

## STEPS TO WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS

1. Select a topic
2. State the objective or thesis
3. Prepare a working outline
4. Develop a preliminary bibliography
5. Taking notes & Annotated bibliography
6. Write the rough draft
7. Edit to arrive at the final draft

### 1 SELECT A TOPIC

Choose your subject carefully, keeping in mind the amount of time you have to write the paper, the length of the paper, your intended audience and the limits of the resources. The topic of the paper is what you want to say about the subject. To narrow the topic, you need to read the background articles about your subject in books, journal articles to form an opinion or viewpoint about it. Don't start by taking notes, simply read through some of the articles from a library database search and jot down the main ideas you are seeing. Avoid controversial topics and sensational subjects that are not scholarly, too technical, or will only restate the research material. As you read, ask questions like the following:

- Who are the important people involved?
- What are the major issues?
- What are my opinions regarding the topic?
- Why is this an important, interesting subject?
- How has the problem (or issue) developed? When? Where?

#### Example of a topic for a five page paper:

**Too broad** - Sports are enjoyable

**Better, but still too broad** - Swimming is enjoyable

**Narrowed topic** - Swimming is enjoyable because it is challenging for most people.

Narrowing the topic for extensive research can be more complicated. Using Wikipedia and other blog-like web resources is not a good idea because the information is too broad and can be inaccurate. Be careful beginning with sources that are not peer-reviewed or scholarly.

### 2 STATE THE OBJECTIVE (THESIS)

Before you begin your research for your paper, you need to compose a thesis statement that describes the viewpoint you are going to express and support in your paper. Since your purpose in the rest of the paper is to prove the validity of your thesis, your thesis statement provides a controlling idea.

This idea will help you choose resource materials and will limit your note taking.

**Example:**

**Thesis** - Ancient Greek culture is reflected in the lives of present day Greeks.

**Controlling idea** - "reflected in" - The writer will look for materials that describe characteristics of ancient Greek culture and characteristics of modern Grecian culture, and for any similarities between the two.

Compose your thesis statement carefully, for it is the key to a good paper. As a matter of fact, a good thesis statement can outline your paper for you. There are several common errors that students make when composing thesis statement. Some of these are listed below, with examples:

**1. A thesis cannot be a fragment; it must be expressed in a sentence.**

**Poor:** How life is in a racial ghetto.

**Better:** Residents of a racial ghetto tend to have a higher death rate, higher disease rates, and higher psychosis rates than do any other residents of American cities in general.

**2. A thesis must not be in the form of a question.** (Usually the answer to the question could be the thesis.)

**Poor:** Should eighteen year old males have the right to vote?

**Better:** Anyone who is old enough to fight in a war is old enough to vote.

**3. A thesis must not contain phrases such as "I think."** (They merely weaken the statement.)

**Poor:** In my opinion most men wear beards because they are trying to find themselves.

**Better:** The current beard fad may be an attempt on the part of men to emphasize their male identity.

**4. A thesis should not be written in figurative language.**

**Poor:** Religion is the phoenix bird of civilization.

**Better:** As long as man can conceive the idea of a god, religion will rise to give man a spiritual reason for existence.

**5. A thesis must not be expressed in muddled or incoherent language.**

**Poor:** In Act One of Othello, to cause them to feel fury against Othello, Iago fuels Brabantio, Othello, Roderigo, and Cassio with deceit by telling them lies.

**Better:** In Act One of Othello, Iago deceives several characters in order to further his plot to destroy Othello's life.

## 3

### PREPARE A WORKING OUTLINE

A working outline is important because it gives order to your note taking. As you do your research, you may find that you need to review your plan if you lack information about a subtopic or have conflicting information. Nevertheless, it provides a good starting point and is essential before you start to take notes.

Begin by listing the topics you want to discuss in the paper. (You should have a general idea of these from the initial reading you have done and your general knowledge of the topic.) Then, divide the items on the list into major topics and subtopics. An example of a working outline is presented below:

**Thesis statement** - Ancient Grecian culture is reflected in the present day Greeks.

**Working outline:**

Ancient Greeks

- Religious beliefs

- Family Structure

- Artistic Pursuits

Modern Greeks

- Religious beliefs (note differences)

- Family structure (note modern differences)

- Artistic pursuits

Under each section of the working outline, you will be adding the sources and notes about each. You will put the outline to the side for the time being to develop the preliminary bibliography and then you will merge the bibliography with the outline before taking notes.

## 4

### DEVELOP A PRELIMINARY BIBLIOGRAPHY

A preliminary bibliography is a list of potential sources of information. You can start with the LSU Libraries Database by searching peer-reviewed and scholarly sources. You may need to request the full articles and/or books via Interlibrary Loan and this is the step to do that.

You will want to begin to format your bibliography by understanding the citation style for the paper and formatting the sources into a list. Using EasyBib.com or a software such as EndNote will assist you in keeping large amounts of sources organized. If you are writing a shorter five or ten pages paper, consider using the Microsoft References tool in Word.

Once the bibliography is formed, you can write some notes for sources you have already reviewed:

### An example of what a bibliographic note might look like:

Tillich, Paul. Systematic Technology. 3vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63.

