How to Write a Research Paper (Step by Step for Students)

Education and Communications · about 21 minutes · 2026-11-11

A fully illustrated 39-step guide to writing a research paper: choose a focused question, find credible sources, build a thesis, structure the argument, cite correctly and revise for clarity.

Phase 1 — Define the Question

1. **Start with a broad subject you genuinely care about**
   Start with a broad subject you genuinely care about.
2. **Survey the landscape before committing**
   Survey the landscape before committing.
3. **Turn the subject into a question**
   Turn the subject into a question.
4. **Test that the question is arguable**
   Test that the question is arguable.
5. **Scope it to the word count**
   Scope it to the word count.
6. **Write a one-sentence working thesis**
   Write a one-sentence working thesis.
7. **List your keywords and synonyms**
   List your keywords and synonyms.
8. **Choose the right databases**
   Choose the right databases.
9. **Set a source quota and a stop date**
   Set a source quota and a stop date.

Phase 2 — Find and Evaluate Sources

10. **Search with exact phrases first**
    Search with exact phrases first.
11. **Prioritise peer-reviewed and primary sources**
    Prioritise peer-reviewed and primary sources.
12. **Read the abstract before the full text**
    Read the abstract before the full text.
13. **Use citation chaining both ways**
    Use citation chaining both ways.
14. **Save the full citation the moment you download**
    Save the full citation the moment you download.
15. **Check who wrote it and where**
    Check who wrote it and where.

16. **Identify the claim and the evidence**

    Identify the claim and the evidence.

17. **Note limitations and disagreements**

    Note limitations and disagreements.

18. **Sort sources into 'use', 'maybe' and 'background'**

    Sort sources into 'use', 'maybe' and 'background'.

Phase 3 — Build the Argument

19. **Group your notes by theme, not by source**

    Group your notes by theme, not by source.

20. **Give each pile a one-line claim**

    Give each pile a one-line claim.

21. **Order the claims into a logical sequence**

    Order the claims into a logical sequence.

22. **Refine the thesis to match your evidence**

    Refine the thesis to match your evidence.

23. **Draft section headings**

    Draft section headings.

24. **Write the body before the introduction**

    Write the body before the introduction.

25. **Use one claim, evidence, explanation per paragraph**

    Use one claim, evidence, explanation per paragraph.

26. **Quote sparingly and paraphrase precisely**

    Quote sparingly and paraphrase precisely.

27. **Cite as you write, not afterwards**

    Cite as you write, not afterwards.

28. **Keep a 'to verify' column**

    Keep a 'to verify' column.

29. **Write the introduction last**

    Write the introduction last.

30. **Close by answering the question**

    Close by answering the question.

Phase 4 — Cite, Revise and Submit

31. **Build the reference list from your saved citations**

    Build the reference list from your saved citations.

32. **Match every in-text citation to the list**

    Match every in-text citation to the list.

33. **Apply one citation style consistently**

    Apply one citation style consistently.

34. Add page numbers for direct quotes

Add page numbers for direct quotes.

35. Read the draft aloud once

Read the draft aloud once.

36. Check that each paragraph answers to its topic sentence

Check that each paragraph answers to its topic sentence.

37. Cut filler and vague words

Cut filler and vague words.

38. Check the question–thesis–conclusion thread

Check the question–thesis–conclusion thread.

39. Run a final originality and format check

Run a final originality and format check.

Sources

1. Purdue OWL — writing and citation guide
   https://owl.purdue.edu/
2. Oxford Reference
   https://www.oxfordreference.com/
3. Khan Academy — free courses
   https://www.khanacademy.org/
4. Coursera — online courses
   https://www.coursera.org/

Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/How-to-Write-a-Research-Paper. Corrections: https://www.howcompass.com/c