

Questia Writing Center

9 Step Writing Guide

“ A research paper is your opinion on a topic, informed by research you have done. It is not a summary of others’ thoughts, a personal essay or a review or critique. This can be daunting for new and experienced writers alike. Questia’s 9-step writing guide can help keep you focused and guide you down the path to a successful research paper. ”

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STEP 1

Getting started

So you sit down at your computer to begin and it just stares back, blank. The temptation to check email or your social media accounts jumps into your head. Don't. Try these steps to get you focused.

Identify tasks and build a schedule

- Identify the milestones for each step in the research and writing process.
- Identify your final due date
- You don't have to figure it all out at once
- Spend some time to frame the task ahead of you - even 20 minutes can get you started
- Understand your assignment - format, type and length differ among professors
- Add dates to each milestone

Determine the type of paper you are writing

Analytical Paper

Here the key is to research and scrutinize the subject of your paper, and then present your analysis from your own standpoint or perspective

| *Example: The role of the Catholic Church in Medieval Europe*

Argumentative Paper

Present your stand on an issue and persuade the reader to your point of view. Your research serves as evidence to support your position.

| *Example: Capital punishment is not an effective crime deterrent*

Get organized

Write everything down and keep it organized: Notes, research sources, thoughts - everything. It is easier to have all the information you need and not use it, than to be scrambling at the last minute trying to remember where you read something.

STEP 2

Select a topic

Choosing a topic can often be the hardest part of writing a research paper. Here are some tips and ideas to help make this important step easier.

Generate topic ideas

Remember, a topic is the subject of your research paper - what you plan to write about. Think of what interests you relative to your assignment.

For example, if you are taking a course on the history of 19th Century America, what about that period is interesting to you? The Civil War? Westward Expansion?

Check reference books, encyclopedias, the Internet, newspapers, magazines, television, talk to your teacher and peers - you'd be surprised where some good topic ideas can come from. And for tips for doing your preliminary research, see Step 3 - Research and note taking.

Determine if a topic is good for you and your paper

Are you interested in this topic?

You'll do a better job - and enjoy the process more - if you're interested in your topic.

Is the topic broad enough to be narrowed down?

Your topic needs to be substantive enough that you can write a paper about it but specific enough so that you can cover it sufficiently in your paper.

BROAD IDEA		NARROW IDEA
Native American Mythology	—●—	The trickster myth in Native American Cultures
Learning styles	—●—	Gender differences in learning styles
The Harlem Renaissance	—●—	Literary Roots of Harlem Renaissance

Are there enough sources to support your paper?

Do some quick research. Can you find books and articles on your topic?

Do you have anything to say about this topic?

You need a position, a point to make about your topic. This ultimately leads to your thesis statement.

IF YOU NEED HELP CHOOSING A TOPIC,
TRY QUESTIA'S TOPIC FINDER TOOL

STEP 3

Research and note taking

While listed as a singular step here, research is actually a fluid process that crosses several steps of writing a research paper. You will be doing preliminary research to find your topic and thesis. As you write your paper, you may find yourself needing to do additional research as you go.

Tips for finding sources

Many types of sources exist, each with pros and cons

Books

Can contain in-depth information but may be challenging to find up-to-date facts on contemporary issues

Encyclopedias

Good for background information on a topic, but generally not in-depth enough to be used as your primary resources

Academic Journals

Narrow, academically-oriented focus on very specific topics; often a source of unique findings that can strengthen and distinguish your paper

Magazines

Can be good sources of information on current events and general-interest topics, but may not be accepted as scholarly or academic

Newspapers

Another good source of information on current events and general-interest topics, and are generally more up-to-date than magazine articles (though often short or with limited background)

Internet / Websites

A wide range of information; a lot of it is credible and valuable while a lot of it is unreliable and inaccurate; take care in choosing your online sources

Interviews

Can provide expert insights if you are able to interview a credible authority in your topic

