

Mapping the Terrain: How to Plan, Pre-Write, and Write an Undergraduate Research Paper

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(Note: This guide is for students who need to write an original research paper, as opposed to a paper based on a specific essay prompt. For information on how to write a strong prompted essay, see my handout titled "How to Tackle an Essay Exam.")

Why Should I Plan and Pre-Write a Paper?

Imagine we were going to take a road trip to Northern Canada. While many of us might like to believe we could set off into the great unknown and find our way, very few of us would actually be able to make it to the destination without consulting a map. At the very least, we would check our route before leaving, perhaps plugging it into our GPS and letting the navigation guide us.

The same is true for writing. Very few people can sit down in front of a blank word document and begin to write from scratch. While we might have some sense of where we want to go with a paper, the route we take to get there is not always obvious. Almost no one can write from scratch in a way that is coherent, organized, and with a clear argument. In the same way that you would plan your route before starting a road trip, you should plan your paper before you start writing.

I have broken down the remainder of this document into three phases: Planning, Pre-Writing, and Writing. I have also included a suggested time for completing each of these steps before your paper deadline; keep in mind that these time guidelines are when you should *finish* these steps, not when you should *start* them!

Five Steps for PLANNING Your Paper

Below I outline five steps for planning your paper. These steps can be used no matter what kind of paper you are writing, no matter what class you are writing it for. Working through these steps can give you a coherent grasp on your "destination" for the paper and a detailed "roadmap" that will help you along the way as you write.

Step 1: Know Thy Topic

(Recommended Completion: 4-5 weeks before paper deadline)

Before writing your paper you should be very clear on what, precisely, your paper is about. You may be given some guidelines by your instructor (check the syllabus!), be sure to adhere to those when deciding on a paper topic. Ideally, your paper will be about something relatively interesting to you. However, you will probably have to spend some time thinking about what, specifically, is interesting to you. Many students start their papers with a topic that is too broad. Strive to find the "sweet spot" for your topic – neither too broad nor too narrow.

For example, you may be interested in gender inequality. But that is a huge topic! There are thousands and thousands of books on the subject. You'll need to narrow it down. Choose a segment of society, a kind of life experience, a particular geographical area, or some other factor that narrows your topic and still keeps your interest. But don't go too far and overly narrow your topic; while "gender inequality" is too broad, "wage gap of bus drivers in Dayton, Ohio" is too narrow.

Once you have decided on a topic, practice summarizing the topic and why it is interesting to you. You should also formulate a clear link between the topic of your class and the topic of your paper – why is

this an appropriate paper topic for this class? Visit your instructor/TA and review your idea to see if they have any suggestions and to see if they know of any interesting books/articles you should read.

Step 2: Do Thy Homework

(Recommended Completion: 2-3 weeks before paper deadline)

All academic papers need some kind of support from existing literature. A paper without any citations/references to existing knowledge is usually not considered academic or scientific. You'll need to use sources to support what you say in the paper. These sources may include readings and other materials from your class, and it may include material from outside your class. Check the syllabus and/or assignment instructions before you search for reference materials.

If you only need to use materials from class, take some time to carefully curate which class materials you want/need to use in your paper. Make sure these materials speak to your topic and that you can use them to make an argument about that topic. Of course, in order to do this you will have to carefully read these materials, so be sure you are keeping up with the readings in the course schedule so that you are not behind on the readings when it comes to writing your paper.

Oftentimes you will have to present some outside literature in your paper in addition to readings assigned in class. Fortunately, online academic databases have made literature searches much more user friendly. Before you begin your literature search, think about some keywords that relate to your topic. Ask your instructor/TA if they know of good keywords/search terms that you can use. Utilize your library's online academic databases to find journal articles and books using these keywords. I suggest refraining from using Google Scholar, since its sorting and search functions are not as robust as academic databases and it has only archived about 50% of existing scholarship. Here are other tips for finding literature:

- Ask your instructor/TA for suggestions on important books or authors in their field/discipline that relate to your paper topic
- When you find an article that you like, look for the keywords that the authors chose to "tag" their paper, then use those search terms to find more work on those topics.
- When you find an article or book that you like, look to see who else has cited that article to see if there are newer articles/books on that same or similar topic that are drawing upon that author's work.
- When you find an article or book that you like, look at their references and see if any of them are relevant/interesting for your paper topic.
- Utilize your library's research/reference librarian to help you find sources.
- Use inter-library loan or a similar service to access sources not owned by your library.

