick overview of some commonly known facts, such as how the circulatory system works or what scientist came up with quantum theory, it is not a good source for researching controversial topics like gun control or abortion. Just as you would never use a print encyclopedia as your main source for a paper, Wikipedia should never be used to gather your primary information—no matter how tempting!

- **Who Is the Author of the Site?**

If the site is anonymous, or if you have difficulty finding the site's author or supporting organization, you may want to reconsider using the information it contains. It should be easy to find the author or organization that supports the website. Sometimes a website is one big advertisement for a company, a service, or an organization. Clearly, information posted on such a site will be biased by the advertiser.

- **How Accurate Is the Information Presented?**

Accuracy is not always easy to determine, but a few clues might help you in your quest. Some companies pay writers to add content to a site to help it come up in web searches. That content is usually very general and may lead you to seek out a company's products—meaning it is little more than an advertisement. The

facts cited on the site should be verifiable in another source. Look for citations or other identifying features that can help verify the source of the facts. The citations should be current and relevant and not just taken from another source to make the website *appear* informative. In addition, cross-check the author of the site on a separate Internet search. You may find out something about the author or website that you did not know.

Bias

The site's bias should be clearly stated. A bias does not necessarily disqualify the source for research, but it should be very clear what it is. Many organizations advocate a particular position. Organizations such as the Right to Life Committee, which opposes abortion, and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, which favors gun control, are examples of organizations that advocate specific positions on issues. So, it follows that the information presented on their websites will support their positions. But if that position is the one you are trying to represent, such sites can be very useful in attaining further information.

- ***What Is the Value of the Information Presented?***

To assess value, ask yourself these types of questions: Are sources and statistics that are cited current? Can you tell that the person writing the material has kept the website up-to-date and is serious about offering the most current research available? Is information that contradicts the site's position also offered in the interest of maintaining a fair and accurate representation of the subject? How often does the site rely on deeply personal anecdotal information that is hard to qualify and may merely bring up a visceral and gut-wrenching reaction without any analysis? Is the information that is presented dated? Be suspicious of sites that don't seem to offer dates, names, and other easy-to-verify facts. Taking the time to verify your sources will help you become an educated consumer of information and will be a skill you continue to use and develop throughout your life.

- ***Culling Your Research***

In the research phase of your project, you will gather a variety of sources. It is common to have at least fifteen to twenty-five different sources from articles, books, organizations, and more. Quickly assessing, reviewing, and using this information may seem daunting at first. But spending time up front sorting through it and making notes will save you time later. It will also prevent you from having to reread the information to find what you are looking for.

Gathering Quotes, Anecdotes, and Statistical Data

Each paragraph in your paper will require a piece of evidence to back up your points. You know which points you want to make in the paper, so now you should sort through your research to find data. You should have a mix of the following:

- **Quotes from Experts and Laypeople**

Quotes from experts that back up your main points add legitimacy to your paper. But sometimes laypeople can be just as important. In a paper on how pollution on military bases harms health, for example, you may want to have quotes from base residents who have suffered from illnesses as well as from experts who have tested the water at such sites. These types of quotes are primary source quotes; they come from individuals who have some personal involvement in the event or situation. Secondary source quotes may also be valuable. A quote from someone who has studied pollution reports from many military bases to conclude that the military has neglected health would be a secondary source.

- **Anecdotes**

Anecdotes, or poignant stories, can be an excellent way of enhancing the points in your paper. In your reading, look for such anecdotes and how they could be used to engage your reader.

- **Statistical Data**

Statistics are a good way of having some hard facts in your paper to make your point. But you must be careful to root out the source of the statistic before you can use it with confidence. For example, in online reviews of restaurants or movies, favorable ratings might state that 99 percent of users approved of this movie or that restaurant. If you look further, you may find that only four people actually reviewed it—which is a tiny sample. The same thing can happen in statistics that are represented as fact in online sources. It is always worth a few extra minutes to make sure the statistics you want to use are not misleading. Statistics should be able to be verified by a third source, and this is easily done with the Internet. In addition, check the date of the statistic. If it is ten years old or older, it will probably not be useful for a paper that is talking about current events. A lot can change in ten years.

Take Notes

Now that you know what types of information you are looking for, be sure to take good notes. On your personal copies, highlight passages, anecdotes, and statistics that you want to use. On books or borrowed items, make a note of the page number and the passage you wish to use. This will save you from having to go back later to reread the entire piece to find the passages you wanted to use.

Writing Your Paper

Review Your Outline

When you sit down to write your paper, first review your outline. Now that you have read up on your topic and know more about the subject, this is a good time to make changes in the outline if you think they are needed. Don't be wedded to an original idea just because it seems difficult to change. Good research almost always leads to at least some changes—and maybe even a change in your initial topic idea. Go back through your points and add, subtract, and review your initial thesis statement to make sure it matches what you've discovered in your research.

