A Guide to Developing a Research Paper Topic

The purpose of this guide is to lead you through the process of beginning a college level research paper. While the requirements for a research paper can vary from class to class and from field to field, the following steps are appropriate for most disciplines.

1. Understand the Assignment
The first step towards writing a research paper is to understand your assignment; what are your professor’s expectations and how can you meet them? Begin by making a list of all of the criteria for the paper, such as the length, the number and types of sources (books, journals and Internet sites) as well as the critical questions that need to be addressed. What specific questions must you answer? Also, consider how these questions relate to your course as a whole. If you are having a hard time understanding the assignment, contact your professor immediately.

   Model Assignment: Investigate an architectural, social, or political aspect of a major American City. What is the origin of the city's structure, and based on its history, can we predict where it will go in the future? Use 3 sources, one book, one journal article, and one Internet site. 3-5 pages.

2. Form General Questions
Your questions are the starting point for your research paper. They are the subjects that you are investigating from the particular angle that interests you. The questions are often based on something that you have witnessed, heard about in passing, or have only touched on in your coursework. It is important for the questions to be open enough for your research to have an impact, since your interests will change in the process of learning about your topic, but narrow enough to focus your process.

   Example of General Questions: Why do some parts of New York City have standardized architecture, while other neighborhoods seem more random in design? Why do some parts of Manhattan seem to be planned while others might have developed more organically?
3. Isolate Critical Questions

Once you have the starting point for your research paper, the next step is to isolate your critical questions. These lead you to the information that you need to answer your general questions. Just like with the process of understanding the assignment, your parameters can often take the form of a list of critical pieces of information that you need to investigate. These critical questions will be your guide as you enter the world of research.

*Example of Critical Questions: Which parts of Manhattan are in a grid? When were they developed? Who made the decision to develop them in this way?*

4. Begin Your Research

At the beginning of research, your job is to compile as many sources of information as possible. A few of the many valuable sources of information are books, journals, and academic databases. However, a good starting point may be the Internet – try plugging your subject into any of the popular search engines, such as google.com and yahoo.com. This will help you become familiar with the way your subject is discussed in the world at large. However, for any academic essay, you must utilize the library. If you are not familiar with the Brooklyn College library, begin by attending one of the tours or special information sessions at the library.

*Examples of Sources:*

*Book:*

*Article:*

*Internet Site:*
5. Sort Through Your Research

Once you have gathered every source of information possible, begin the process of sorting through the material. You cannot use the same number of sources in a five-page paper as in a two-hundred-page dissertation. Find what is both relevant to your topic and interesting to you. It is not necessary to read every source in its entirety: allow yourself to browse, noticing what really grabs your attention. For each book, look at both the table of contents and the index for any terms that connect with your topic.

Example of the Sorting Process: While Esther Cohen’s article, “They Love New York” is very interesting, it does not relate to my topic because it deals with cultural rather than structural aspects of the city. However, Michael Wallace’s A New Deal for New York really connects with my questions because it focuses on city planning and has a chapter devoted specifically to Greenwich Village.

6. Create a System for Research

In working on a large research project, it is imperative that you keep track of where all your information is coming from. By creating a tracking system at the beginning, you will be able to move between a variety of sources with relative ease. Some useful tools creating a system for research are post-it notes and index cards. For more information, please see the Brooklyn College Learning Center handout titled: “Selecting and Using Quotes.”

7. Re-Direct Your Questions and Create a Hypothesis

At this point, you will have a much stronger idea of what your research paper is about. You will be able to truly pinpoint your topic and focus your critical question. You may have to visit the library for a second time and fill in some of the gaps in your research. In writing a thorough research paper, the key is to be both flexible and directed at the same time: do not be distracted by irrelevant information, but do not ignore a new piece of information that may complicate your paper.

Example of Hypothesis: While city planners initially designed the Upper West Side, it was the work of architects and the city government to make sure their designs were implemented. In contrast, the West Village grew more organically, and without a clear design for growth. Through comparing the upper West Side and the west village, it is clear that the degree to which each neighborhood adheres to a grid, dramatically effects its contribution to the overall aesthetics of New York City.

8. Plan for Citation

Many disciplines have their own form of citation. Before you begin writing your research paper, make sure that you know what form your professor expects you to use. The proper use of citations is the best insurance against plagiarism. Ask your professor if you should be using footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical references. The Brooklyn College Learning Center has handouts on the dominant forms of citation as well as how to avoid plagiarism. Once you know the form to use, practice using it as you take notes on your research. By keeping track of the sources for your information, you will save yourself a substantial headache later on.

Examples of Citation Forms:

MLA:

APA:
9. Begin the Writing Process by Creating an Outline

Every writer works in a different way, but with the research paper it is especially important to be organized. Now that you have most of your research, make an outline of which pieces belong where. Estimate how long each section should be – then select the appropriate amount of research for each section. You will continue learning about your subject through process of writing, but remember that while the research you have done is your guide, you are the writer. Do not allow yourself to write strictly a list of facts; instead, establish a strong thesis that you will prove by the end of your paper.

For more information on the writing process, please see the Brooklyn College Learning Center handouts on Essay Structure, Thesis Development, Paragraph Organization, and Forms of Citation and Plagiarism.