After you have amassed a body of literature that seems relevant to your paper and interesting to you, put together your bibliography. Use the citation style that is specified by the instructor (ASA, APA, Chicago, etc.), or the style you are most familiar with if the instructor has not specified a particular style. Type up your bibliography now so that you don't have to do it later. Doing this early on will help you keep track of the sources you have, and you can easily add/remove sources as needed.

Step 3: Review Thy Literature

(Recommended Completion: 2 weeks before paper deadline)

Now the fun begins! Reviewing the literature you found is, basically, the way you are going to teach yourself about this topic. Remember that you are in the driver's seat here – you are capable of reading

these sources and teaching yourself about the topic you chose, and your instructor is there to support you.

Remember when reading each of your sources that you need to be an active, rather than passive reader. I suggest using the guidelines in my “Learning to Read” handout to help you read more actively. After you have actively read a source, take notes on the source and ask yourself: What did the source teach you? What is still unknown after reading that source? Finally, how does it relate to any of the other sources you’ve read so far? Repeat this process for each of the sources in your bibliography.

After you have read each of the sources in your bibliography, go back through your notes and make a list of everything you have learned from the sources. If you learned similar things from different sources, consolidate them together into a broader “lesson.” Try to come up with a handful of “lessons” that you have gained from reading these sources.

Then, go back through your notes and make a list of everything you that is still unknown after reading those sources. If something that was unknown for one source was made clearer/answered in a different source, take note of that and consider moving it to the “lesson” side of your notes. If you found similar unknowns in different sources, consolidate them together into a broader “mystery” or “question.”

Finally, go back through your notes and determine which of your sources relate most closely to each other. Try to “cluster” your similar/related sources together, so that you could talk about them together by discussing the thing that makes them related (such as a similar conclusion, methodology, or contrasting/disproving conclusion).

Step 4: Inventory Thy Ideas

(Recommended Completion: 2 weeks before paper deadline)

At this point you should have some pretty clear ideas starting to emerge from your sources and your notes. When you look at your notes, determine what you *could* write a paper on based on the lessons from your sources. Also, determine what you *could not* write a paper on based on the remaining questions from your sources.

Here is where you need to pause for some reflection. Remember that you will need to write a paper that can be supported by existing literature. Now that you have read this literature, try to identify the kind of paper you could write that would be supported by these sources. Take some time to really think about it. If you are satisfied with that paper, then proceed to the next step. However, if you are not satisfied with that paper, and you find yourself drawn more towards the unanswered questions left by your sources, consider searching for a few more sources that could help you answer those questions and write the paper you want to write. Repeat Steps 3 and 4 for your new sources until you are satisfied, remembering to update your bibliography as needed.

Step 5: Refine Thy Argument

(Recommended Completion: 1-2 weeks before paper deadline)

At this point, you have collected a body of literature that you can cite (carefully chronicled in your bibliography) as well as inventoried several ideas that you can discuss in a paper. But, unfortunately, it is not enough to simply entertain a bunch of ideas one at a time. A proper paper needs to have an overarching idea/theme that draws all of these other ideas together and organizes them to *say something about something*. This is often called a “thesis statement;” I prefer the term “argument,” but they essentially mean the same thing. Your paper needs to have a clear, declarative idea that ties all the other ideas together and organizes them in a logical way.

Here are some predictable features of good arguments:

- They are clear and explicit
- They address a specific topic/issue
- They offer a strong explanation/assessment of that issue
- They are multifaceted; they pull together several pieces into one coherent idea

Spend some time thinking about the argument you can make based on the research you have done. Remember that your argument will need to be supported by your sources, so avoid making an argument that you cannot actually prove/support based on the sources you have. Try to make your argument explicit, specific, explanatory, and multifaceted. You should be able to articulate your argument in 1-2 sentences. If you are struggling with this step, ask your instructor/TA for assistance in making a strong argument based on the ideas that you have. Carefully outline all of the ideas you want to discuss and ask for their help coming up with an argument that encompasses and organizes those ideas.

