Writing Your Research Paper: A Step-by-Step Checklist

Use this checklist as a guide to help you organize, research, and write a research paper.

Step #1: Lay the foundation
1. Select your source readings
2. Choose a topic and restrict the subject
3. Jot down your initial opinions
4. Develop a preliminary thesis

Step #2: Gather data
1. Brainstorm about useful sources
2. Collect your research materials:
   a) books
   b) journals and periodicals
   c) newspapers and magazines
   d) material from databases, such as Galileo, JStor, etc.
   e) creative sources, such as films, interviews, close observations, etc.
3. Document and annotate the bibliography in MLA style

Step #3: Write the draft
1. Review your materials and take notes
2. Develop an idea map and/or outline
3. Place your notes in order
4. Add quotes, avoiding plagiarism
5. Articulate an informed opinion

Most of this material is based on the research process as described by James D. Lester in Writing Research Papers: A Complete Guide, 2nd ed. (1971; rpt. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1976). Some of the material has been adapted from "Writing Research Papers: A Step-by-Step Procedure," Purdue University Online Writing Lab

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Step #4: Polish the paper

1. Rewrite as necessary, paying attention to the paper’s organization and the logical progression of its ideas
   a) put your thoughts where they best complement your research
   b) consider the “so what?” and rework the thesis in line with your research and opinions
   c) connect everything with effective transitions

2. Perhaps reposition the thesis

3. Strengthen your introduction and conclusion

4. Double-check your citations

5. Correct any grammatical and mechanical errors

6. Review your formatting

Step #5: Check your work

1. Read the paper out loud, as a whole, and listen for tone and style

2. Make sure that the paper has a viable thesis and meets the assignment guidelines

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