

Researching for Essays and Other Projects

Rushing through the research phase of a paper is the most common mistake I've seen other students make. Getting the writing process off to a rocky start makes everything else all the more difficult, so you should take your research seriously. Here are some simple guidelines to get you started.

Highlight as You Read

To begin with, if you're going to have to write a paper on a book you yourself own, then be sure to highlight or underline key passages as you read. Jot notes in the margins as well, perhaps to summarize long or confusing paragraphs. This will save you a lot of time when you go back to gather evidence and quotations to support your paper's claims.

Pick a Topic that Excites You

When deciding what to write about, try to find something that interests you or something that stuck out to you in the material. For instance, I thought *A Tale of Two Cities* was incredibly boring, but I found myself genuinely shocked when some guy in it ran over a boy with his carriage and tried to rationalize his actions. So, when essay time rolled around, I picked that scene as my topic.

- If you need to write a persuasive essay to argue a point, then don't pick a stance everyone will agree with. A paper called "Eating is Good for You" probably won't receive a high grade. Instead, pick a topic that actually requires some persuasion and solid research.

- As you zero-in on your topic, remember that your thesis statement shouldn't be dry and obvious. Rather, it should be the launch pad for making interesting points.

Follow the Rules

Make sure your topic complies with the rules set out by your instructor. If you're unsure, ask them whether or not the topic is appropriate for the assignment. You don't want to set yourself up for failure right away.

Consult Many Sources

If you need to use outside sources, then *research the topic thoroughly*.

- The better you understand the topic, the more likely you are to conjure up your own original thoughts rather than just paraphrase what others have said. This will, of course, boost your grade... and you'll learn more, which is a good thing to do at school.

- You'll also find it easier to write the paper overall. I know it's tempting to use the minimum number of sources possible, but you're just making things tougher for yourself in the long run. The more material you have to draw from, the easier it is to reach paper length requirements without rambling. You simply have more to write about.

- Having thorough knowledge of a controversial subject will help you anticipate any counterarguments that could be made against your claims.

- Besides, if a teacher sees a nice, long works cited list, they'll be impressed.

The Library is Your Friend

There's more to research than throwing your topic into a Google search. Most of your results will probably be pages written for people looking for quick, easy answers. Actually use your library to search for books. You can search through the library's catalogue at home as long as they have a website, so you can ensure that they have the books you need before you make a trip there. Have plenty of sticky notes so you can mark statements you're likely to reference in your paper.

Databases are Treasure Troves of Information

Also, be sure to use your library card to access its databases full of academic articles and resources. Nearby public libraries and your college's own library could offer these free of charge. These will give you results that delve deeper into the material than most websites do.

- Academic Search Complete on EBSCOhost is particularly helpful, but you need a library card to access it.

- I'd like to point out that, in college, I rarely cited websites; I mostly relied on books and database articles. They're just plain more informative. If you have any trouble accessing or using a library database, then ask for help from a librarian.

- Yes, it takes a little longer to find a thorough book or database article, but you'll have a much stronger starting point for writing your essay if you use excellent sources.

- If you're a university student, you can learn more about using your college's resources in my article aptly called "Using Your College's Resources."

Doing some thorough research using the many resources your school provides can help you a whole lot when it comes time to write an essay.

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