(esp. vol. 1 - ch. 2) bibliographic information; also ch. 4 for dissenting opinions

You will want to do this for each of the sources, checking the abstract, methods and discussion section of journal articles and the table of contents in books. Once you have the preliminary notes on what you are looking for, you can move on to the outline because we will come back to complete the annotated bibliography.

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### TAKING NOTES

After you have your working outline and preliminary bibliography, you can start taking notes. Be sure to notice that taking notes does not mean copying and pasting from web resources or even from journal articles. While you may have many resources in digital format, copying directly from those resources can cause issues in paraphrasing, citation and synthesis of the material. Years ago, researchers would use index cards to make notes (which is still an acceptable practice). Most researchers today use programs like EndNote or Microsoft Word to create digital note cards.

Begin each note card by including the title of the source (or short hand) and the page / chapter to use for citing. This is very important because you **MUST** cite all material even if you have not used the exact words of the text. Be sure to write all notes in your own words and only use direct quotes when the information is worded in a particularly unusual or impactful way. Read the example below and pay attention to the paraphrasing that summarizes the content of the passage and the other items included on the "note card."

**Thesis:** Man's attempts to create a healthier and more prosperous life often have unforeseen detrimental effects upon the very environment he hopes to improve.

**Sample Text:** Ecology and Its Implications

In Malaysia recently, in an effort to kill off mosquitoes, American technologists sprayed woods and swamplands with DDT. Result? Cockroaches, which ate poisoned mosquitoes were slowed in their reactions that they could be eaten by a variety of tree-climbing lizards, which in turn could be eaten by cats, which

promptly died of insecticide poisoning. The cats having died, the rat population began to increase; as rats multiplied, so did fleas: hence the rapid spread of bubonic plague in Malaysia. But that is not all. The tree-climbing lizards, having died, could no longer eat an insect that consumed the straw thatching of the natives' huts. So, as Malaysians died of the plague, their roofs literally caved in above their heads. *from Peter A. Gunter. The Living Wilderness. Spring 1970*

**Note card:**

"Ecol. & Its Implications" Spr. '70, p. 31

Living Wilderness (*topic from outline*)

Recently the use of DDT in Malaysia, originally intended to kill mosquitoes, started a chain reaction of events leading to bubonic plague and the actual collapse of Malaysian's huts.

## FINAL OUTLINE WITH ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

As you are taking notes and making "note cards" for each important topic in each source, you will be making big steps towards the annotated bibliography. Once you have completed all of the notes, it is time to merge the "note cards" with the working outline.

This step in organizing your notes should yield an annotated bibliography within the final outline. The final outline is similar to the working outline but it has subsections that are details found when taking notes. These subtopics will house the notes on the topic and the source. You will need to go through your notes to find key subtopics and highlight them or just move the notes around in the document to get the like concepts together.

Then you need to consider if the subtopics should be arranged in chronological order or in another way that makes sense given the thesis. Here is an example:

**Thesis statement** - Ancient Grecian culture is reflected in the present day Greeks.

**Outline with notes:**

1. Ancient Greeks

A. Religious beliefs

1. Ceremonies

- Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece: Literature, Religion, Society.

Bucknell Review, Vol. XLIII, No. 1. Edited by Mark W. Padilla. Lewisburg, PA:

Bucknell University Press, 1999: Discusses the intersection of religion and

society in ancient Greek culture - good examples of ceremonies and other rituals

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## ROUGH DRAFT

After you have completed the final outline and annotated bibliography, you can begin writing the rough draft. It is important to remember that this rough draft will be revised. You need to allow time for this part of the process as revision is the key to avoiding plagiarism. Concentrate on the content of the paper, following your outline and expanding the ideas in it with the information from your notes.

Your paper should consist of three parts: the introduction, the body of the paper and the conclusion. The introduction should state the thesis, summarize the main ideas of the paper and capture the reader's interest. The body of the paper should develop each section of the outline without copying material directly from the sources. When you use information from a note, cite the source in the sentence. The formatting is not important right now, but to save time you can use Easybib.com or Microsoft References to create the in-text citation and references page as you write. The conclusion should summarize your findings and restate the thesis.

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## EDITING & FINAL DRAFT

When you have finished the rough draft, read through it again and revise it. Pay particular attention to the content and organization of the paper. Does each paragraph have a topic sentence that relates to the thesis? Is each idea supported by evidence? Are there clear transitions from one section to another? You may want to have someone else proof read the paper and provide you with edits and even feedback. Check out the Writing Lab or other resources on campus.

The final draft should be your best work on the topic and should include in-text citations and a reference list. Use the format that your instructor has identified and go to OWL at Purdue online for assistance with citations or formatting. If you are using footnotes, be certain the numbered passages correspond to the correct sources.

Before submitting the paper for a grade check the list below:

- **Look for spelling and grammar errors highlighted by Microsoft Word**
- **Read the introduction and conclusion to be sure that the thesis is clearly stated and supported in both places**
- **Read for repetition: words used too much or phrases that could be retated**
- **Double check in-text citations**
- **Double check required formatting such as cover page and reference list**