

# KEY POINTS FOR A RESEARCH PAPER

- I.** Understand the Assignment
  - A.** What kind of paper are you to write? (A review of literature, original research, critique, etc...)
  - B.** What kind of approach is expected? (reading and note-taking or experimentation)
  - C.** Depth and breadth of coverage? (broad survey or a narrow, intense study)
  - D.** What materials are you to use? (journal, periodicals, primary and secondary sources, laboratory)
  - E.** What format does your professor require? (varies with academic discipline)
  - F.** Assignment specifies? (purpose, nature, scope of paper; and the special limits of the paper, such as length, date due, typed or hand written)
- II.** Six Factors Influencing your Grade
  - A.** Appearance (neatness, legibility, etc.)
  - B.** Organization (coherence, logical and effective presentation)
  - C.** Originality (uniqueness of approach, self-expression, own ideas)
  - D.** Variety (comprehensive coverage, types and number of references)
  - E.** Mechanics (absence of grammar, spelling, punctuation errors)
  - F.** Format (proper documentation, bibliography, etc.)
- III.** Points to keep in mind on Paper, Paragraph, and Thesis Structure
  - A.** You should make your points by adding examples.
  - B.** In most cases, your writing will be more effective if you work from the general to the specific or the abstract to the concrete.
  - C.** Most paragraphs can be thought of as a topic-restriction-illustration pattern. The first sentence is a statement of the topic (general), the next is a restriction of the topic (more focused), and then the restriction is supported by illustrations (specifics).
  - D.** Thesis statements also follow the rule of different levels of generality. Good thesis statements often involve mentioning the subject twice on two levels of generality. The second level is a restriction of the first. For example: Odysseus (1st level of generality) because he (2nd mention of the subject) is resourceful, wily, and able to survive any test of the gods (2nd level of generality and a restriction of the 1st). Now the remainder of the paragraph and paper can explore illustrations to support the thesis statement.
  - E.** Know your audience. Imagine accurately what your audience (reader) needs to know and what effect your writing will have on your reader.
- IV.** Choosing a Topic
  - A.** Choose a topic that really interests you (within the limits/choices your instructor has set). Make sure it is neither too trivial nor too broad.
  - B.** Scan the literature to help you decide on a topic. Make sure the topic you've chosen has a variety of available resources.

**V. Collecting Information**

- A.** Prepare a brief, precise statement defining the objective and scope of your paper. This will help you focus on information pertaining to your topic. It can also be your initial thesis statement.
- B.** Use card catalogs, indexes, abstracts, and guides to build up a comprehensive bibliography of references. Tradition suggests that you limit your sources to those not more than 20 years old, unless the nature of your paper is such that you are examining older writings from an historical point of view or unless the author of an older text is clearly still considered an authority on the material.
- C.** Survey each book or article on your list to determine whether or not it contains the kind of information you want.
- D.** Take brief, accurate, pertinent, usable, readable notes in your own words (preferably). Be sure to indicate wording of another author with quotation marks. Be sure to identify in your notes bibliographic information for your sources so you will not have to check back later. Write down facts and opinions. Get all sides of the argument over your subject. Be objective in your review of research studies.
- E.** Take notes down in the form easiest for you to use. Many prefer note cards to ruled paper. Use of a separate card for each major idea (with the source on the back) allows you to rearrange ideas later when you get to the organizing stage.
- F.** Check the bibliographers listed at the end of the books and articles you are using for further sources of information.
- G.** Keep an “idea page” for jotting down possible sources of information as well as possible approaches for your paper, illustrations to be included, etc.

**VI. Organizing Your Information**

- A.** Review your initial thesis statement. Modify it, if necessary, according to the information and knowledge you’ve gathered. Be sure you have adequate information to support your direction. Formulate a statement which expresses the point of view you wish to express and support. It should indicate the major points you’ll be covering as well as help you organize the content of your paper.
- B.** Read through your note cards and sort them according to whatever categories seem logical to you.
- C.** Scan the cards in each pile to determine what appears to be the central theme for that group. Organize each pile into the most logical sequence, eliminating duplications and irrelevancies that you discover.
- D.** Arrange the piles into the most appropriate order to achieve the best possible presentation of your major ideas. Number each card in order according to the arrangement.
- E.** Prepare a detailed outline from your organized cards. Keep the outline simple and direct.

## **VII. Writing the First Draft**

- A.** With reference to your outline, begin writing spontaneously your thoughts and ideas in an organized manner. Keep in mind the old formula:
  - 1.** statement of purpose: tell the reader what you're going to say.
  - 2.** main body of the paper: say it
  - 3.** summary and conclusion: tell the reader what you've said.
- B.** Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, etc. at this stage.
- C.** Stick to the point, avoid digression. State each major idea quickly and then develop it through examples and explanations.
- D.** Include concrete examples, illustrations, and factual details to back up your generalizations.
- E.** Criticize, evaluate, illustrate, attack, or defend where appropriate to your topic. Show you've been thinking.
- F.** As you write, indicate your information source (by # of card or author's name) in the margin beside ideas. You can return later to complete the documenting of your references.
- G.** Unless your professor has specified otherwise, be sure to introduce quotations and show how they fit in with your position. Don't use them as filler.
- H.** Leave plenty of room for correcting and editing.

## **VIII. Revising your Rough Draft**

- A.** After taking a break from writing the first draft, approach your paper as if it were unfamiliar to you.
- B.** Read it out loud to check for flow and awkward language. Read for clarity and logical progression and smooth transitions.
- C.** Find alternate words for ones you are using too often (check a Thesaurus).
- D.** Check for mechanical errors such as misspelled words, inaccurate punctuation, incorrect grammar, etc.
- E.** Watch carefully to prevent plagiarism. Be absolutely certain that your documentation gives full credit for all materials used not only in quotations but in paraphrased form.
- F.** Revise and polish your tentative draft for final typing.

## **IX. Preparing the Finished Report**

- A.** Type the final version of your report. Double space and allow for proper margins.
- B.** Follow the exact format prescribed by your instructor for the title page, bibliography and documentation. This may vary from course to course, so be sure to check if you're in doubt.
- C.** Double check your documentation against your alphabetized bibliography. Make certain that all of your documentation is accurately tied to the references listed in your bibliography.
- D.** After typing, be sure to proofread for typos and other errors.
- E.** Hand your paper in!!

Information for this handout was taken from:

*Preliminary Steps in Writing a Research Paper*, Appalachian State University; Boone, North Carolina.  
*The Common Freshman Prologue to the Liberal Arts*, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.  
*Student's Guides to Effective Study*, Wm. Brown, Southwest Texas State University.