Writing a Research Paper

This handout provides general steps for writing a research paper.

Introduction
Writing a research paper is a process that starts with a topic and ends with a paper ready to be handed in.

Define your topic.
Do you have a specific topic that you must write about or did your professor leave it open? If you have a specific topic then you must write about that. If you have more options about a topic, then think about what interests you or what you would want to read about.

Note: Select a topic that you are interested in because you may be researching and writing about this for several weeks or the entire semester.

Get an overview of your topic.
To get background information about your selected topic, use encyclopedias, either general or subject specific. These will provide you with basic information about your topic and may help you further define what you will write about.

Where should you begin?
Before using any database or catalog to find information about your topic, stop and think about what words describe your topic:
- Find unique terms that may help narrow your search.
- Think of other words that people may use for the same idea you are working on.
- Use Boolean operators (AND/OR/NOT), truncation, and phrase searching.
- If you don’t find anything relevant, broaden your search terms.

Find Books, Articles, and Web sites about your topic.
Once you have defined your keywords, you can look for books, articles, and web sites that may have relevant information.

Books – Use the Lewis J. Ort Library Catalog to find books relevant to your topic.

Note: You can also order items from other University of Maryland campuses or through Interlibrary Loan.

Articles – Search for articles using subject specific databases (which may contain full-text articles)
Note: If an article you are interested in is not available either electronically or in print from the library, you can order it via Interlibrary Loan.

Note: If you have a specific article you are looking for, you can use Citation Linker to see if the library has the article in print or electronically.

Web sites – Your professor may allow you to use web sites that have been critically evaluated (by yourself or professor) in your research.

Steps to think about when you evaluate a web site:
1. Is the website current? (Currency)
2. Who is the author? (Authority)
3. Is the information accurate? (Accuracy)
4. Is the topic covered thoroughly? (Coverage)
5. Is the web site relevant to your topic? (Relevancy)
6. Finally, does the information from the web site complement the information you already have?

Note: You should always look for other information sources for your paper and not rely solely on information from a web site.

Additional Note: Remember to check with your professor to see if using information from web sites is allowed.

Also: Once you have chosen information from a web site, make sure you print out the web page. This will provide you with the web site (to refer back to later) and will help you complete your works cited page.

You are now ready to write your paper.
You have gathered all your information; you have completed your research, now you can write your paper. There are many ways to begin writing a research paper. Some start with the introduction and work their way through each step. Others begin by completing an outline for what they want to include in their paper. It is up to you to decide how to complete the writing process.

Note: You must properly cite information you have gathered from books, articles, and web sites using the citation style your professor requires.

Also: If you use information from web sites or databases you need to cite where you got the information. To avoid plagiarism, you must tell the reader in the body or end/foot notes where you got your information from including the title, author, and pages of your source and NOT JUST ON THE WORKS CITED OR BIBLIOGRAPHY PAGE.

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