

Writing an Academic Paper

Listed below are the steps required to write an academic paper. These steps do not have to be done in the order listed; in fact, they may be repeated many times during the process. Repeating steps most often happens during the research, reading, and first draft stage of writing. Writing and learning is a fluid process, so a thesis statement or viewpoints in the paper might change as you do your research. Or, an outline might be more easily written after completing the first draft rather than before. In addition, it is not unusual to go back to do further research or to revise a thesis statement when editing the rough draft.

Select a topic

- Choose, if possible, a topic that interests you
- Follow directions given by your professor
- Consult with the professor/TA if you are uncertain about the assignment

Create a schedule with deadlines for each step

- Research
- Read & take notes
- Outline
- Write the first draft
- Revise for content, organization, and clarity
- Edit & proofread

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Find sources

- Identify how many sources and what kinds of sources your paper requires
- Use the UM Libraries' database to search for these sources
- Gather different viewpoints to capture the topic's complexity
- Look through the reference lists of sources to find additional sources
- Make a research log and reference notecards

Prepare preliminary questions to guide your reading & note-taking

- What information is needed to develop the topic?
- What are the important issues related to this subject?
- Who has contributed significantly to this area?
- What conclusions can be drawn?

Design a system to organize and take notes

- Identify title, author, and page numbers to make citations easier later
- Identify topic headings

- Indicate whether the information is a quote, a paraphrase, or a summary of the source
- Add your original thoughts about the reading

Formulate a working thesis statement

A thesis statement is a declarative sentence that expands your topic into a scholarly proposal, one that you will prove, defend, or expand on in your paper. The working thesis statement is your first draft of this sentence; it will develop as you write.

Outline and draft your paper

- List, classify, group, and number all discussion points
- Craft an introduction which includes sufficient background information and the working thesis statement
- Write sections of the paper, following your outline
- Write a brief conclusion

Revise your thesis statement

- Plainly state your position for the reader
- Control, focus, or direct the paper by providing an outline of your body paragraphs
- Add specificity; make vague words more specific and add in any developments that emerged as you wrote the draft
- Anticipate the conclusion that you arrived at

Revise your draft

- Set the paper aside for at least a day or, if time allows, more
- Make sure that each paragraph has just one main idea expressed in a clear topic sentence
- Read the paper aloud to detect any weaknesses in reasoning and structure
- Make certain everything in the paper relates back to your thesis statement
- Review the assignment guidelines to make sure you have all required components
- Ask someone to read your paper and give you general feedback, ensuring that they are not making corrections or changes to the paper themselves. Working with a writing tutor can guarantee that you are following appropriate collaboration guidelines.

Edit

- Does sentence structure vary?
- Are there any run-on sentences or sentence fragments?
- Have irrelevant or repeated phrases been deleted/changed?
- Is word choice precise, vivid, and varied?
- Are appropriate verb tenses used?
- Are there any contractions? If so, rewrite in full; e.g. don't = do not.
- Have you searched for homonyms?

Proofread

- Search for typos that you frequently make.
- Double-check that all of your in-text citations and reference list entries follow the required citation style
- Double-check that your page formatting follows the requirements of your citation style and professor
- Review any paraphrasing or direct quotations from sources to ensure they all have in-text citations, reference list entries, and are otherwise done appropriately