An Overview: Take it One Step at a Time

A large research project can seem so overwhelming that some students procrastinate, then panic. But if you begin early and break it down into manageable steps and stages, you can survive even the most challenging project! If you start with a topic you like, you'll be motivated to do research and make discoveries. The more material you have, the easier it is to focus and organize it. Then you're less likely to face “writer's block.” Finally, the more time you take to revise, edit, and proofread, the more polished your final paper will be.

Successful writers usually do five things:
EXPLORE * ORGANIZE * COMPOSE * REVISE * EDIT
(See handout, The Research Paper: A Writing Process.)

A student who wanted to break down their research project into manageable stages might take a lot of smaller steps that would lead he/she steadily to the goal of the final paper.

Step by Step

a) solid topic idea (approved)
b) list of questions
c) list of sources (library and live)
d) basic question or a tentative thesis
e) notes, either quoted or paraphrased/summarized information
f) notes with your own ideas/response to what you've learned
g) flexible outline or writing plan (may evolve as you write)
h) first draft of an opening, with thesis
i) first draft of a whole paper
j) feedback from a reader on the first draft
k) plan for revising your first draft (research/writing)
l) first draft of an ending and title
m) second draft (content OK, but needs documentation/editing)
n) final paper, typed and proofread, in correct format

1. FIRST, DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE ASSIGNMENT?

Talk to your professor if you have any questions, especially if there is no written handout. Ask about guidelines for topic, sources, length, and documentation. Share an early topic idea. (This will save heartache much later if your topic is weak).
2. WHY ARE YOU WRITING THIS PAPER?

And I'm not talking about just getting a grade. As a researcher, thinker and writer, you'll gradually figure out what you're trying to say in this paper and what you're trying to get your audience to think, feel, or do. The PURPOSE of a research paper is usually to inform and to explain by combining outside material with your own thesis and ideas.

3. WHO ARE YOU WRITING IT FOR?

Think of your paper as a way to share your investigation with a specific AUDIENCE: your professor and classmates, who are interested in that subject and your discoveries about it. (It can also help to discuss topics, plans, or an early draft with a general reader, someone in the Learning Center.) Ultimately, you're doing it for yourself and learning a lot in the process!

4. CHOOSE A TOPIC YOU WANT TO EXPLORE

Don't work with a topic that doesn't interest you. If topic is assigned, try to connect it to another topic or idea that intrigues you. Do some initial research to see if there's enough information available. Try to narrow your topic to a specific FOCUS, as concrete as possible. Sample topic: journalism. Focus: how two Boston newspapers covered the OJ Simpson trial during the same week. (See handout, Topic Proposal.)

5. ASK LOTS OF QUESTIONS

Jot down 5-10 initial questions you have about your topic, and some your professor/classmates might have. Don't forget to ask the obvious: who, what, when, where, why, and how? For each question, try to come up with a few specific sub questions. This early list of questions can guide your research, help you to form a focus and THESIS QUESTION, and help organize your paper. (See handout, Writing Plan.)

6. MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE LIBRARY

If you haven't been introduced to the Brennan Library's computer systems or paper indexes yet, here's your chance. Books, newspapers, periodicals, journals, and other library sources are still your best place to begin research. If you can't find it at Lasell, you can check the Minuteman online catalogue, which has a million items you can borrow from 24 other libraries in the Minuteman Library Network. A word about librarians: ask them, and they'll be glad to help you!

7. OTHER SOURCES CAN ADD SOME "LIFE"

You can add variety, interest, and a "live" feeling to your investigation by leaving the library and tapping other sources: media --radio, television, film, video, etc. performances --concerts, theater, lectures, exhibits, etc. interviews --ask an expert to share his view of your topic surveys --poll the public that's affected by your topic government agencies --brochures, toll-free hotlines, etc. organizations --special interest groups have meetings, pamphlets, observation/experimentation --conduct your own field
8. HOW TO AVOID PLAGIARISM

When you are taking notes, always write down complete source information for your List of Works Cited. Label your notes to distinguish between: 1) Quotes -- someone else's exact words enclosed in " " 2) Paraphrases -- someone else's ideas, but put into your own words and 3) Your ideas. All quotes and paraphrases must be credited to the original source. Again, IF YOU BORROW THE IDEA, EVEN IF YOU PUT IT INTO YOUR OWN WORDS, YOU STILL NEED TO GIVE CREDIT. (See handouts a) Plagiarism: How to Avoid "Idea Theft" and b) Documentation: Citations and Bibliography.)

9. HOW TO COME UP WITH YOUR OWN IDEAS

Your purpose is to prove your thesis or answer the basic question you have raised. Each of your ideas helps the reader to interpret the research you present as evidence. To generate ideas: Respond to a quote or a striking fact. Explain the "why" and the "how" of your topic. Ask intelligent questions. Get beyond your "gut reaction" to your informed opinion, now that you've learned more. Describe something you've observed. Relate a relevant personal experience. Sum up the ideas and information you've presented and then interpret them. Connect, compare, and evaluate different parts of the topic you've explored. Offer a fresh approach to an old idea (See the Cubing handout).

10. SHARE YOUR IDEAS AND PLANS AS YOU GO

You certainly will want to discuss your topic and early plans with your professor and a librarian, to get you started on the right track. As you move through your research and begin to develop an outline and thesis, you may want to discuss your approach with someone (Learning Center staffer, classmate, friend, professor). You also might share a first draft with an interested reader and get some constructive criticism. (See handout, Responding to a Draft.)

11. SOME FORMAT TIPS FOR THE FINAL PAPER

Should be typed, double-spaced, with standard 1-inch margins. Always keep a hard (paper) copy of it, even if you have it stored on disk. Do a separate title page, with a centered title which is an interesting, specific phrase presenting your narrow topic and something you want to say about it. Put other information at the bottom: your name, course number, date, and instructor. Proofread paper carefully; don't rely on spell-check alone. Don't hand in computer paper with holes and folds still in it; staple the pages at top left corner. Make sure your source references (author, page) in the text match the first word of each entry in your List of Works Cited, which should be your last printed page.

Prepared By: Mary S. Pool for Lasell College Academic Achievement Center