Once you have refined an argument for your paper, you are ready to start the pre-writing stage.

Five Steps for PRE-WRITING Your Paper

You have already put in a considerable amount of work and thought into your paper, but you are still not ready to begin writing. Don't waste your hard work by moving straight to the writing stage and writing a paper that is sloppy, disorganized, or unfocused. Pre-writing your paper is the best way to ensure that all of the knowledge you've gained and careful considerations you've made make it into your paper in a way that is logical and coherent.

Below I have outlined five areas of pre-writing that you should finish before you move on to the writing stage. I suggest you complete these elements together in the same sitting, or with relatively small gaps of time between each. You will find that once you get your train of thought moving completing these pre-writing steps will go more smoothly. But if you stop that train of thought it will take some time to build up the same momentum again. I recommend you complete these pre-writes 1 week before your paper deadline.

1. Write a brief summary of your paper topic (1-2 paragraphs)
 - a. Introduce your topic with a "hook" that gets the reader interested in the topic and draws them into the paper. A good hook is usually specific and/or surprising. Overly broad or grand statements, like "since the beginning of time" or "for all of human history," are *not* good hooks. Try to say something specific; use vivid imagery or a strong word choice. A good hook might be a story, a captivating quote, a powerful statistic, etc.
 - b. Summarize your topic and why it is significant
2. Write down why this topic is relevant for the class you are taking (2-3 paragraphs)
 - a. How does the general topic of the class align with your paper topic?
 - b. Specifically name 2-3 concepts from class that directly relate to your paper topic and unpack/explain how they relate.
 - c. What course readings/materials could you use to frame or discuss your paper topic?
3. Write down the argument you will make in the paper (1-2 sentences)
 - a. Remember that this should be a strong, declarative idea that ties together the multiple ideas/sources that you will discuss in the paper. Those ideas/sources should, in turn, give support to your argument.

4. Write a narrative summary that details how the paper will progress from start to finish (1 paragraph)
 - b. Be specific about how you will go about proving your argument and how you will order your ideas.
5. Write a bullet-point outline that maps out your paper and includes where you will insert your sources. (See Sample Outline below.)
 - c. Organize your outline with your argument in mind. Each section should speak directly to the argument you are making in the paper.
 - d. Organize your outline around ideas rather than readings. Your paper should not read like a book report of other people's work, it should read like a discussion of ideas for which different sources can be cited.
 - e. Remember that you can use the same source multiple times in different sections of the paper, depending on what you are trying to say.
 - f. Highlight or underline when you include one of your sources.
 - g. Determine where you will have the broader discussion of your paper's relevance to the course themes/ideas
 - h. Remember to use the specific terms/concepts from your class as much as you can, to show that you understand what those terms mean and that you know how to apply them to the real world

Sample Outline

*This outline was written by me (Erica) during my junior year of college at a different university for a course that is no longer even offered. The actual content of the outline will not help you, but pay attention to how I structure the outline around ideas and in a way that proves my argument. Pay attention to the way I present an argument and draw on material to support it. I draw upon as much material as possible to make **specific claims** that are **well-evidenced**.*

Argument: *Globalization has contributed to new opportunities for women to migrate and work outside of the home, but these opportunities have come at the cost of entrenching inequalities between the global north and global south.*

- Review Globalization and New Opportunities
 - As presented in Global Woman chapter1
 - Use Malika's Story to illustrate
 - Connect to "Gender in Global Perspective" course themes/objectives – globalization makes gender "global"
 - Pivot to how globalization opportunities come with both positive and negative effects for women around the globe
- Positive Impacts
 - Brings more job opportunities for women in low-skill service and manufacturing industry (Ross)
 - "Better-than" argument (Smith)
 - Certain amount of empowerment (Mills – don't see themselves as victims)
 - Economic liberation
 - Ability to help their families
 - Being "modern" and free
 - Consumption/being part of consumer culture
 - Reduces pressure to marry (Burn)
- Negative Impacts