Tips for taking notes

- Write down anything you think you might need - it's better to write something down now and discard it later.
- Whenever you write down a direct quotation, put it in quotation marks.
- Think about what you are reading as you take notes, and record your thoughts and ideas.
- Paraphrase whenever possible. (You still need to credit your sources even when paraphrasing.)
- With every note include the source (including page number) of the information, idea or quotation.
- Remember that web sites and interviews must be cited like any other type of source.
- Use Questia to research credible books, academic journals, magazines, newspaper articles and reference material. Electronically take notes, highlight passages, bookmark pages, save books and generate citations -- it will all be captured in project folders for future reference.

STEP 4

Develop your thesis

Once you have your topic you can create your thesis statement. This is your declaration of what you are going to prove or argue in the rest of your paper.

A good thesis statement ...

- Is clear and succinct
- Expresses your main idea, perspective, or position. It is not a statement of known fact
- Does not include your specific arguments or evidence - that is in the body, later
- Does not use first person language (e.g., "I think..." or "In my opinion...")
- Does not just describe your topic - "this paper is about..."
- Is located at or near the end of the introductory paragraph to inform the reader what you are about to argue in the rest of the paper
- The thesis statement is usually a single sentence, but it can be longer

DEVELOP YOUR THESIS WITH HELP FROM
QUESTIA'S THESIS BUILDER TOOL

Common problems with thesis statements

Too factual

A thesis should not just repeat facts. It needs to represent your position on a topic. Overcome this by asking yourself what it is you will be trying to prove in your paper.

ORIGINAL THESIS	REVISED THESIS
There are many causes of the U.S. Civil War	While there were many factors that led to the U.S. Civil War, the greatest causes were the intertwined issues of slavery and states' rights.

Too vague

Avoid merely announcing the topic. Make your original and specific take on the issue clear to the reader.

ORIGINAL THESIS	REVISED THESIS
In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between fairy tales and early childhood.	Not just empty stories for kids, fairy tales shed light on the psychology of young children.

Too subjective

Your thesis statement and entire paper need to be based on research, analysis, and evaluation rather than personal taste. When you make a (subjective) judgment call, justify your reasoning.

ORIGINAL THESIS	REVISED THESIS
Socialism is the best form of government for Kenya.	If the government takes over industry in Kenya, the industry will become more efficient.

Can't be proven

If your thesis can't be proven you shouldn't try to prove it. Avoid making universal or pro/con judgments that oversimplify complex issues. A sign of this is the use of "always" or "never" in your thesis statement.

ORIGINAL THESIS	REVISED THESIS
We must always save the whales.	Because our planet's health may depend upon biological diversity, we should save the whale.

STEP 5

Create an outline

Creating an outline is the process of organizing your thoughts and what you are going to say. Doing so will make it easier to write your paper. You'll be able to identify areas that need more research or thought or may no longer fit with your paper - and make those adjustments before writing your paper

Steps to creating an outline

1. Organize your notes and research to group similar material together.
2. Review your thesis statement - is it still what you want to say? If not, change it.
3. Identify the main points of your arguments that support your thesis.
4. Identify the ideas that support your main points.
5. Match your research to your points.
6. Order your ideas in a logical flow.
7. Identify where you need more research, where your thoughts need more development, and where you have the information that is no longer needed.

QUESTIA'S OUTLINE TOOL CAN HELP YOU ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS
WITH HELPFUL EXAMPLES AND A STEP-BY-STEP OUTLINE STARTER

STEP 6

Write draft

Now that you have your thesis, research and outline complete, it is time to write your first draft of your paper. It should consist of three main sections:

Introduction

Opening paragraph of your paper. Presents the purpose of your paper, includes your thesis, and engages your readers' interest in your topic.

Body

The largest section of your paper. The body follows the main points you have listed in our outline and includes the arguments and evidence that support your thesis

Conclusion

The conclusion reiterates your main contention without just repeating what you said earlier in your paper, and ties together your points.

