

Writing a Research Paper



Liberty University Center for Writing and Languages

Writing a Research Paper

- Choosing Your Topic
 - Narrowing Your Topic
- Writing a Thesis Statement
- Creating an Outline

Choosing Your Topic



Choosing Your Topic

- **Breadth.** You may need to start broad and let your research take you narrower.
- **Originality.** Choose a topic that will allow you to contribute to the field, rather than just regurgitate facts.
- **Sources.** On the other hand, also choose a topic that has scholarly grounding.

Narrowing Your Topic

- **Focus on a specific TYPE or CLASS**
- **Focus on a particular PLACE or REGION**
- **Focus on a certain TIME PERIOD**
- **Focus on a certain ASPECT**
 - Social, legal, medical, ethical, biological, psychological, economic, political, philosophical, etc.
- **Focus on a specific POPULATION**
 - Gender, age, occupation, ethnicity, nationality, educational attainment, species, etc.
- **Focus on a RELATIONSHIP with two or more topics**
- **COMBINE different kinds of focuses**

Narrowing Your Topic

Tips: Use journalistic questions: who?, what?, when?, where?, why?

Review recent literature (journals, trade papers, etc.)

Recall questions asked in class.

Apply your paper to your career goals.

Talk to your professor.



THESIS STATEMENT

- The thesis statement is like an outline in miniature. It is a “roadmap” for the rest of the paper.
- A typical thesis statement gives brief mention to each of the paper’s main points, and it also states the overall argument the writer wishes to make.
- It directly answers the question asked of you.
- It makes a claim that others might dispute.
- It is usually a single sentence near the end of the first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader.

IDENTIFYING A STRONG THESIS STATEMENT

- Do I answer the question?
- Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?
- Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?
- Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?
- Does my thesis pass the "how and why?" test?

THESIS STATEMENT EXAMPLES

Essay Topic: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War.

- Poor Example: *“The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.”*
- Better Example: *“While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.”*
- Best Example: *“While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.”*

THESIS STATEMENT EXAMPLES

Essay Topic: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain's novel Huckleberry Finn.

- Poor Example: “*Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.*”
- Better Example: “*In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.*”
- Best Example: “*Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.*”

The Writing Process

1. Outline
2. Draft
3. Revise
4. Edit



Benefits of an Outline

- Aids in the process of writing
- Helps you organize your ideas
- Presents your material in a logical form
- Shows the relationships among ideas in your writing
- Constructs an ordered overview of your writing
- Defines boundaries and groups
- Prevents you from “straying” from the topic

Creating an Outline

- **Research:** Perform initial research to learn about your chosen topic.
- **Brainstorm:** List all the ideas that you want to include in your paper.
- **Organize:** Group related ideas together.
- **Order:** Arrange material in subsections from general to specific or from abstract to concrete.
- **Label:** Create main and sub headings.

Outline Tips

- **Begin early!** A strong, detailed outline is a crucial step of the writing process.
- **Refer to your outline often.** A strong outline provides a consistent backbone during the writing process.
- **Be as specific as possible.** This will be your guide throughout the entire writing process.

Outline Tips

- **Avoid having too many subheadings.** This may indicate that you can further narrow the topic of your paper.
- **Don't be afraid to change your outline.** Further research may provide additional information or counterpoints.
- **Allow yourself enough time to make changes.** Attempting a complete overhaul of your paper the night before it's due is both frustrating and often futile.

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