

Procedure for Writing a Term Paper

A term (or research) paper is primarily a record of intelligent reading in several sources on a particular subject. The task of writing such is not as formidable as it seems if it is thought out in advance as a definite procedure with systematic preparation for the job.

The procedure for writing such a report consists of the following six steps:

- I. Choosing a subject***
- II. Finding Sources of materials***
- III. Gathering the notes***
- IV. Outlining the paper***
- V. Writing the first draft***
- VI. Editing the paper***

Now let's look at each of them.

I. Choosing a subject

Most good papers are built around questions. You can find subjects in any textbook. Simply take some part of the text that interests you and examine it carefully. Ask yourself the following things about it to see if you can locate a question to answer in your paper. Does it tell you all you might wish to learn about the subject? Are you sure it is accurate? Does the author make any assumptions that need examining? Can two of the more interesting sections in the text be shown to be interrelated in some useful way? Your paper is an attempt to write a well-organized answer to whatever question you decide upon, using facts for the purpose of proving (or at least supporting) your contention.

The most common error made by students in choosing a subject for a term paper is to choose one that is too general. A subject must be quite specific to be adequately treated in a short paper. The most specific subject will always have enough aspects to furnish a longer paper, if you think about it for a while.

II. Finding sources of materials

- A. Limitations. Tradition suggests that you limit your sources to those available on the campus and to those materials which are not more than 20 years old, unless the nature of the appear is such that you are examining older writings from an historical point of view.
- B. Guides to sources:
 1. Begin by making a list of subject-headings under which you might expect the subject to be listed
 2. Start a card file using the following forms:

Sample bibliography card for a book

Subject: Propaganda - History
Author: Jones, James Allen

Title: American History and Propaganda
Facts of
Publication: N.Y., Rutledge Press, 1999
Lib. Call #: HI 267.3B

Sample bibliography card for a new a magazine article

Subject: Propaganda – Memory
Author: Erskine, Peter Samuel
Title: “Memory of Emotionally Loaded Words vs. Neutral Words”
Facts of
Publication: J. of Elem. Psych., Oct. 2003, vol. 23, pp. 83-89
Lib. Call #: 230.8 AT62

Sample bibliography card for a new story

Subject: Propaganda – Cost
Facts of
Publication: New York Times, April 21, 2001, p.1
Headline: “Proposed Budget for Voice of America Doubled”

For periodicals, record author, title, name of periodical, volume and page number, month and year.

Sort these cards into books and each volume of periodicals. Then look up call numbers of the periodicals and sort out those for each branch library. This sorting saves library time.

If the list looks very big at this point, reduce the generality of your paper further. Take one main division of it as your subject. However, remember that several of the references you have will be discarded when you see the actual material and you may not have too much useful material even if you have a large working bibliography.

3. Consult the card catalog in the library to locate books. Record author, title, publisher, date of publication and call number.
4. Consult guides to periodical such as Education Index, Readers Guide, International Index to Periodicals, and Psychological Abstracts. These are aids to finding articles on any subject. They list subject headings with various titles of articles under them, together with the location of each article.

III. *Gathering Notes*

- A. Examine the books and articles – several volumes at a time will save steps. Skim through your sources locating the useful material, then make good notes on it, including quotes and information for footnotes. You do not want to have to go back

to these sources again. Make these notes on separate cards for each author – identifying them by the author.

- B. Take care in note-taking by being accurate and honest. Be sure that you do not distort the author's meanings. Remember that you not only want to collect those things that will support your thesis but other facts or opinions as well. The reader wants to know other sides of the question.
- C. Get the right kind of material.
 - 1. Get facts, not just opinions. Compare the facts with the authors' conclusions.
 - 2. In research studies, notice the methods and procedures and do not be afraid to criticize them. If the information is not quantitative in a study, point out the need for objective, quantified, well-controlled research.

IV. *Outlining the Paper*

- A. Do not hurry into writing. Think over again what your subject and purpose are, and what kind of material you have found.
- B. Review notes to find main subdivisions of your subject. Sort the cards into natural groups, then try to name each group. Use these names for main divisions in your outline. For example, you may be writing a paper about the voice of America, and you have the following subject headings on your cards:
 - 1. Propaganda – American (History)
 - 2. Voice of America – funds appropriated
 - 3. Voice of America – expenditures
 - 4. Voice of America – cost compared with Soviet propaganda
 - 5. Voice of America – statement of purpose
 - 6. Voice of America – structure and organization
 - 7. Voice of America – offices and duties
 - 8. Voice of America – effect on Soviet people
 - 9. Voice of America – plans for the future

The above could be sorted into six piles easily, furnishing the following headings:

- 1. History (card 1)
- 2. Purpose (card 5)
- 3. Organization (card 6 & 7)
- 4. Cost (card 2,3,4 & 9)
- 5. Effects (card 8)
- 6. Future (card 10)

You will have more cards than in the example above. At this point you can possibly narrow down your subject further by taking out one of the piles of cards.

- C. Sort the cards again under each main division to find subsections for your outline.
- D. By this time it should begin to look more coherent and to take on a definite structure. If it does not, try going back and sorting again for main divisions to see if another general pattern is possible.
- E. You may want to indicate the parts of your outline in the traditional form as follows:

- I.
 - A.
 - 1.
 - a.
 - 1)

Use these designations only in the outline and not in the paper itself, or it will look more like an extended outline than a paper.

V. Writing the First Draft

You are now ready to write!

- A. Write the paper around the outline, being sure that you indicate in the first part of the paper what its purpose is. Follow the old formula:
 - 1. Tell the reader what you are going to say (statement of purpose)
 - 2. Say it (main body of paper)
 - 3. Tell the reader what you've said (statement of summary and conclusions)
- B. A word about composition:
 - 1. Traditionally, any headings or subheadings include nouns, not verbs or phrases
 - 2. Keep things together that belong together. Your outline will help you do this if it is well organized. Be sure you don't change the subject in the middle of a paragraph, and be sure that everything under one heading in your outline is about the same general topic
 - 3. Avoid short, bumpy sentences and long, straggling sentences with more than one main idea.
- C. This is the time to decide upon the title of the paper.

VI. Editing the Paper

You are now ready to polish up the first draft!

- A. Try to read it as if it were cold and unfamiliar to you. It is a good idea to do this a day or two after having written the first draft.
- B. Rereading the paper aloud is a good way to be sure that the language is not awkward, and that it "flows" properly.
- C. Check for proper spelling, phrasing, and sentence construction. Be sure that pronouns clearly refer to nouns. For example: "Labor believes in a guaranteed annual way while management is opposed." The fact clearly indicates that this position is unwise.
- D. Check for proper form on footnotes, quotes and punctuation.
- E. Check to see that quotations serve one of the following purposes:
 - 1. Show evidence of what an author has said.
 - 2. Avoid misrepresentation through restatement.
 - 3. Save unnecessary writing when ideas have been well expressed by the original author.
- F. Check for proper form on tables and graphs. Be certain that any table or graph is self-explanatory.