

How to Write a Research Paper

1 Understand the assignment

For some of you this goes without saying, but you might be surprised at how many students start a research paper without even reading the assignment guidelines.

So your first step should be to review the assignment and carefully read the writing prompt. Specifically, look for technical requirements such as **length, formatting requirements** (single- vs. double-spacing, indentations, etc.) and **citation style**. Also pay attention to the particulars, such as whether or not you need to **write an abstract** or include a cover page.

2 Choose your topic

In open-ended assignments, the student must choose their own topic. While it may seem simple enough, choosing a topic is actually the most important decision you'll make in writing a research paper, since it determines everything that follows.

Your top priority in how to choose a research paper topic is whether it will provide enough content and substance for an entire research paper. You'll want to choose a topic with enough data and complexity to enable a rich discussion. However, you also want to **avoid general topics** and instead stick with topics specific enough that you can cover all the relevant information without cutting too much.

3 Gather preliminary research

To refine your topic and prepare your thesis statement, find out what research is available for your topic as soon as possible. Early research can help dispel any misconceptions you have about the topic and reveal the best paths and approaches to find more material.

Keep in mind the [difference between primary and secondary sources](#) as you search. Primary sources are firsthand accounts, like published articles or autobiographies; secondary sources are more removed, like critical reviews or secondhand biographies.

4 Write a thesis statement

Using what you found in your preliminary research, write a [thesis statement](#) that succinctly summarizes what your research paper will be about. This is usually the first sentence in your paper, making it your reader's introduction to the topic.

A thesis statement is the best answer for how to start a research paper. Aside from preparing your reader, the thesis statement also makes it easier for other researchers to assess whether or not your paper is useful to them for their own research. Likewise, you should read the thesis statements of other research papers to decide how useful they are to you.

5 Determine supporting evidence

Here's when you go through all the sources you collected earlier and find the specific information you'd like to use in your paper.

Normally, you find your supporting evidence by reading each source and taking notes. Isolate only the information that's directly relevant to your topic; don't bog down your paper with tangents or unnecessary context, however interesting they may be.

And **always write down page numbers**, not only for you to find the information later, but also because you'll need them for your citations.

6 Write a research paper outline

A lot of students want to know how to write a research paper outline. More than informal essays, research papers require a methodical and systematic structure to make sure all issues are addressed, and that makes outlines especially important.

7. Write the first draft

Once your outline is finished, it's time to start actually writing your research paper. This is by far the longest and most involved step, but if you've properly prepared your sources and written a thorough outline, everything should run smoothly.

If you don't know how to write an introduction for a research paper, the beginning can be difficult. That's why writing your [thesis statement](#) beforehand is crucial. **Open with your thesis statement** and then fill out the rest of your introduction with the secondary information—save the details for the body of your research paper, which comes next.

8. Cite your sources correctly

Citations are part of what sets research papers apart from more casual nonfiction like [personal essays](#). Citing your sources both validates your data and also links your research paper to the greater scientific community. Because of their importance, citations must follow precise formatting rules . . . problem is, there's more than one set of rules!

9. Edit and proofread

Last but not least, you want to go through your research paper to correct all the mistakes. We recommend going over it twice: once for structural issues such as adding/deleting parts or rearranging paragraphs and once for word choice, grammatical, and spelling mistakes. Doing two different editing sessions helps you focus on one area at a time instead of doing them both at once.

To help you catch everything, here's a quick checklist to keep in mind while you edit:

