

Research Papers, Start to Finish

Maybe you're a re-entry student and it's been ten years since you've written a paper. Or maybe you just got out of high school but never wrote anything more complex than an opinion essay. How do you start a research paper? How do you keep track of your research? Here is a practical step-by-step approach to starting—and completing—your research paper.

1. Choose & narrow a topic.

The topic has to respond, first of all, to your instructor's prompt. Beyond that, your topic needs to be interesting to *you*. Otherwise, it's unlikely that it will hold your interest or the interest of any other reader, including your instructor. Get an idea about how much information is available on your topic. Start with an electronic database such as Proquest and search using keywords. Scan the results—six to eight well focused sources are probably enough to begin. At this point, though, if you find it hard to find enough information, stop wasting your time and try another topic. Once you determine that your topic is a good one with plenty of good sources, narrow it down to a manageable size:

General assigned topic	My personal topic ideas	Enough focused information?	My narrowed topic
a social issue affecting college students	birth order & college success	not really—only 3. (and boring)	
	cheating in college	yes—10 or more	why cheating matters

2. Start reading & record keeping.

Keep a small notebook to write down publication information for each source. If you read online, start a resource document where you copy & paste the publication information. If you are citing from electronic sources such as Proquest, look for the *Cite This* button and choose MLA or APA style. Then simply copy & paste the resulting citation into your resource document. Microsoft Word has features (on the References tab) that generate in-text citations and Works Cited entries for many types of electronic and print sources. However you choose to do it, keep records right from the beginning to avoid the frustration of having to backtrack later. Take notes from each source and include the page numbers. If you copy or quote anything exactly, add quotation marks *immediately* to distinguish direct from indirect quotes. Keeping a separate resource document or notebook for your sources helps you to keep clear, both in your own mind and in your paper, the difference between your own ideas and the ideas of others.

Source	Information	Page number
Chris Bates. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Washington: Feb 20, 2009. Vol. 55, Iss. 24; pg. A.36.	"Turning a blind eye gives rise to the kind of thinking that condones deceit at the top levels of management, as evidenced by the problems at companies like Enron and WorldCom."	A36
Errin J Jeffes, Steven M Janosik. "The court's response to student cheating with the help of term paper mills: Implications for student affairs administrators." <i>College Student Affairs Journal</i> 21.2 (2002): 68-77. <i>General Interest Module</i> . ProQuest. Web. 16 Mar. 2009.	case study: State of New York v. Saksniit selling of papers by term paper mills fraud	71

3. Formulate a thesis & start to organize.

When you have gathered enough information to have clear idea about what *others* have to say about your topic, write a working thesis statement. Your thesis is your informed opinion about the topic. Make sure your thesis gives a clear stand, even if the clear stand is that you feel ambivalent about the topic.

My topic	My opinion about the topic	My working thesis statement
why cheating matters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it condones deceit • it short-circuits the learning process 	Cheating by college students short-circuits the learning process, leaving students ill-prepared for the complexities of civic and business life; worse, it makes cheaters callous about cheating even at high levels of government and business.

Based on your thesis statement, create a working map or outline. Each of the main points stated in the thesis should correspond to several body paragraphs. Use the research notes you made earlier to fill in reasons, facts, examples, statistics and other evidence. If your thesis seems a little vague or doesn't say exactly what you mean, re-work it. *Thesis and organization are very closely connected, so check back and forth frequently.*

4. Continue reading and record keeping.

Once you have your basic organization—whether in the form of a map, outline, or something else—you may find that some of your points have more evidence than others. This tells you where to focus your ongoing research. You want to develop all your reasons adequately. Return to the library to continue your research and record keeping. Periodically add your new evidence to your outline and review what information you still need.

5. Write a draft

With enough evidence to support your informed opinion on the topic, start writing a first draft. Since you already have a thoughtful, informed thesis and an organizational plan, a first draft should not be difficult. Start with the thesis and write all the body paragraphs first. Omit the introduction for now (unless you already know exactly how to begin, but not all writers do). Don't worry about the conclusion at this point, either.

6. Revise and attribute.

Read your draft and make sure your ideas are clear and support your thesis. Every paragraph should have a single topic derived from the thesis statement. If any paragraph does not, take it out (or revise your thesis slightly if you think it is warranted). Add transition signals where they are needed. Check that you have quoted and paraphrased accurately and that you have acknowledged your sources. Every idea that did not come to you as a personal epiphany or as a result of your own reasoning should be attributed to its owner.

7. Write the introduction and conclusion

Add an introduction (usually *before* the thesis) and a brief conclusion. The introduction should be more general than the thesis, gradually narrowing to the thesis. (For more on introductions, see the tip sheets "Introductions" and "Introductions & Conclusions" on the Yuba College web site under Writing Center Tip Sheets.) The conclusion should refer to your thesis without simply restating it. At the end of your paper, insert a page break and create (if you have not already done so) a Works Cited (for MLA) or a Bibliography (for APA), using the publication information you collected while researching. Use the MS Word features on the Reference tab or a writer's guide such as *Rules for Writers* by Diana Hacker for specific guidance.

8. Proofread.

Time permitting, allow a few hours or days to go by before proofreading. This "time out" will make you more objective. Proofread *from paper* with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Proofread several times—once just for sense and flow, and once each for each type of mistake you normally make (for example, if you know you make apostrophe errors, scan once just for those. If you make comma errors, scan just for commas and analyze each one). Slowly read your paper through at least once aloud. Your ear might catch errors your eye misses.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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