- Affluence of globalization is not distributed equally among nations, thus helping women in the 1st world with cheaper products but hurting women in developing countries (Ehrenreich and Hochschild)
- Structural Adjustment programs impacted women more than men because women are normally responsible for providing food, water, and healthcare (TIWDL film excerpt)
 - SAP's ceased domestic production and called for cash crops and raw materials for export. Thus all the manufactured goods were imported and sold at a higher price.
 - SAP's also called for the decrease in health, education, and social services
 - Women work more but get less (Ross)
 - Women have to travel farther to get the resources they need
- Globalization creates some paid jobs for women, but these low wages do not balance SAPs, and many women cannot sustain their families
 - Women have to migrate to be able to sustain their families
 - Women become subject to economic downturns of the global market
- When things get bad, women are the first to lose their jobs (Chesky: ex. women's unemployment in former Soviet countries during economic transition) in an effort to protect male breadwinners
 - Breakdown of local markets, so globalization jobs become the only viable options (Ross)
- Division of Global Labor, Stratification of the Global South (Smith)
 - Knowledge-intensive aspects stay in the western countries but the labor-intensive (and low-paying) aspects move to developing countries where women are the preferred labor force
 - Women are traditionally disempowered, so they won't cause trouble (docility) (Ross)
 - Easier to lay off b/c family or pregnancy – more so than men (ex. Mexican factory in the Double Shift film)
 - Can be hired for lower pay under less desirable conditions
 - Few other options for work outside the global economy, so women work in factories
 - Women's work is globally still underpaid (Ehrenreich & Hochschild)
 - Inequalities of race and class inherent in this as well (E&H)
 - Migration
 - Women usually migrate to help their families, not to make it for themselves (Mills; also Khem)
 - Relative Deprivation:
 - Images of modernity (Mills) are contrasted with low wages, poor working conditions, new forms of authority, long hours, poor living conditions, high price of urban existence (Migrant in Double Shift film's statement that "money is hard to hang on to")
- Solutions/Commentary (Conclusion)
 - SAPs mirror the same processes as living wage
 - Not necessarily one or the other, the social structure of globalization does not depend on exploitation
 - First we need to pay women a living wage so they can meet their immediate survival needs, then we can engage in broader gender equality movements

Now that you have successfully finished the planning and pre-writing process, you are *finally* ready to write your research paper.

Five Steps for WRITING Your Paper

Below I outline five steps that will help you get through the writing process. To me, there are few things more daunting than opening a blank word document and staring at that white page of doom. Luckily, the blank page will not deter you because you have already built a strong foundation for your paper.

You've spent the last several weeks working through the planning and pre-writing process, and now all that is left is putting your ideas into words on paper.

Step 1: Start at the Beginning

(Recommended completion: 5-6 days before paper deadline)

I personally like to start with an introduction because it gets me "primed" for the rest of the writing process. More importantly, it reminds me of what, specifically, I am trying to argue so that as I go forward I can be sure that the rest of the paper is in service to my argument.

When writing your introduction, start with the "hook" you described in your pre-write (assuming that you like that hook, if you don't like it then come up with a hook that you do like). Then, spend a few sentences describing the topic of your paper and why it is a significant topic. When describing the significance, try to use as many terms/concepts from your class as you can. Then, spend a sentence or two funneling this "overview" into the precise perspective that you are taking in the paper.

Finally, end your introduction with your argument. Remember that your argument should be clear and declarative; when your reader gets to the end of your introduction, they should have *no doubt* about what they will be reading as the paper progresses.

Once you have finished the introduction, re-read it and make sure it accurately reflects what your paper will discuss. Then, give the introduction to a friend, roommate, or relative who is not in the class and ask them to repeat back to you: 1) what the paper is about, 2) why it is important, and 3) what the argument of the paper will be. If they say something that is surprising to you, that probably means that you were not clear enough in your writing. Refine your writing until there is no doubt that what you have written communicates what you are actually trying to say.

Step 2: Proceed Section by Section

(Recommended Completion: 4 days before paper deadline)

In the pre-writing stage, you made an outline and a narrative summary that planned out the various themes/ideas that you would explore in the paper and the order that you would explore them in. Beneath your introduction, type out some sub-headings for each of these sections. You don't have to include these sub-headings in the final draft, but for now it helps you recreate your thought process on this new document.

Once you've typed out your sub-headings, focus on writing just one section at a time. While you are writing, focus your attention just on that section, knowing that you will get to the other sections eventually. Refer back to your outline often, remembering the ideas/claims you want to discuss and the evidence/sources you will use to discuss them. Remember that this section should further or prove your argument in some way, so be sure to include a few explicit sentences that link the section back to your main argument. I recommend putting these explicit links to your argument in the beginning and end of each section (at the very least).

