ORGANIZING AND WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER

PREPARING A PROSPECTUS AND A WORKING OUTLINE

Your prospectus consists of preliminary questions you intend to answer in your paper. In general, they are who, what, when, where, why, and how questions. Below is a sample prospectus (from Hulon Willis, Writing Term Papers).

TOPIC: The Growth of Abraham Lincoln’s Religious Beliefs

QUESTIONS:
1. What was the religion of Lincoln’s parents, and what kind of religious training did they give him?
2. What was his religious attitude as a young man?
3. How did his religious views change as he grew older?
4. Did he belong to a particular denomination and attend church regularly? If not, what seemed to be his definition of religion?
5. Would his definition of religion be generally acceptable to church members?
6. How did his speeches and writing reflect his religious sentiments?

After formulating questions, you should be able to prepare a working outline as a guideline to follow in collecting specific notes. This outline is flexible; you may add or delete points. The working outline consists of a thesis statement, subheadings for the thesis, and categories for the subheadings. Below is a sample of a working outline, adapted from William Coyle, Research Papers.

THESIS STATEMENT: Custer’s last stand is one of American history’s legends because of the event’s very nature and related aspects that appeal to people’s imaginations and emotions.

I. Event’s Nature
   a. Indian uprising
   b. Government’s uprising
   c. Outcome

II. Related Aspects
   a. Impact of the number of deaths
   b. Destruction of land
   c. People’s reactions to the battle

TAKING NOTES

Skim your sources, looking for information that pertains to your questions and your outline. Take notes only on information which answers your preliminary questions.

Follow the directions below for preparing notecards:

1. Use 4x6 cards.
2. If you write on both sides of a card, be sure to use a symbol to remind you not to overlook any notes when writing your paper.
3. Never put notes from more than one source on each card.
4. Identify the source of the notes on each card by putting in the upper right-hand corner the number of the bibliography card that lists the source of the notes. This simple reference method saves tedious recopying of the titles and authors and eliminates inaccuracies that recopying might introduce.
5. Be sure to include on each note card the exact page number from which you take your information. If notes on one card are taken from two or more pages of the source, indicate with a slash the point at which each new page begins.

6. In the upper left-hand corner, put a Roman numeral to indicate which section of the working outline the notes on the card pertain to. Keep in mind that you can revise the questions in your prospectus and your working outline if your reading indicates that you have left out an important aspect. Never take a note that is not relevant to the prospectus or outline.

7. Never put on one note card information that pertains to two or more different headings of your preliminary outline.

8. Finally, don’t begin to write the paper until you have taken all of your notes, but do update your preliminary outline when note taking requires.

Take most of your notes in a condensed, summarized form. If you use the exact words of the source in your notes, put them in quotation marks on the notecard. The four purposes that direct quotations may serve in a paper are listed below.

1. To emphasize a point;
2. To share with the reader a short passage that is striking and enjoyable in its phrasing;
3. To quote an authority to sanction a point of view that you support;
4. To present original evidence for a conclusion you draw.

In all other cases, paraphrase your notes.

When you write your paper, you must acknowledge facts, ideas, and opinions “borrowed” from sources as well as acknowledge direct quotations. To avoid plagiarism, you must give the source of all information that you take from your sources. You have the same obligation to acknowledge the source of a fact or a “borrowed” idea as you have to acknowledge the source of a summary, a paraphrase, or a direct quotation.

To summarize: Notes for research papers are selective. Do not summarize entire sources, but look for specific facts, ideas, and pertinent statements that will fulfill your plan. Avoid taking unnecessary notes, but pass up nothing that is useful.

ORGANIZING AND WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT

I. Introduction
II. First Major Point
   a. Subpoint
      i. Sources used
      ii. Sources used
   b. Subpoint
      i. Sources used
      ii. Sources used
III. Second Major Point
   a. Subpoint
      i. Sources used
      ii. Sources used
   b. Subpoint
      i. (etc. Use as many divisions as you need under all points and subpoints.)
IV. Conclusion

When you begin writing your paper, keep quotations to a minimum. If using quotations, you should introduce them by telling who said them, and you must blend them into the text. For correct style with longer quotations, check the style manual your teacher recommends.
DOCUMENTING THE PAPER

There are several acceptable ways of crediting sources. The MLA style is used for papers about literature, and the APA style for the social sciences, psychology, and education, among other disciplines. Both the MLA and APA styles use parenthetical references within the body of the paper. The MLA style requires a works cited page for full documentation of sources and the APA style a references page. Both works cited pages and references pages are placed at the end of papers. The Chicago and Turabian and CBE (used with most science papers) styles use footnotes, which appear at the bottom of the page on which a source is cited, and endnotes, which are all placed on one page immediately following the text and before a bibliography. When citing sources, keep in mind the information listed above under TAKING NOTES. Then, using the appropriate stylesheet, prepare references, footnotes, or endnotes exactly according to the examples in that particular style manual.

Do not be frightened by the idea that most of your paper is covered by notes citing your sources. A research paper consists of the information contributed by others. Your part is collecting and compiling the information, using the appropriate form, and convincing your audience of the validity of your thesis statement.

The final part of the paper is the formal bibliography in which you alphabetize the sources which you have cited in your paper. The standard form for a bibliography can be found in whatever stylesheet, or style manual, you are using.

PREPARING THE FINAL COPY

The final copy is a revision of the final draft. For the revision to be effective, the writer must see the paper from the reader’s point of view. When revising, you should watch for correct punctuation and grammar errors, wordiness, and unity, clarity, and coherence problems. The revision may require going over the paper many times. Few writers, no matter how experienced, can make an acceptable finished copy by reading the paper only once.

Most college level teachers require typed, double spaced research papers. And despite the instructor’s effort to be totally objective about content, a typed paper often makes a better impression that a handwritten one. Regardless of whether you or a professional types your paper, you and you alone, are responsible for the final copy.