The Research Process

Topic Selection

Selecting a topic for a research paper or project can be challenging.

You will want to select a topic that is of interest to you. This will make the research, reading, and writing less of a chore. But you will also want to choose a topic that has sufficient source material. If you need to write a 10 page paper and select an event that just happened last week, there won't be enough material to learn from. It is a good idea to wait to decide on a topic until you do some preliminary searching for books, articles, and Web-based resources. If you can't find enough, you will want the flexibility to select a new topic.

*REMEMBER: Librarians can help you with this preliminary searching!*

Thesis Statement

This is the focus for the research paper or project. You will want to make your topic manageable in scope. So, rather than selecting 'rock music' as a topic for your paper, you would develop a thesis or assertion about rock music. Examples of thesis statements are:

- Rock music had a profound effect on the relations between parents and teenage children in the 1960s (for a sociology class)
- Rock music was a driving force in the expansion of record production companies (for a business class)
- Rock music played loud and long has a negative effect on hearing (for a science class)

A thesis statement such as those above will help you to whittle down the number of resources you will need to look at, and a thesis will provide a focus. Once you do the research, you will be in a position to prove or disprove your initial statement. Take a look at The Research Room on *The Writer's Complex Web* page. (http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/home)

Finding Sources and Materials

When you start to look for materials on your topic, as defined by your thesis statement, you might find you need to know more about the general subject area, or specific parts of it. The University Libraries provide a wide variety of reference books, both in print and online, that will help you get a handle on your topic and the concepts involved. If you need assistance in finding overview material, ask a reference librarian to steer you in the right direction.
Creating an Outline

Some students find that organizing their thoughts by using an outline helps them to structure their paper. You may have used outlines when you were in grade school or high school. An outline includes headings and subheadings for each section of the paper. Here is a short example:

Rock Music's Effect on Hearing

I. Introduction

II. Background on hearing

   A. How hearing works

   B. Decibels

      1. Decibel levels of various noises

III. Rock music and decibels

   A. Concert/home/car levels/mp3-player levels

   B. Room size

   C. Speaker size

IV. Scientific studies

   A. Those supporting hearing loss

   B. Those seeing no connection between rock and hearing loss

V. Summary and Conclusions
Writing a Draft

You can use your outline to write a draft version of your paper. Even if you don't develop an outline first, you should still write a draft. The first version of your paper will not be your last! You should consider asking your professor to read your draft, so that you have time to make changes before you get a grade. You might also ask friends or your roommate to read the draft. They can tell you what is and isn't clear, what needs more information, where your logic might be faulty, etc. You may still be reading additional sources as you write your draft, and you will need to incorporate additional information into your paper. Take a look at Essay Writing and Building the Essay Draft Web page at (http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/home).

Remember, the Writing Center staff is available to help you with your writing projects. More information is available on their Web page at (http://www.albany.edu/writing).

Final Version

It is a good idea to put your draft paper aside for a day before you start working on the final version. You will look at it with fresh eyes and catch problems you might otherwise miss. Proofread your paper not only for spelling and grammar mistakes, but also for logic and flow.

- Did you develop your central idea adequately?
- Is each paragraph satisfactorily developed?
- Are the transitions between paragraphs and sections logical?
- Are you assuming knowledge on the part of the reader?
- Do you need to explain concepts or theories, or clarify sections of your writing?
- Did you follow your professor’s instructions for formatting a paper?

Remember to use the spell check feature of your word processor, but also double-check by reading your paper carefully. Spell check doesn't catch everything! Don't forget to cite your sources! When you paraphrase an author or quote an author directly, you MUST credit the source. You must also cite another person's work if you use his or her ideas, information, data, evidence, or style of presentation. When in doubt, CITE! If you have any questions about whether you need to provide a citation, check with your professor.

Your professor will probably require a certain style to follow, such as APA, MLA, or Chicago styles. These will show you how to include footnotes or text references to materials you relied upon. There are even directions for citing electronic resources, such as Web pages. You will also want to include a bibliography or list of sources.

IF YOU DO NOT CITE YOUR SOURCES,
YOU ARE PLAGIARIZING THE WORK OF OTHERS
THIS IS A SERIOUS ACADEMIC OFFENSE
AND A VIOLATION OF UNIVERSITY REGULATIONS!

Use CitationFox APA or CitationFox MLA to properly cite resources.
Two good books to consult for more information on writing research papers are: