How To Write A Research Paper
Part 2: Writing

Step One: Have a Plan, Know the Rules

1. **The Outline.** Remember the outline you used to focus your research? Before you begin writing, go back to the research outline and revise it. Make it your writing outline. Organize your research and thoughts and put them in order with a detailed outline that maps the sequence you’ll be using to present your ideas. Time spent thinking about and constructing a focused outline will make your writing focused.

2. **All Papers Should Be Typed.** Whether you are writing two-page paper or a ten-page paper, it should be typed and printed from a computer. Unless your instructor specifically asks for a hand-written response, you should assume that all written work should be typed. Not typed in Note Pad or Word Pad, but typed using MS Word or a comparable word processing program that allows you to format correctly.

3. **Formatting Details: Margins, Spacing, etc.** If your instructor gives you specific formatting instructions, follow those. If not, use one inch margins, a standard font such as Times New Roman, and a standard font size, such as 12. Double space. Do not use unusual fonts. Do not italicize the text of your paper. Do not use a font or formatting that is cute or fancy or difficult to read.

4. **Using Style Books.** If you haven’t written a paper in a long time, or if you’ve never written a paper, you may want to consult a style book about the writing process. The QV Library – or any library – has handbooks that can go beyond the scope of this handout and can help you think about how you should write your paper.

Step Two: What Should the Paper Look Like?

1. **The Title Page.** The format of the title page may be specified by your instructor. If it isn’t specified, there is no “correct” format. Typically, a title page should contain: 1) the title of your paper, usually centered; 2) your name; 3) the date; 4) the name of the class. The title page does not count as a page: if you need a five-page paper, don’t count the title page as one of the five.

2. **The Thesis Statement and Introduction.** The thesis statement should concisely define what your paper is about, in a single opening sentence or question. Typically, the thesis statement will be the first sentence in your first paragraph of introduction. The introduction is the first part of your paper. It may be a paragraph or several paragraphs. The introduction expands on the thesis statement and introduces your topic more fully. It gets your reader interested in the story you want to tell about your topic. How long the introduction is depends on the size of the paper and the topic being discussed. Longer papers or bigger topics require longer introductions.

3. **The Body of the Paper.** This is the meat and potatoes of your paper and the longest part. This is where you detail what you know about your topic, what you’ve learned about your topic, and the evidence you have found relating to your topic. The body of the paper tells the story of your topic. It should not jump around without sequence. The paragraphs should be written in a logical, understandable series, with each paragraph clearly related to the one before. Write in your own words as much as possible. Keep direct quotations to a minimum.

4. **The Conclusion.** This is the part of the paper that wraps things up. You’ve told the story, now you need closure. What are the main points from your paper that you want to emphasize and comment on? What can you conclude or speculate about your thesis? Has writing the paper changed your thinking? What has the paper accomplished? Like the introduction, the length of the conclusion depends on how long your overall paper is and how complex your thesis. It should be at least one paragraph and may be several.

5. **Citations in the Text.** Information gleaned from your research that is unique (not common knowledge) must be cited, whether you are directly quoting or whether you are putting a fact or idea in your own words. Read the brief instructions following “Citing Sources in the Body of Your Paper” on the appropriate QV Library “Citing Your Sources” handout. Since in-text citations always refer to the citations on the Works Cited page (MLA) or References page (APA) or Bibliography (Chicago/Turabian), you may want to construct this page first, so you can easily incorporate in-text citations as you write. If you have questions about in-text citations, consult your instructor or learning center staff or library staff.
6. **Works Cited.** The Works Cited (or References or Bibliography) page comes at the end of your paper. It contains the alphabetical list of carefully constructed citations for all the sources you used in your paper. Writing citations is harder than it looks. If you are using one of the QV Library’s “Citing Your Sources” handouts, find an example that corresponds with the source being cited and follow it meticulously. If you have questions about writing citations or need to cite something not on the handout, see library staff. The Works Cited page does not count as a page: if you need a five-page paper, the Works Cited page is not one of the five, even if you number it.

