



Planning a Research Paper

Your job as a writer of a research paper is to ask a question, then answer it. You are explaining, arguing and analyzing a point of view, not merely giving information. In planning your paper, you move from a general idea of a topic to a question about that topic...why...what were the effects of...how does A compare to B...?

The writing process

For most people, the writing process has three parts: first is pre-writing, then the actual sitting down and typing, and then the finishing stages. The pre-writing and finishing stages usually take more time than the actual hours you spend writing.

In a research paper, the pre-writing stage is long, because you can't start writing until you've gathered your material. Pre-writing can include classroom discussions, conversations with friends and fellow students about your material, procrastinating in various ways, finding the source material you want to use, reading and evaluating your sources, and refining your topic.

Initial research

You begin with a very general topic for your research paper. You may not know much about the topic. Go with something you are interested in.

Use the library catalog and a library database appropriate for your discipline to do preliminary research. Generally, you will find lots of material, and you need to narrow it down. You may find, however, that not much has been written about your topic. In that case, you need to consult with a reference librarian or your instructor about finding sufficient material.

Skim articles and books. Read just the abstract or first paragraph. You only need to identify possible sources. You can read relevant material in depth later.

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Planning continued

Express your topic in terms of key words and phrases

Now you need to identify a small, focused area to concentrate your paper on. Suppose you want to write about mining accidents. Write down key words and phrases that help you narrow one aspect for your research paper.

Mining Accidents

prevention
survivors

environmental effects
women and children

government response
company policies

Turn key words into questions

Choose one of the key words or phrases that seems to interest you most, or that you have the best source material on. Rephrase it as a question.

How did company policies contribute to mining accidents?
How did company policies change after mining accidents?
How did miners' families influence company policies regarding accidents?

Once you've picked a question to answer, you have defined your job as a writer.

You still need to narrow the scope. Will you write about one specific mining accident, or accidents in one area or at one point in time? Maybe you will compare several different accidents. Now is the time to read your material in-depth. You need good background material, and material that relates specifically to your question. How you narrow your topic may depend on what kind of material you find. You can begin writing now, though you may need to do more research as you go.

“Your role is to investigate, explain, defend, and argue the issue at hand with proper citations.” (Lester, Writing Research Papers)

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