After you have written one section, pause and READ it. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What does this section teach the reader?
- Is this section well supported with evidence from my sources?
- Have I cited my sources properly in this section?
- Does this section explicitly advance my argument?

When you are able to confidently answer these questions, move onto the next section and repeat the process. Do this again and again until you have finished writing the content of your paper.

Step 3: Rock that Conclusion

(Recommended Completion: 3-4 days before paper deadline)

Many students think that the conclusion is just a “recap” of their paper, but this is actually just one ingredient in a powerful conclusion. In addition to recapping the paper, you need to also drive home your argument, provide some brief commentary/implications of your argument, and end your paper with a strong sentence that leaves an impression on the reader.

Before writing your conclusion, re-read your paper from start to finish. Not only will you catch some edits that you want to make, it will also prime you to start writing a compelling conclusion. Start your paper off with reviewing your argument. Then, spend a few sentences explicitly connecting the general content of each section back to your argument once more. Now, pivot toward the “bigger picture.” Make some commentary about this topic (keep it general and academic, now is *not* the time to tell a personal anecdote or share your feelings), and/or provide some implications of the argument you have just made. If your paper addresses some kind of social problem, entertain some potential solutions that are implicated in/related to the argument you made in your paper.

Finally, end your conclusion with a strong sentence that leaves an impression. I like to call this sentence “the mic drop,” as in a moment where it is clear that there is nothing left to say but the reader keeps thinking about what they’ve read. Spend some time brainstorming a good “mic drop” sentence to end your paper.

Step 4: Step Away!

(Recommended Completion 2-3 days before paper deadline)

You are so close to being finished with your paper. Remember that just because you have finished writing your paper does not mean that it is ready to turn in. You have successfully written a *draft* of your paper, but that draft will likely still have imperfections that should be fixed before you turn it in. However, at this moment, you are too close to the paper to see its imperfections. In the same way that you cannot see a mural when you are standing inches from a wall, you need to step back before you can see the paper in its entirety.

Give yourself some time to take a break away from your paper. I recommend a minimum of 24 hours, but realistically it should be however much time you feel appropriate given your deadline and other assignments you have to complete. Save your file and back it up so that it is not lost. Then walk away for a bit.

Step 5: Read and Edit

(Recommended Completion: 1-2 days before paper deadline)

Like it or not, re-reading your paper will reveal some mistakes and flaws that you will want to fix. Sometimes reading your own work can be painful, and many of us have a lot of negative self-talk when it comes to writing. But remember that you have put in a lot of work for this paper, so you owe it to yourself and the process to make sure it is to the quality that you want. Also remember that you ARE smart and capable, and that the only difference between “good” writers and “bad” writers is the amount of time spent *practicing*. This is just part of the practice.

The goal of this step is for you to re-read your paper from as objective a standpoint as possible. You've taken a break from the paper so that you're not as close to it, but it is still ultimately your work and your writing. So here are some tips that you can try to get more distance between you and your paper:

- Put the paper into a new word-processing program or change the font
- Adjust the zoom on your computer so that you view a whole page or 2 pages at once
- Convert the document into a PDF
- Print the document

Once you have put some distance between you and your paper, read it carefully from start to finish. Try your best to channel your instructor/TA. Remember that when they read your paper they will have never seen it before and they cannot ask you about it; your paper must be able to stand on its own. As you read, take note of any typos, grammar, or word choice errors that should be fixed. Also, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is my argument clear?
- Is my argument maintained/supported in each section?
- Are my sections well-evidenced/supported with my sources and/or course material?
- Am I proud of this piece of writing?
- Does this paper satisfy all of the assignment requirements?

Edit your paper as necessary after you re-read it and reflect on these questions. Once you have a new draft, you can repeat this step as many times as necessary until you feel ready to submit the draft. Once you feel ready (or when the deadline demands!), submit your paper as specified by your instructor.

Congratulations!

**You have successfully planned, pre-written, and written a high quality research paper!
Now you know and can repeat this same process whenever you have a research paper assignment.**

Now go take a break, you've earned it!