

BEGINNING A RESEARCH PAPER

Find a topic that interests you that has readily available information. Next note the following:

1. **The subject should not be too broad or complex.** For example, “The American Indian” would lead you to compile miscellaneous, general information or to summarize from one or two main sources. Restrict your general subject area until you arrive at a topic you can explore in detail.
2. **The subject should not be too simple.** For example, “What the Navajos Ate” would lead you into much the same trap as a too broad a topic. Most of your information would come from one or two sources.
3. **The subject should not be too subjective.** “Why I joined a fraternity” is not a research paper topic, but a topic for a personal testimony. While you want to choose an appealing topic, you must choose one on which you can find information through a number of documentable sources.
4. **The subject should not be too technical.** One of the first rules of good writing is that you must write for your audience. While “The Use of Radioactive plant tracers” may be a good subject in science class, it would be a poor subject for an average, mixed audience.

In addition to these hints on selecting the subject, keep in mind the following information:

1. **A good term paper is not drawn from only one source nor from five sources, all of which say the same thing.** The paper should show that the author has made detailed use of several sources. Avoid subjects that would tempt you to summarize preassembled information from one main source. Whatever points you make should require careful sifting and comparing of evidence from different, and possibly conflicting, sources.
2. **The conclusions elaborated in the paper should stay close to the evidence actually presented.** When you write a research paper, the stance you adopt toward your audience is “Here is the evidence. This is where I found it. You are welcome to verify these sources and to check the facts.”

NARROWING A TOPIC

Once you have chosen a subject, narrow it to a manageable topic by examining available sources. To limit your topic and verify your interest in it, do some preliminary reading in general and specialized encyclopedias, handbooks, textbooks, dictionaries, and other reference materials. The reason for a preliminary survey is to get enough information so that you may better define the topic. Below is an example of one subject area worked into a manageable topic, taken from William Coyle, Research Papers:

American History
 History of the West
 Indians of the West
 The Sioux
 Sioux Uprisings in the Civil War
 Custer's Last Stand

Limiting a topic is a primarily a process of analysis, or breaking something down into its parts. Some methods of narrowing a topic:

- spatially (according to place)
- temporally (according to a specific time or period of time)
- causally (according to the cause)
- categorically (according to classification)

Also consider:

- cause and effect
- circumstance
- limitations
- advantages and/or disadvantages

FORMULATING A THESIS STATEMENT

The thesis sentence, the main or central idea to be supported with evidence, states the objective of that paper.

BAD THESIS STATEMENT:

- indisputable facts:
 EXAMPLE: Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world.
- personal opinions:
 EXAMPLE: Chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla ice cream

GOOD THESIS STATEMENT:

- takes a stand (opinion, position) on a topic
- tells why the stance is taken
- serves as a good guide for gathering information

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

DOING RESEARCH

Sources for research papers:

- Books
- Bound and unbound periodicals and newspapers
- Library Electronic Databases (which often have full-text articles)
- Prominent letters
- Movies
- Audiotapes
- Filmstrips
- Slide presentations
- Pamphlets
- Brochures
- Personal interviews
- Personal letters
- Television programs
- Public addresses
- Museum exhibits

To find sources in the library, begin by using the on-line catalog, computer databases, encyclopedias and indexes which may be pertinent to your subject area. Alkek reference librarians can demonstrate using the online catalog or assist in finding other sources. Below is a list of indexes found on the online catalog:

- Abstracts of English Studies
- Abstracts of Folklore Studies
- Applied Science and Technology Index
- Art Index
- Bibliographic Index
- Biological and Agricultural Index
- Book Review Index
- British Humanities Index
- Business Periodicals Index
- Cumulative Index to Nursing Literature
- Education Index
- Humanities Index
- International Bibliography of Articles on the Modern Languages and Literature
- JSTOR from JSTOR (full-text articles on literature and authors)
- Literature Resource Center from Gale (includes the Dictionary of Literary Biography and Contemporary Authors Series)
- Modern Humanities Research Association Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature
- MLA International Bibliography from EBSCO (full-text articles on literature and authors)
- Music Index
- New York Times Index
- The Philosopher's Index
- Poole's Guide to Periodical Literature
- Public Affairs Information Services
- Publications of the Modern Language Association Annual Bibliography
- Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature
- Social Science and Humanities Index
- Social Science Index

BIBLIOGRAPHY CARDS:

On a 3 x 5 card, complete a preliminary bibliography of sources that appear useful; complete the following information:

1. **Number the cards** to identify a source in notes or text.
2. **Record library call number** and volume number used in multi-volume set
3. **Record Web site addresses** if you are using an Internet source or online database.
4. **Record the full name of the author.**
5. **Further information required** depends on the type of source. Below are the most common.
 - a. Book: the exact title, place of publication, publisher, and date.
 - b. Periodical or magazine: the exact title of the article, the exact name of the periodical or magazine, date, volume number, and the inclusive page numbers of the article.
 - c. Newspaper article: the author (if known), the title or headline, the date of the issue, the part (if any), page(s), and column(s) the article appears on.
 - d. Reference work: the name and volume number of the reference work, the title (and author if known) of the entry, and the inclusive page numbers.
 - e. Internet or database source: the exact title of the article, name of the author, name of the journal, name of the database, Web site address, and any page numbers you see.
6. **Put only one entry on each card.** Write a brief note about the contents of that source.

PZ 4034 .G3	1
Tenin, George. <u>The West from Silence to the Seventies</u>. New York: Grossman Publishing Co., 1973	
p. 370-a good description of Custer's troops.	

Note: use the style manual your instructor indicates for bibliographic entries (and other documentation). If the instructor does not indicate a specific form of documentation, use the MLA Handbook or Turabian's A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations for courses such as English, Philosophy, or History. Use the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, (most current ed.) (APA) for Psychology, Education, Health Sciences, etc. Whatever style used, be consistent. **DO NOT** combine elements of more than one documentation style. Form and punctuation must be exact.

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Adapted from Catherine Wildermuth, Dept. of English, TSUSM, Handout, "Writing a Research Paper."

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