PLEASE NOTE: This is an interactive document, so along the way you’ll want to click on the hyperlinks, which look like this for links to web sites and videos.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN
Before you begin your research paper, it may be helpful to discuss what a research paper is. A research paper is the end product of an involved process of research, critical thinking, source evaluation, organization, and composition. Research papers have a certain agreed upon format which can be different depending on who you are writing the paper for. Rasmussen College uses the American Psychological Association (APA) format. You will see as you write a few of them that research papers are ever-changing organisms that grow with time.

It is important to note that a research paper is not simply a summary of a topic using sources. It is not a book report or an essay. With a research paper, you need to investigate and evaluate sources with the intention of offering an interpretation of the source material in the context of the overall topic. In short, you use your source material and your own insights to prove your point.

In every research paper you write, you will consciously recite source material in various parts of your paper in an attempt to prove your conclusions are valid. This does not mean that you copy and paste someone else’s work; it means you can use tiny insights from other authors and properly cite them in your text, making sure to give the authors credit for their work. Copying another author’s work without properly citing them in your paper is plagiarism, and plagiarism is strictly prohibited; see our Academic Integrity Online Guide.

STEP 1: CHOOSE A TOPIC
There are two ways a research topic may be presented to you:
Your instructor gives you a list of topics or research question that have already been deemed worthy of researching, and you as the student get to choose the one you would like to research. For students new to research papers, this can be helpful because it eliminates the need for you to choose a topic on your own.
Your instructor provides an assignment sheet that covers the logistics of the research paper, but leaves the topic or research question selection up to you. In this case, you need to make sure your research topic is somehow relevant to the course, and submitting your idea to the instructor for approval prior to starting your research is a great idea.

A great method to find a good research topic consists of several steps:

Brainstorm
Start by writing down as many topics as you can think of to get them out of your head and on to your paper. Don’t worry about listing any ideas you think aren’t good; the point of brainstorming is to get a lot of ideas, not get all the best ideas.
Narrow down your ideas
Look for the topics that really interest and challenge you and weed out the others. Focus on a limited aspect. For example, narrow it down from "Religion" to "Eastern Religion" to "Buddhism", and perhaps to a specific Buddhist principal or set of principles. Learn to generate search terms. Obtain instructor approval by e-mail for your topic before embarking on full-scale research. If you are uncertain as to what is expected of you in completing the assignment or project, re-read your assignment sheet or ask your instructor.

Conduct a preliminary search
Making sure your topic has enough source material to write your paper is very important and it can mean the difference between choosing one topic or another. Topics that are obscure can be difficult when there is limited source material to draw from, so you may want to avoid them.

Make sure you can understand the source material
Select a subject you can manage. Avoid subjects that are too technical, learned, or specialized. Avoid topics that have only a very narrow range of source materials. Identify popular vs. scholarly sources and primary vs. secondary sources.

Remember research papers are fluid
Keep in mind that you may change your topic after you begin your research. Research topics tend to be fluid, and your research into your initial topic may yield surprising and exciting results you can choose to pursue. This happens often in research and it is not a bad thing. Remember to check in with your instructor if you change your topic.

STEP 2: FIND INFORMATION
Go to the Online Library
Find print and electronic books, articles, and other resources in the Rasmussen College Online Library. To utilize the library resources, you will log in through the Student Portal. If you have trouble finding the resources and information you need, use the Click to Chat feature on the library home page. If you have never used Rasmussen’s Online Library, watch this short video for help.

Use Other Credible Online Resources
The best way to find trusted resources is through Rasmussen College’s library databases. Here you will find all the research information you will need broken down by subject area. Rasmussen College has gone to great lengths to make this database information available to you free of charge, so use it often.

You can also check out public and university libraries, businesses, government agencies, as well as contact knowledgeable people in your community. Read and evaluate these sources, and bookmark your favorite Internet sites for future use. Print out and take notes of relevant information.

As you gather your resources, jot down full bibliographical information: author, title, place of publication, publisher, date of publication, page numbers, URLs, creation or modification dates on Web pages, and your date of access. Take a moment to immediately add them to your references page in addition to storing them for easy review at a later date. Accurately citing your sources is a vital part of a successful paper. Remember that a paper with missing or incorrect reference information and in-text citations does not meet APA standards and may be subject to a lower or non-passing grade.
Use NoodleBib
Use the NoodleBib citation tool to help you create perfect APA citations every time. NoodleBib is a Rasmussen approved website that allows you to enter the necessary fields for your citation and, with the click of a button, create a correctly structured reference citation that you can copy and paste into your references page. As a Rasmussen College student, this service is free of charge. You will need to enter your username and password to access NoodleBib.

NoodleBib Login Information:
Username: firstname.lastname (example: john.smith)
Password: The first letter of your first name, the first letter of your last name, then the last four digits of your social security number (example: js1234)

Find subject specific resources in Rasmussen Online Academic Guides (Click links below)
Anatomy & Physiology  Business  Criminal Justice  Early Childhood Education  English Composition  Health Information Technology  Human Biology  Medical Assisting  Paralegal  Medical Law & Ethics  Medical Terminology  Nursing  Structure & Function  Undergraduate Research

Search for Credible Web Resources
For general or background information, check out a few trusted websites. Pay attention to domain name extensions, e.g., .edu (educational institution), .gov (government), or .org (non-profit organization). These sites represent institutions and tend to be more reliable, but be careful of possible political bias in some government sites. Be selective of .com (commercial) sites. Some .com sites are useful such as www.mayoclinic.com; however, a large number of them contain advertisements for products and nothing else. Learning how to critically evaluate resources and to search effectively on the internet can help you eliminate irrelevant sites and avoid wasting time. Visit our webinar series archives for workshops on evaluation, locating resources, research paper writing and many more topics: http://rasmussen.libguides.com/llcwebinarseries

STEP 3: STATE YOUR THESIS
Do some critical thinking and write your thesis statement in one sentence. Your thesis statement is a declaration of your belief. The main portion of your research paper will consist of arguments to support and defend this belief. See our webinar on Writing a Thesis Statement.