Tips for writing your draft

- Remember, that a first draft doesn't have to be perfect -- get your ideas down and you can revise it later
- Following your outline will make writing your paper easier, but don't be afraid to adjust your outline as you go
- While you write, note areas that need to be cited and keep track of the sources for the ideas and quotations you use
- If a section of your paper become hard to work through, skip it and come back later
- Keep notes of research and quotations -- it will make citing them later much easier

STEP 7

Review and revise

Reviewing and revising your paper is the process of reading your draft and making any changes to the content you see fit. Proper revising includes careful thought about your paper's ideas, arguments, supporting research and structure.

Reviewing and revising checklist

Need help figuring out how to take your paper to the next level?
Try this checklist for opportunities to improve your paper.

- ☐ Is my thesis statement easily identifiable and an accurate summary of my position
- ☐ Do my main points support my thesis?
- ☐ Do I have enough research and evidence to support what I'm saying?
- ☐ Do I have any information that does not relate to my main points?
- ☐ Does the order of my paper make sense? Does my information flow logically?
- ☐ Are my citations noted?
- ☐ Is there anything that reads would find confusing or hard to follow?

Tips for reviewing and revising

- Wait a day between completing your first draft and reviewing it -- gives you a fresh perspective
- Read your entire paper at least once -- without revising it -- to get an overall perspective
- Have someone else read your paper and offer you an outside point of view
- Review a printed version of a draft, then return to the computer to make the revisions

STEP 8

Citation and bibliography

Giving proper credit to the sources of facts, ideas, and quotations you have incorporated into your paper is key to avoiding plagiarism. By documenting your sources, you let your reads follow your thought process and see how you have built upon the thoughts of others.

What to credit and what not to credit

You should always credit a source for the following types of information:

- Facts and statistics that are not common knowledge
- Direct or paraphrased quotation and excerpts
- Ideas, thoughts, and opinions expressed by others (as opposed to those ideas, thoughts and opinions that are original to you)

You do not need to indicate a source for information that is commonly known. This includes:

- Common knowledge and accepted wisdom
| *Example: Since many people like chocolate...*
- Commonly known facts
| *Example: The capital of Texas is Austin*
- Reference to or brief mentions of commonly known literary, artistic, and religious works
| *Example: Just as David slew Goliath*

Citation and bibliography styles and formatting

Your instructor will likely specify a particular documentation style to use for your paper. Several established styles (MLA, APA, and Chicago are common) specify: what to include, format, punctuation and more. Check with your instructor on which style you should use.

Questia provides tools while reading books and articles in our library to create citations in any of the three styles mentioned previously. You can generate your bibliography automatically for those items too!

STEP 9

Proofread and submit

Effective proofreading is the final step and enables you to present your paper - and yourself - in the best light possible. It is tempting to skip this step - but don't!

Tips for reviewing and revising

- Correct the spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors that your computer doesn't catch
- Double-check the formatting of your paper including the citations and bibliography
- Identify any passages that are awkward, repetitious, or unclear

Proofreading techniques

- Read your paper out loud
- Read your paper a line at a time
- Read your paper backward, one sentence or paragraph at a time
- Proofread your paper once for general mistakes, once for spelling, once for grammar and punctuation, and once for writing style
- Use your word processor's spell check and grammar check features to identify possible problems
- Don't assume the computer is always correct, though - determine this for yourself
- Proofread from a paper copy, not on the computer screen

Proofreading tips

- If possible, proofread the day after you finish your last revision
- Take your time - don't rush
- Proofread longer papers in several sessions instead of all at once
- Proofread your paper more than once - you'll probably catch problems the second time, too
- Have someone else also proofread your paper - he or she may catch something you don't

**For more tips and resources, visit the
Questia Writing Center**

WWW.QUESTIA.COM/WRITING-CENTER