Develop Your Paragraphs from Your Outline

Start working through the points in your outline, developing one to three paragraphs to discuss each point.

Paragraph

A good paragraph should include the following:

- a topic sentence that is usually a claim or main idea
- a piece of evidence that supports the claim
- a sentence that explains the piece of evidence or shows, in your own words, how it supports your main idea
- a concluding sentence

A paragraph should be no more than four or five sentences. If your paragraphs are longer than this, reread them. Look for—and delete—sentences that do not expand on the idea of the paragraph. If your paragraph is too short, look to see that you've done the things above. Your pieces of evidence are the anecdotes, statistics, and quotes that you gathered in your research. Sometimes it is tempting to simply use these and not explain them. You may think that your point is obvious. But you must explain how your evidence relates to your point.

For example, on a paper on the dangers of teen cell phone use and driving, a paragraph may look like this:

Studies prove that teens should never use a cell phone while driving. According to the Department of Motor Vehicles, eleven teens die every day in accidents involving cell phones. In addition, a 2013 Automobile Association of America study found that teen drivers are four times more likely than adults to get into car crashes or near crashes when talking or texting on a cell phone. The combination of inexperienced driving and further distractions such as cell phone use is deadly. Cell phone use and driving just do not mix.

Here, no sentence is irrelevant to the paragraph. The author has a topic sentence, uses statistics to support that idea, sums up for readers what the statistics reveal, and then provides an overall conclusion.

Writing a Conclusion

The conclusion is one of the most important paragraphs of your paper. Here you will sum up what you have said in your previous paragraphs and reiterate why these points have proven your thesis. The conclusion should not be used to make any new points. It is used to show your reader that you accomplished the goal of proving your thesis.

Some Final Tips

Reviewing Your Paper

This step is essential to the process of writing. Reviewing your work is just as important as writing your paper. Learning to self-edit will help you throughout your life and in your day-to-day dealings with others. Many online sources have checklists that can help with this. You might even want to print one out and go point by point. Consider these main ideas when self-editing:

- **Review Your Assignment**

Look again at the assignment you got from your teacher. Have you done everything that he or she wanted? Is the header the way it should be? Is the paper paginated correctly? If the teacher wants the piece double-spaced or in a particular font, did you do that? If your teacher requires notes, are they done correctly? Many papers receive low grades because the student does not follow instructions.

- **Allow Time to Pass Before Reviewing**

Even though you may be anxious to turn your paper in and be done with it, give yourself a little time before you review it. You should allow at least twenty-four hours to pass before looking at the completed paper. Print it out, stick it in a drawer, and forget about it for at least a day. When you look at it again, you will have more distance from the project and will be able to see it with fresh eyes.

- **Edit on a Hard Copy**

Using a hard copy allows you to more easily see mistakes and again provides that distance you need to review the paper with fresh eyes. Have a colored pen or pencil so that you can mark up your paper as you would if you were a teacher.

- **Start by Reviewing the Thesis and Conclusion**

You should be able to look at these two paragraphs and see a sort of mirror quality. Although they should not repeat themselves verbatim, the thesis statement should say what you plan to prove or write about, and the conclusion

should talk about how you proved your thesis. If you do not see this parallel structure, go back and revise these two paragraphs.

- **Review the Body of the Paper**

For each paragraph, review your topic sentence. Does it make a claim, or is it just a fact? Is the claim clear and provable? Did you use at least one piece of evidence to prove the point, and is it cited? Did you provide a date for the evidence if it is a statistic? Did you provide enough information about the author if it is a quote? Make sure your paragraphs explain the relevance of the evidence you used. Remember, your evidence cannot stand alone. It must have your interpretation of why you used it in the first place. Finally, does each paragraph have a concluding sentence that wraps up your idea?

Warnings About Plagiarism

Plagiarism is taking someone else's words and passing them off as your own. With the ability to cut and paste material, plagiarism is easier and more tempting than ever.

Plagiarism

In an article titled “What Is Plagiarism?” on the website Plagiarism.org, plagiarism is described this way:

- turning in someone else's work as your own
- copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
- failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
- giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation
- changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
- copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not



All of the above practices are wrong. Plagiarism is also unnecessary. You can definitely take facts like statistics and use them without worrying about plagiarism. But how you use those facts and what you say about them should be in your own words. Never copy text into your paper and think that you will revise it later, as it becomes difficult to remember what are your words and what are someone else's words. In addition, you can use someone else's words if you quote that person and cite where you found the material. Always acknowledge where you got the information. Even if you are paraphrasing, it doesn't hurt to say where the idea came from. It shows that you've done your research.