STEP 4: MAKE A TENTATIVE OUTLINE
An outline is an essential step to the research writing process. Though it is not always required, it will reduce the overall amount of time you’ll spend on your paper. Making sure all your ideas are organized on paper allows you to format your paper in a more coherent way, and helps you cut down your composition time. Watch this video on how to write an outline.
INTRODUCTION  - State your thesis and the purpose of your research paper clearly. What is your purpose for writing the paper? Who is your audience— the general public, other students, scholars, your instructor or a combination of these? State how you plan to approach your topic. Is this a factual report, a persuasive argument, a book review, a comparison, or an analysis of a problem? Briefly explain the major points you plan to cover and why readers should be interested in it.

BODY - The body of your paper is where you present your arguments to support your thesis statement. Remember the rule of three, i.e. find three supporting arguments for each position you take. Begin with a strong argument, then use a stronger one, and end with the strongest argument for your final point.

CONCLUSION – Restate your thesis and summarize your arguments. Explain why you have come to this particular conclusion.

STEP 5: ORGANIZE YOUR NOTES
Organize all the information you have gathered according to your outline. Critically analyze your research data. Using the best available sources, check for accuracy and verify that the information is factual, up-to-date, and correct. Opposing views should also be noted if they help to support your thesis. This is the most important stage in writing a research paper. Here you will analyze, synthesize, sort, and digest the information you have gathered and learn something about your topic. You must be able to effectively communicate your thoughts, ideas, insights, and research findings to others through written or spoken format, according to the assignment’s guidelines. Instructors will be looking for integration of your sources with your voice and awareness of audience in the content of the assignment or paper.

Do not include any information that is not relevant to your topic, and do not include information that you do not understand. Make sure the information that you have noted is carefully recorded (paraphrased or summarized) in your own words, or quoted when needed to strengthen defense of your thesis. Avoid plagiarism by documenting with in-text citations all, statistics, graphs, charts and ideas paraphrased, summarized, quoted in the body of your paper. As you organize your notes, jot down detailed bibliographical information for each cited paragraph and have it ready to transfer to your Reference list.

STEP 6: WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT
Start with the first topic in your outline. Read all the relevant notes you have gathered that have been marked, e.g. with the capital Roman numeral I.

Summarize, paraphrase or quote directly for each idea you plan to use in your essay. Use a technique that suits you, e.g. write summaries, paraphrases or quotations on note cards, or separate sheets of lined paper. Mark each card or sheet of paper clearly with your outline code or reference, e.g., IB2a or IIC, etc.

If it is helpful to you, use a symbol such as "#" to mark the spot where you would like to check back later to edit a paragraph. The unusual symbol will make it easy for you to find the exact location again. Delete the symbol once editing is completed.
CHECKLIST ONE:
Is my thesis statement concise and clear?
Did I follow my outline? Did I miss anything?
Are my arguments presented in a logical sequence?
Are all sources properly cited to ensure that I am not plagiarizing?
Have I proved my thesis with strong supporting arguments?
Have I made my intentions and points clear in the essay?

Use a dictionary or a thesaurus as needed, run spell check, and submit your paper to Grammarly. Correct all errors and improve the overall quality of the paper to the best of your ability. Remember that a spell checker does not catch most grammatical errors and misused words (ex. there instead of they’re). Misused words, missing words or grammatical errors can be viewed as sloppy writing and can degrade the value of your research. Ask someone else to read your paper. Sometimes a second pair of eyes can see mistakes that you missed or read your paper aloud to hear errors.

CHECKLIST TWO:
Did I begin each paragraph with a proper topic sentence?
Have I supported my arguments with documented proof or examples?
Are there any run-on or unfinished sentences?
Did I use any unnecessary or repetitious words?
Do I have varying lengths of sentences?
Does one paragraph or idea flow smoothly into the next?
Are there any spelling or grammatical errors?
Are quotes accurate in source, spelling, and punctuation?
Are all my citations accurate and correctly cited in APA format?
Did I avoid using contractions? Use "cannot" instead of "can't", "do not" instead of "don't"?
Did I use third person as much as possible? Avoid using phrases such as "I think", "I guess", "I suppose."
Have I made my argument clear and interesting but remained objective?
Did I leave a sense of completion for my reader(s) at the end of the paper?

Proofread your final paper carefully for spelling, punctuation, and missing or duplicated words. Make the effort to ensure that your final paper is clean, tidy, neat, and attractive. Aim to have your final paper ready two or more days before the deadline and submit to our Online Writing Lab for review. Remember why you wrote this paper: because you will know more information, learn to write better, think critically, and organize your thoughts... and if that is not enough, you are earning a college degree that nobody can ever take away from you!
VIDEO LINK RESOURCES USED IN THIS GUIDE:

Citing Sources
Avoiding Plagiarism
Academic Integrity Online Guide.
Assignment sheet
Good research topic
Learn to generate search terms
Identify popular vs. scholarly sources
Primary vs. secondary sources
Rasmussen Online Library
Database information
Reading Resources
Evaluate sources,
NoodleBib citation tool
Library and Learning Center Webinar Series
Writing a Thesis Statement
Creating an Outline
Integration of Resources
In-text citations
Reference list
Summarize, paraphrase or quote
Citation in APA format

Contact Us:
Facebook.com/RasLLC
Instant Message: LLCRasmussen
Text: 952-314-3920
Email: LLC@rasmussen.edu

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