



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

The Research Paper

If you are asked to do a research paper, your instructor expects you to find good information, present and interpret it in a clearly written essay and document clearly where you got the information you included. This handout takes you through the stages of developing a research paper.

Instructors may give you specific instructions to fit their subject area, but this handout gives you a basic idea about how to approach your research paper assignments.

To do a good job on a research paper, you probably need these steps:

- I. Get Started
 - a. Understand assignment instructions
 - b. Plan your time
 - c. Choose and narrow your topic
- II. Do research and take notes
- III. Plan, write and revise your paper
 - a. Create an outline
 - b. Write a draft
 - c. Document sources
 - d. Revise

The rest of this handout describes ways of completing these various stages of developing a research paper. These are not the only ways, but they are a good starting place if you are unsure about what to do.

I. Get Started

a) Understand the assignment instructions

The most common problem leading to poor marks is misunderstanding of instructors' expectations, so read over all assignment instructions carefully. It's a good idea to underline or highlight the key words which tell you what steps to take, how to organize the paper and what requirements the instructor has. If you are unclear about any of them, check with your instructor.

Some key questions to check out:

- whether you are just expected to present information about the topic or you are expected to present an opinion and support it with research.
- what style you are expected to use to document your sources. (See section III.c in this handout for more information about this.)

b) Plan your time

Once you are clear on the instructor's expectations, start your research paper by giving yourself a series of deadlines. Writing a good research paper is a big job; you can't do it well if you leave it to the last minute. So, as soon as you get your assignment, look at the due date and then work backwards giving yourself a series of deadlines.

How long each stage takes depends on a lot of variables like paper length, your current knowledge of the topic, your research, your reading and writing skills, and the amount of time you can spend on the paper each week. For your first few research papers, start early.

To plan your time, follow these steps:

1. Skim through this entire handout.
2. Decide how much time you think you'll need to complete each stage. Allot more time than you think you'll need because you sometimes run into glitches.
3. Plan deadlines for completing the following:
 - Choosing a topic
 - Taking research notes
 - Making an outline
 - Writing a Draft and Documenting Sources
 - Revision

c) Choose your Topic

Your instructor may give you a list of topics to choose from. However, sometimes you need to come up with your own topic. If you need to find your own topic, try looking at the table of contents of your textbook and your class notes for ideas. If you still haven't found a topic, talk to your instructor.

Choose a topic that:

- Really interests you -- you will spend a lot of time learning about the topic.
- Can be researched easily with our library resources – our library does not have information on every possible topic.

Winkler and McCuen (2003) suggest that students should avoid topics that are:

- too big – if the topic is too broad, you can't get deep enough into the topic

- too technical –you may not have the specialized background knowledge needed
- too trivial – may be not worth writing about or boring for your instructor
- over-used – it’s hard to be original about a very common topic
- too current – there may not be enough information available yet
- topics that have only one source – that’s not really research

Once you’ve chosen your general topic, the next step is to **narrow it to something manageable** within the assigned paper length. If you are already fairly knowledgeable about your topic, you may be able to narrow it easily. However, if you don’t know much about your topic, you need to do some general reading on your topic. Try reading entries on the topic in specialized encyclopaedias or reading about the topic in your textbook; you might also try doing a quick Google search on the internet to find basic information about the topic. Such sources are probably too general to use as sources for your paper, but they can help you to get an overview of your topic and show you options for how you might focus your paper.

One good approach to narrowing your topic is to use questioning. Use *Who*, *What*, *Where*, *When*, *Why* and *How* questions to help you explore your topic. Your goal is to come up with a question you can’t answer without doing some research, but that you feel is worth answering. Such a question is often called “The Research Question”. The Research Question can guide your research and the answer you find through your research can often become your thesis statement – the main point of your paper.

If you need more help with narrowing your topic, tutors in the Learning Centre can show you other approaches.

II. Do Research and Take Notes

a) Find sources

Now it’s time to get going on your research. Hopefully, your instructor has arranged for your class to go to the Library and learn basic Library research skills. If not, and you are not familiar with using academic libraries, this part will be more difficult. In that case, you might want to ask your instructor if there is a Library class planned for you. If not, ask for help from a Librarian at the Information desk in the Library.

Here are some basic research tips:

- To find out about recommended sources for researching topics in your subject area, go to the Library homepage, click on “Resources by Subject” and then click on the subject that matches your course. Resources such

- as on-line databases and specialized websites and encyclopedias are listed.
- To prepare to search the library catalogue or on-line databases for your particular topic, you need to identify key words, phrases or concepts you could search for. Think of different ways to state these key terms. A thesaurus can help if you have trouble thinking of synonyms. Sometimes search systems do not use the most obvious words, so think of as many synonyms for your key words as possible and then look for various combinations of those. A further complication is that the key terms that work best for one database are not necessarily the terms that work best for another, so as you switch databases, you may also need to try different terms.
 - When you find a good source, use it to help you find other sources.
 - Look in the bibliography of the source for other useful sources.
 - Find out the key terms used to describe the good source in the database or catalogue and try those keywords to find further sources.
 - The Internet is an additional way to find information. From the Google homepage, click on “Scholar”. This will focus more on academic sources than an ordinary Google search does.
 - Don’t suffer in silence. If you spend 20 minutes and can’t find what you need, ask for help from a Librarian. You can access this help:
 - in person at the Information Desk in the Library,
 - on the telephone,
 - by email, or
 - by on-line chat.

