



A GUIDE TO THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Preparing a research paper or project can often be one of the most intimidating assignments a college student must face. The process can be less made daunting by following an organized plan. The number of steps may vary from list to list, but they are all similar. The following outlines seven steps that can be used in the research process.

STEPS IN PREPARING A RESEARCH PAPER or PROJECT:

1. Select a topic

- If you have a choice, choose a topic that interests you.
- Consider your prior knowledge of the topic and unfamiliar terminology. If you are not comfortable with a topic you may need to do preliminary research using an encyclopedia/dictionary, the Library of Congress Subject Headings, the library's online catalog, and periodical databases to get enough background information to clearly determine your topic.
- Consider the length of the assignment and how much information you will need to gather. Also, consider availability of resources. If the library does not have all of the information you need, you need to leave enough time for the library to obtain the materials for you through interlibrary loan.
- Consider the type of assignment. What resources would be most appropriate? (ie. videos, books, journals, maps). Also know your instructor's requirements.
- Be aware of when your assignment is due; give yourself enough time to locate, evaluate, and process the information you will use. Locating useful sources takes time; you will need to give yourself enough time to do all the necessary steps in order to produce good work and meet the deadline.

2. Formulate a Thesis

- Begin with one or more related questions.
- Conduct research to find ideas and concepts that help form or shape an opinion. Background research is necessary especially when you are not very familiar with a topic.
- Develop the thesis statement using the points that support the idea that is to be shown or proven. The thesis statement provides the central focus or purpose of the paper and all information following the thesis should be supportive of the thesis statement.

TIP: Creating a concise, well-developed thesis is key to producing a good paper or project. The thesis statement should not be longer than three sentences.

3. Prepare an Outline

- Divide the parts of the thesis statement into a number of major points.
- Divide the each of the major points into subheadings.

TIP: All of the major points of the outline should support the thesis statement. Spend time forming your outline into logical supporting headings and subheadings with supporting points. The outline is the framework for the paper and if the outline restates the main points and subject of the thesis in more depth, you are one step closer to having a thoroughly developed paper or project.

4. Develop a Search Strategy

The search strategy is your plan of research.

- Decide what kind of information is needed (ie. surveys, news reports, essays, speeches, statistics, etc.), then determine which sources would be appropriate to find the type of information you need.
- Familiarize yourself with available resources so you will know which sources are best to consult for the information you seek.

5. Locate & Read the Information

Evaluate the information you find.

- Look at the author and publisher to determine if the source is reliable and reputable.
- Examine the author's perspective to determine if the information is objective and free of bias.
- Look at the content to determine if the information is appropriate.
- Look for illustrations, charts, and graphs that may support your thesis.
- TAKE NOTES; as you locate and read materials that may be useful, write down the bibliographic information (author, title, page #), so you can find the information again when you are ready to begin writing.
- You may paraphrase an author's wording and ideas in your paper, but you MUST acknowledge that the words and ideas belong to the author and cite the work in your bibliography. Be sure to always place quotation marks around wording that belongs to the author. Quotations are needed for authoritativeness. Always maintain the author's *intent*. Be sure when you paraphrase or take a quotation out of its original context that the meaning is not manipulated or distorted.

6. Write the text of the paper

- Follow your outline for paragraph development.
- Carefully select the words you will use. You want the *audience* to understand what you are writing.
- Use correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling; use spell check and grammar check, but know that these are NOT substitutions for proofreading. A word may be spelled correctly, but it could be the wrong word for the context. Grammar checkers are not always right.
- Use effective and clear sentence structure.
- Structure paragraphs logically.
- After writing, review, and revise as appropriate. It's a good idea to step away from your work for a while and return later with refreshed eyes.
- Have someone else read your work for an honest opinion and constructive criticism.

7. Document sources cited or consulted

- Consult style guides (MLA, APA, Turabian, etc.) to correctly format your citations and bibliography. If your instructor specifies a certain style, be sure to follow it.

Works consulted for creating the *RPCC Research Guide*:

O'Hagan, Mimi. "How to Build Your Writing Skills." AAP Student Service Booklet Series Oct. 1981:1-6.

Bolner, Myrtle, and Gayle A. Poirier. The Research Process: Books and Beyond, 3rd edition
Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 2004.