

How to Tackle a Research Paper Assignment

1. **Read the assignment.** Know and understand just what the instructor is looking for. FOLLOW DIRECTIONS. If there is one pet peeve all instructors have, it is students not following the directions of the assignment. If the assignment calls for a pickle with a cherry on top, put a cherry on a pickle and turn it in. If you're not sure just what the instructor is looking for, ask the instructor.

2. **Create a Word document for your sources and notes.** Name it with your last name, the class, and the name of the assignment. Save it to your My Documents folder within the folder you've made for that class. If you haven't yet made a folder for that class, you can do it while you're saving your document.

To create a folder as you save, click Save As, and within your My Documents folder, right click and choose new, then create a folder for the class. Double-click on that new folder, and THEN save the document with the name described above. Example: JohnsonHistory111RomePaper.doc.

3. **Read on the general subject of the assignment.** If it's a paper on the fall of the Roman Empire, read several things about the Roman Empire. If the assigned topic is more specific, such as the role of transportation in the fall of the Roman Empire, you can read specifically about that. However, don't be afraid to broaden your reading on a topic. You never know when something will be useful, or relate in an unexpected way.

Remember that the goal of a research paper isn't for you to open up a can of information and dump it into the paper. It is for you to read and absorb. Only by thinking your own thoughts can you make your own connections to the material.

4. **As you read, take notes.** Record the source for every text or idea that interests you. Put exact language in quotation marks so you will always know what language is not your own, and what ideas came from other people. For ALL sources, whether quoted or paraphrased, record the page numbers of the material. Don't focus too narrowly yet. Note anything that seems interesting, no matter how well it relates to your assignment or to anything else. Gather broadly now. Sift later.

Save preformatted citations for any source you find through EBSCOHost, and create your own citations for other sources. To build your own citations:

- Include all applicable publication information for your source:
 - the authors' first and last names,
 - the title,
 - title of databases you used,
 - the name of the book or website or journal (etc.),
 - the volume and issue numbers,
 - the page numbers,
 - the date of publication,
 - the date you accessed the source online,
 - The web addresses (URL). While web addresses are not always required, always keep these addresses in your notes so you can revisit the web sites when you need to.

5. **Think about your subject.** Noodle around with ideas. Apply your own opinion. Ask other people what they think, especially experts in that field. Most professors are happy to talk about their work, by phone or by email, as are journalists who write stories in newspapers and magazines. You can also interact simply by exploring more written sources and video interviews. What other opinions about that topic interest you, especially ones you disagree with?

6. **Create a thesis.** AFTER you've done some reading, thinking and exploring, have a point to make, one that really grabs you. If nothing grabs you, don't go any farther with the paper. Instead, go back into the reading and find something that fits the assignment that does grab you.

7. **PUT AWAY YOUR RESEARCH.** Yes, I said put away your research and start writing. This is your paper now. Use only those ideas and words from the sources that occur to you as you write, whether they are fresh in your mind or things you dimly recollect. Only go back to your research notes or to the original sources to correctly document any idea or text you want to use as an example or as support, and that you might have gotten elsewhere.

8. **State your argument in a single sentence.** When you're about halfway through your first draft, try and fit every major point you make in the paper into the flow of one sentence. If your paper is cohesive and makes a simple point, that sentence should be logical and persuasive.

As an example, here is a 59 page research report boiled down into a single sentence: A recent study by the Community College Research Center showed that high school grade point average is a better predictor of college performance than placement test scores or other high school transcript data.

If you can't write the paper's basic argument in a single sentence or two, you probably don't have a cohesive, simple thesis. A paper without a thesis is like a chicken without a head. It tends to squawk a lot and wander.

9. **Revise the paper and its core argument.** Do these until you feel good about the paper, then read it aloud to yourself or a friend, or better yet, have a friend read the paper aloud to you. The weak spots will stand out. Edit accordingly.