On the Library homepage, choose “Ask a Librarian” for information on how to access these various types of help.

If you can’t find sources, you may need to adjust or change your topic.

b) Evaluate Usefulness of Sources

When you find sources, you need to decide how useful they are for your particular topic. This is especially important on the Internet. Here are some general guidelines:

- Are both author and date of the material provided? If not, the material may not be trustworthy.
- Is the information up-to-date?
 - Usually instructors want you to use sources no older than 10 years, preferably less than 5 years. This varies, however, by subject area.
- Is the author or company that produced the material qualified to be an expert in the subject?

- Look for biases. Does the author have a hidden agenda that might affect the information?
- Does the author document the sources of information used to write the article? If not, the material may not be trustworthy.
- Is the information relevant to your paper? Does it provide new perspectives or new information you haven't already found in another source?

c) Skim your Sources and Develop a Basic Plan

Once you've found some useful looking sources, you should skim them:

- To begin to develop a general knowledge of your topic
- To make a list of categories of information you could/should include in your paper.

During this initial research phase, don't try to do a lot of in-depth reading. Instead, skim them by reading introductions, conclusions or abstracts and glancing over topic headings and graphics. Keep a record of all useful-looking sources for later use. For more information about how to find sources, see the next section of this handout.

From what you learn in doing this initial research, you should develop a basic plan. This plan should mainly be a short list of the categories of information you think you might include in your paper. This initial plan may change as you do more research, but having an initial starting place is very useful.

d) Take Notes

Now it is time to start taking detailed notes. A planned approach to taking notes can save you a lot of time later. Follow these steps:

1. Before taking notes on a source, record bibliographical information for each source you want to use. This includes: author/s, full title of book or journal article, year of publication, city of publication and publisher as well as any edition number or editor's name. For on-line sources, also include the date you accessed the material and the web address (URL). For journals and magazines, you also should record the name of the journal, the volume number and the specific date of publication. Keep a running list of the sources you want to use. Later you will organize this list and include it in your paper.
2. Make a page for each of the topic areas in your basic plan. As you read your sources, put information from the sources on the appropriate topic area page.

3. For each note, be sure to include which source it came from (usually just the author's name is sufficient) and the page number.
4. Your notes can include exact quotations from the sources, paraphrases of sources (putting their ideas in your own words), summaries of sources, and ideas of your own that you get from reading the sources.
5. If you are copying the exact words from a source, be sure to put "quotation marks" around them in your notes so you know these are not your own words.
6. Your notes do not need to be in complete sentences, but be sure to include enough information so that they will make sense later.

As you take your notes, you may find you need to add new topic areas. In that case, make a new page for that topic area and treat it like the others.

III. Plan, Write and Revise your Paper

a) Create an Outline

For each topic area from your basic plan, decide what points you want to make and how you want to organize the ideas. Make a simple outline for each section of your paper. The outline should include:

- the points you want to make
- the evidence from the sources that you will use to support each point.

Consider the best order, both for points within a section as well as the order of the sections themselves.

Some students like to make an outline for a section and then write it before moving on to the next section. Others prefer to make a full outline for the whole paper before starting to write.

Here are some time saving tips that might help you:

- You can cut up your note pages so there is one note per piece of paper. Then you can move the notes around until you are satisfied with the order. Use tape to stick them to a piece of paper to form your outline.
- You can put all your notes on the computer and then just click and drag them around to create your outline.
- You can do your notetaking on file cards and then physically move those around until they are in the order you want.

If you need more help on how to make an outline, you should consult a Learning Centre tutor.

b) Write a Draft

If you have taken a composition course, you already know the essentials of a good essay. If you have not yet taken a composition course or are hesitant about writing, come to the Learning Centre for help. You could get help from a tutor, or you may want to consult the Learning Centre handout WR4.30 The Essay.

Using your outlines as a guide, write the sections of your paper. As you write your draft, don't get hung up on the details. Just get the ideas on the paper. Later you can go back and revise the paper, improving its content, organization, language and mechanics. For now, you want to make your points and support them, following your outline.

A research paper generally has three parts: the introduction, the body and the conclusion. Some students find it helpful to write the body sections of their paper before they write the introduction and conclusion. Some students just write the easiest sections first, which helps them tackle the more difficult sections later.

Remember that not all subjects are alike in what they expect in a research paper. Some areas have very specific formats that are different from the most typical described below.

Here is some basic information about each of the parts in the typical research paper format.:

The Introduction

The introduction is one or two paragraphs that introduce your reader to your topic. The purpose of the introduction is to capture your reader's interest, to provide background information, and to clarify your focus.