**Step Three: How Should the Paper Sound?**

1. **Formal Writing vs. Informal Conversation/E-Mail/etc.** Research papers use more formal language than everyday conversation or e-mail. Avoid slang. Avoid overuse of contractions. Avoid using the first and second person. Avoiding the first person means not referring to yourself with “I” or “we.” Avoiding the second person means not addressing the reader directly with “you.” Instead, write in the third person, using “he,” “she,” “it,” and “they.” Pay attention to grammar. Are you using verbs with the same consistent tense? If you start writing in the past tense, don’t inadvertently slip into the present tense.

Pay attention to how you construct your writing. Make sure that your paragraphs make sense, and that they flow together. Flow means that each paragraph makes a clear transition to the next paragraph. Make sure that you maintain a formal tone—don’t be tempted to step out of your formal writing mode to make a side comment. You may think something is ridiculous or someone is an idiot, but you should express yourself objectively and with a formal tone.

If you aren’t sure about whether a sentence you’ve written is constructed correctly, read it aloud. Sometimes it’s easier to hear a grammar mistake than see one. If you’re not sure if a paragraph makes sense or flows well, read it aloud. Same principle.

2. **The Importance of Spelling/The Dangers of Spell Check.** By all means, use Spell Check. It will help you spot spelling errors that produce a non-word. But beware that Spell Check does not spot spelling errors that involve the misuse of correctly-spelled words. For example, if you mean “there” and write “their” Spell Check won’t catch it, because it’s not a misspelling, it’s a misuse. Your instructor will spot it, however. The answer is to use Spell Check but also proofread for misused words, misused verbs, and other grammatical errors. Most people find it easier to proof-read and spot errors on a printed copy. Proof-reading from a computer screen is usually less accurate.

**Step Four: The Writing Process**

1. **Give Yourself Enough Time To Write the Best Possible Paper.** All of the suggestions below require time. If you don’t start your paper until it’s almost due, you won’t have time to do the writing and re-writing necessary to produce the best paper. Try to get the first draft of your paper done at least a week or two before it’s due.

2. **The First Draft.** Organize your research, consult your outline, take a deep breath, and start writing. Start writing, then keep writing. Don’t let yourself be blocked by that terrifyingly blank page on the computer screen. Write. Keep plowing ahead and writing until you have a draft. If you have to stop, save your work and get back to writing as soon as possible. Consult your outline again. Think. Plunge back into writing. When you have a complete draft, with a beginning, middle, and end, stop. Put the draft aside for a day or so. Do something else. Clear your head.

3. **Proofreading for Fun and Profit.** Once you have a complete first draft, and have put it aside for awhile, the next step is re-reading and proofreading. As you re-read the draft, look for weaknesses: spelling errors; poor construction of paragraphs or sentences; weak transitions between paragraphs; lack of clarity; lack of focus; incorrect citations, etc. Be brutal. You may end up re-writing most of your paper, but re-writing is the best way to make your writing stronger.

4. **Have Someone Else Read the Second Draft.** Now that you’ve sweated and agonized over two drafts of your paper, you need a fresh perspective. Have a tutor (preferably) or friend or even a relative read the paper and make suggestions to improve it. You may or may not take their advice, but having a fresh set of eyes critique your paper helps you see it from a different perspective. Think about the suggestions, re-read your paper again, and re-write.

5. **Proofreading Again.** Don’t forget to re-proofread as you’re re-reading. There’s always another mistake to find, and if you don’t find it your instructor will. Double check those citations while you’re at it.

6. **Have the Paper Read by Someone Else Again.** Now you have a third draft and it should be much stronger than your first draft. Have another fresh set of eyes read the third draft and tell you just how close to perfect it really is. Think about the new suggestions you’ll be given. Consider further tweaking to make your paper even better.

7. **Turn It In, Get It Back.** Don’t be surprised if the perfect paper you turn in turns out not to be completely perfect. Your instructor will probably find some new mistakes or have some new suggestions. Don’t take it personally. That’s what instructors are supposed to do. Ask if you can turn in a corrected version. Learn from your mistakes, so your future writing will be better.