

Research and Writing Papers

There are many excellent text books and web sites on writing. They can provide you with information and ideas on how to conduct research and on the process of writing (and editing) a paper.

One of the most important and overlooked aspects of the writing process is the need to PLAN AHEAD. For many students, writing a paper means staying up the night before the paper is due to write the FIRST DRAFT of their paper. By doing this, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to think and write clearly. They make simple, yet costly spelling and grammar mistakes that they would have easily caught had they planned more efficiently. (We won't get into last minute problems floppy discs not functioning, printers jamming, or unsaved files being lost during a power surge.)

More importantly, when you treat a paper as a last minute project, you lose the opportunity to **learn something of personal value**. The point of writing a paper is to explore a topic of interest that you might not otherwise cover in class or to provide the additional detail you need to meet your career or educational goals. For this to happen, you must first **choose a topic that really interests you**. Your motivation to learn will add a great deal to the quality of your paper and to your enjoyment in writing it.

You can avoid problems and optimize your learning (and grade) with some effective time management in planning the research and writing process. The following are some suggestions:

1. At the start of each semester, get out a calendar and **plan out your semester**. Look at the syllabus for each class. When are your papers due? When are quizzes and tests planned? Notice when you have more than one assignment due or test to take. How will you manage your time to avoid last-minute log jams?
2. As soon as the assignment is given, **read through the list of topics** (if provided) or consider what you want to learn more about that is not covered (sufficiently) by the course. Think about what you might need to know for your future career or further education.
3. During the next week, do some reading on a few of the topics that interest you. This should help you to decide which is of most interest (or the "lesser of evils"). **Search the library catalogs for books, magazine articles and other references available on these topics**. This will give you a "big picture" on these topics and help you to identify resources that you will be able to use.
4. One week after the assignment is given, **choose your topic**.
5. In the next week or two, do some **preliminary reading** on your topic. Explore the different ways you can approach your topic and what kinds of sources you might want to include in your research. Jot down or start mapping ideas for "big picture" possibilities for your paper.
6. Take a week to outline or **make a map** of the paper. This will serve as a guide to the kinds of materials to look for when you start your research.

7. **Start conducting your research.** You'll need to set aside large chunks of time in the library for hunting down the information and for making copies of articles or other materials. It's important to start this process as early as possible, because you may have to borrow materials from other college libraries, which may take some time. (That's assuming that they will be available when you want them!) Give yourself a deadline for conducting your research so that you will have time for steps 8-11.
8. Give yourself a week or two to **compile your notes and write a detailed outline** of your paper. The more time you put into organizing your paper, the better it will flow when you sit down to write. This process will help you to see gaps in your logic and information. You'll have plenty of time to do additional research if necessary.
9. Give yourself a week or two to **write the rough draft.** You want to let it flow out of your personal interest and the information you've collected from your research.
10. Allow at least a week to **edit your rough draft.** This way you'll have the time to put it down when you get overwhelmed with the details and then take it up again with a fresh perspective.
11. Give yourself a week to **write your final draft.** You'll want to take the time to read it carefully for last minute edits and to make sure you've done your very best work.