At the end of the introduction, you should have a thesis statement. The thesis statement tells your reader about the focus of your paper. It is the most important sentence of your paper. Thesis statements can state a point of view or simply outline the scope of the paper, depending on instructor requirements.

The Body

The body of your paper is the paragraphs that make your points and provide the research evidence. The sections you took notes on are included in the body. Each section generally will become a few paragraphs in the completed essay.

As you write, be sure to include where your information came from. You need to do that whether you quote, paraphrase or summarize someone

else's ideas. See the next section on documentation for more information about how to document your sources.

A problem some students have when they use information from sources is that they just put a whole bunch of quotes together without really discussing them. **It is important to both introduce the information from your sources and follow up by discussing how the source information is relevant to the point you are making.**

Use transitions and topic sentences to help your reader move from one point to the next. For long research papers, it is often a good idea to include headings in the body showing the major sections in the paper.

The Conclusion

Generally in the conclusion, you should summarize the main points of the paper and make some comments about the significance of your topic or about actions that should be taken as a result of the truth of your thesis. Your instructor may also provide you with more specific instructions about what she/he expects you to do in your conclusion.

c) Document Sources

Doing documentation of sources means that you show where you got your information -- whether you quoted, paraphrased or summarized your sources. If you do not document your sources properly, you risk committing plagiarism. Plagiarism is unacceptable in college, and students can be failed or even kicked out of college for it. For more information about plagiarism and how to avoid it, see the Learning Centre handout WR6.10 Plagiarism – How to Avoid It.

Documentation in academic work is done in a variety of styles. These styles all basically do the same job, but they are different in the details. Your instructor may specify a particular style you should use.

The most common styles are referred to as APA style and MLA style. In both these styles, you give key information about the source in brackets after you quote, paraphrase or summarize. At the end of the paper, you provide all the bibliographic information that would allow your reader to find your source themselves. In the Learning Centre, you can get handouts about how to use APA (WR5.30 An Introduction to APA Style) and MLA (WR7.20 MLA Style) styles. If you need extra help in following the instructions in the handouts, you should see a Learning Centre tutor. The Learning Centre also has manuals for these styles should you have more detailed questions than the handouts cover.

There are many other styles of documentation that are used for one or a few subject areas. Some of these styles use footnotes instead of putting source

information in brackets. The most common of these is Chicago style. The Learning Centre has a handout on how to do Chicago style documentation, refer to WR7.40 University of Chicago Style Sheet.

The Library website also has a lot of information on how to document sources. From the Library homepage, click on “Citation and Style Guides” and look for the style you want to use.

d) Revise and Proofread your Paper

When you have finished your draft, don't make the mistake of thinking your job is done. A good paper requires more work. You need to revise your paper to strengthen its points, improve its organization and style, and check for language and mechanics errors. The following questions can help you assess and revise your work. First, concentrate on issues of content and organization. When you are comfortable with those aspects, then check the language and mechanics.

Content and Organization Checklist

Does the paper follow the instructor's guidelines? Check back with the original instructions to make sure.

Is there a clear thesis in the introduction? Does the thesis fit with what you've written or does the thesis need to be modified?

Does each paragraph have a topic sentence that states the main point of that paragraph? Is the topic sentence supported with specific evidence (examples, facts, logical reasoning, expert opinion)?

Does all the information in each paragraph relate to its topic sentence? (unity)

Are the connections between the ideas stated?

Have you cited sources for all ideas that you got from a source? Have you used quotation marks in all cases where you have used the author's exact words?

Each time you give information from a source, do you both introduce it and explain its connection to the point you are supporting?

Have you explained the meaning of specialized terms you are using? You may feel your teacher knows what the terms mean, but generally teachers want to know that you understand those terms yourself. You show your understanding by explaining the terms in your own words.

Does the order of the ideas make sense? Would the paper flow better if you changed the order of paragraphs or sections?

Language and Mechanics Checklist

You should check the language and mechanics in your paper. This should include:

Spelling

Punctuation

Word choice

Grammar

Sentence structure

There are many ways to find these kinds of errors.

- For many students, reading their work aloud slowly helps them to find these kinds of errors.
- Spell Check on the computer is also helpful although it doesn't catch misspellings that are also words. For example, it would not catch errors such as confusing "there" and "their" or "then" and "than".
- You can also use Grammar Check on the computer, but you should be aware that Grammar Check has limitations; it only recognizes certain patterns and may identify things as possible errors that are actually correct. Use the underlining in Grammar Check to flag a sentence you should check yourself rather than as the last word.

If you need more help with revising your work, consult with a Learning Centre tutor.

References

Douglas College Library. (2005). *Five steps to successful research*. [Brochure]. New Westminster, BC: Author

Winkler, A. C. & McCuen, J. R. (2003). *Writing the research paper: a handbook*. (6th ed.). Boston: Thomson Heinle.