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# The Research Paper

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A research paper is best done by dividing the work into steps. Instructors generally give an assignment several weeks before it is due because they know it takes time.

- 1. Read the assignment!** What kind of a research paper is it? How long should it be? How many and what kind of sources need to be cited? What citation style is required? When is it due? Is marking criteria available? If you are unsure, ask the instructor to explain the assignment and course expectations.
- 2. Select a subject.** This will be a general subject, not a limited one.  
e.g. eating disorders
- 3. Do a preliminary search.** Visit the VCC library in person or online at <http://library.vcc.ca>. The library reference assistant can show you how to find references on the subject, including material from online databases. Follow the steps on the library's online tutorial on how to research. Survey the materials to get an overview of the subject. Are there aspects or ideas about the subject that interest you?
- 4. Narrow the subject.** After becoming familiar with the subject, limit it to a manageable topic.  
e.g. eating disorders in adolescent males
- 5. Start your working bibliography.** Visit the VCC library to locate books and journals on the specific topic. Is there enough information available and is it from reliable sources? If not, ask the library reference assistant to show you how to do a specific search or change the topic. For each item, note the title, author, edition, city of publication, date of publication, and publisher. Also, note the pages you are using.
- 6. Browse.** Skim rapidly through the material to find out how and if it fits the topic. Record useful information when you come across it.
- 7. Turn your topic into a question.** Think about a question(s) you want answered or what researchers or authorities are investigating.  
e.g. What factors are contributing to the rise of eating disorders in adolescent males?

8. **Write a tentative thesis statement.** An answered question often makes an excellent thesis statement. The thesis statement will be the main point of the paper and will be supported with research references.  
e.g. An obsession with body weight and appearance is contributing to the rise of eating disorders in adolescent males.  
The thesis will be tentative because you might revise it based on the findings of the research.
9. **Make a rough outline.** Make an outline in point form to organize information to include in the research paper.  
e.g. kinds of eating disorders, causes of eating disorders, etc.
10. **Take and label notes.** Read and take notes to help you understand the topic; some students use file cards or separate sheets of paper. As you come across material to include in the paper, label your notes to know where to fit them in the outline. Quote directly if you are going to use the material as a quotation. Otherwise, read and paraphrase – that is, put it into your own words. Always note the source of your information and the page number. This will help you avoid plagiarism.
11. **Revise your thesis or outline if needed.** Do you have enough useful ideas, notes and information to support your argument or claim?
12. **Write a rough draft.** Based on the outline, draft the body, introduction and conclusion. Re-read the first draft to see how the ideas flow and if there are any gaps.
13. **Prepare a final draft.** Revise the paper to make needed improvements. Edit for spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. Proofread line by line. Ask a Learning Centre tutor how to improve your editing and writing skills. Learning Centre tutors can answer your specific writing questions or direct you to useful resources, such as writing checklists. Tutors do not proofread assignments but can show you how to proofread your writing.
14. **Format, add citations, and finalize the bibliography.** Make sure that the final copy is in the correct format. Follow the citation style guide to format the in-text citations. On a separate page, list all references under the appropriate heading. VCC Style Guides for APA and MLA and automatic citation makers are linked online at <http://library.vcc.ca>. A library reference assistant or Learning Centre tutor can show you how to format citations and references.
15. **Print your final copy to hand in.** Instructors prefer a single-sided copy because it's easier to read and mark. Remember to save a copy for yourself.