

Columbia University
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**Some General Guidelines for Writing a Good Social Science
Research Paper**

1. **Choose a topic:** First identify a general area of interest that you would like to investigate. For example: childhood asthma

2. **Define a Question:** Think of some of the current debates within the topic area you have chosen and then choose a specific question that interests you. For example: What has caused the increased rate of asthma in inner-city youth? Always consider the practicality of your question. Remember, this is only a brief research paper and you have a limited amount of time to complete the project. Basically, the earlier you decide on a topic, the easier it will be to complete the project.

3. **Start Researching Your Topic:**
A good place to start is in CLIO – Columbia’s on-line catalog.
 - ***Begin by performing a keyword search.*** This will help you locate some good books on your topic. Browsing the shelves around the books you have located on-line is a great way to increase the results of this first-line search.

 - ***Search through some of the electronic databases like:***
 - Medline
 - Social Science Abstracts
 - Psychinfo
 - Popline (for topics related to population and family health)
 - ProQuest
 - Lexis-Nexis is a good source for materials from the media

 - ***You can also look for articles in social science journals. A good place to start is:***
 - Social Science and Medicine
 - Bulletin of the History of Medicine
 - American Journal of Sociology

- American Journal of Psychology
- Medical Anthropology Quarterly
- Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry

Many of these journals are available on-line. You can access them through CLIO.

- **Always look through the bibliographies of your sources.** Presumably, the authors of these sources have similar interests to your own, so take advantage of the work that's already been done. That's one of the reasons publishers spend the money to print extensive bibliographies.
- **Use the internet.** The internet is a wonderful resource if used properly. Many government statistics are now available on-line. However, remember that there are no barriers to publishing on the internet, so be discriminating of the sites that you visit for source material. If you have any questions, e-mail me and I can try to give you some advice.

4. Start Reading:

Note Taking: Always take notes on the sources you read. You need not take notes on the entire source – just record those facts that will be important for your argument and analysis. It is equally important to note the full bibliographic citation of each source you reference in your paper. These references will be used in the body of the paper either when you paraphrase or quote a source. They will also be used for compiling your bibliography. (**Note:** please use any social science reference style that you are familiar with. If you are unfamiliar with social science references, then you may note citations in the style most commonly used in your field). Make sure you distinguish between information that is paraphrased and that which is quoted in your notes. Quoted information should be marked as such in your paper.

Critical Reading: Always read your sources with a critical eye, looking for compelling evidence about the question you are pursuing. Critical reading also involves reading actively. Always ask questions as you are reading – never take anything an author says for granted. Pay attention to how the author uses his/her evidence. Also look at how the author frames his/her analysis. An article need not focus on the exact topic you are researching to be worthy of reading. You will often find valuable information in articles that focus on the same contextual area that you are interested in. For example, if I'm interested in researching the causes of increasing rates of asthma in inner city youths, I may read articles that discuss the recent degradation of urban livelihoods.

5. Start refining your question till you can derive a clear and concise thesis statement: This will occur as you read. It is important to make notes of these ideas as they develop. Reflect on your reading materials by jotting down small points of analysis in your notes. Eventually you will arrive at a clearly developed hypothesis for your paper. For example: The increased rate of asthma in inner city youths is due to the overcrowding of urban areas.

6. Turn on the computer and write!

You may have trouble writing at first, but if you follow a few organizational guidelines, you will eventually produce a cogent and compelling argument. The first thing to do is just write. Write down any ideas that come to mind. You can revise them later. But if you don't write, there won't be anything to revise. **I often find that writing an outline is very helpful.** An outline provides you with a roadmap that will help structure the organization of the paper. In the long run, papers written with outlines in mind are often much easier to read because their arguments are more organized. Your outline doesn't need to be fancy – a simple napkin can do in some circumstances. Your goal is to simply visualize the organization of the paper. Your outline also doesn't need to be extraordinarily long. A good paper is built on just a few main ideas. A paper structured around a large number of ideas often ends up sounding very cumbersome and confusing.

- **Introductory section:** Start out with your thesis sentence, i.e. what do I aim to illustrate in this paper. This should be stated in the first paragraph of the paper. The introductory paragraph (or paragraphs) should set the tone for the paper. Give the reader your claim and set up the structure of the paper so that the reader knows what to expect. You may also want to tell your reader why this question is relevant. What is its importance to the field of public health?
- **The body:** The bulk of the paper (often referred to as the body of the paper) will support the argument put forth in the introductory section. This is where you will put all that research to use. Make claims that substantiate your thesis and use your sources to support those claims (but always remember to cite the sources). Begin paragraphs with a topic sentence that tells the reader what's coming up in the near term and then use the rest of the paragraph to support this claim. You may find that an outline really facilitates the composition of this section of the paper.
- **Conclusion:** This is your last chance to convince your reader that your thesis is both accurate and important. Restate your thesis here and concisely revisit some of your main arguments. Then bring it on home with a statement that will seem undeniably convincing.

7. A Few More Comments on Outlines:

An outline is a very useful tool for organizing your ideas. Think of it as the structure that will frame your paper. The outline is like the steel girders that frame a building. When you finish erecting the girders, you can then start to fill in the spaces with walls and finished rooms. The cozy rooms are the arguments that will support your outline.

The girders that you will be using to construct this outline are the topic sentences that will set the tone for each paragraph. These sentences will in turn all support the main beam, which is the thesis sentence that appears in your introductory paragraph.

The first step in writing an outline is to refine your question. What is it that you want to argue in this paper? That will be your thesis statement. Write it down on the first line, but remember, you can continue refining this statement throughout the writing process.

Then think of the main arguments that you will use to support this thesis. These will be developed into your topic sentences. Finally, jot down a brief summary of the evidence you will use to support these topic sentences.

At this point you are ready to fill in the spaces in your structure and you are on your way to writing a cogent and organized argument.

8. Further Resources:

Becker, H. (1986). *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

University of Chicago Press (1993). *The Chicago Manual of Style*. 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.