

RIO HONDO  
COLLEGE LIBRARY

# The Research Paper: Ten Steps To Researching It Right

By Judy Sevilla-Marzona and Adele Enright  
copyright 2006©  
all rights reserved



## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Step 1 - Understand The Assignment .....	1
Step 2 - Select Your Topic.....	2
Step 3 - Identify Keywords and Concepts of Your Topic .....	4
Step 4 - Focus Your Research: When to Use Which Resources .....	5
Step 5 - Find Books on Your Topic.....	7
Step 6 - When You Need Articles.....	8
Step 7 - Search for Web Sites About Your Topic.....	10
Step 8 - Evaluate Your Sources.....	12
Step 9 - Cite Your Sources.....	14
Step 10 - Important Reminders.....	16
Research Paper Checklist.....	17

## Introduction

Writing papers is an essential part of the college experience. Whether you write one paper or twenty for your courses here in Rio Hondo College, you will be expected to demonstrate reading and writing skills, critical thinking, reasoning, and organization.

For many students, the bad news is that the process of writing a paper is unfamiliar and even daunting. The good news, however, is that help is readily available from two sources. The Library will assist you in preparing to write your paper and obtaining your research materials, while the Writing Center will help you in the actual writing process.

This handbook has been prepared by RHC librarians to guide you through the research process and familiarize you with the resources that the Library offers. Follow this step-by-step research plan for a fast start to your research paper.

# STEP 1

## Understand the Assignment

### ➡ Ask Yourself:

What does your research require?

- A description of the topic?
- A history of the growth or development of the subject matter?
- Biographical information?
- Analysis of issues related to the topic?
- Taking a stand on an issue and providing persuasive arguments?
- Statistics, case studies, photos?
- When is the assignment due?

What types of resources and how many of each are you allowed to consult?

- Books?
- Journal articles?
- Encyclopedias?
- Internet Web sites?

How are you supposed to cite your sources of information?

### ⇒ Then Do This:

- Read your assignment sheet and syllabus.
- Make sure you know which format ("style") you are expected to use to cite your research sources: MLA, APA, or any other.
- Check with your instructor to make sure you are clear on what you are expected to do in your paper.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## STEP 2

### Select Your Topic

Instructors may sometimes assign you a specific topic (or choice of topics) for your research paper, but oftentimes they expect you to choose your own topic. For some students, selecting a topic is the most difficult part of doing research.

What is a “good” topic? Generally, it must be:

- **Appropriate:** It must fit or meet the criteria for the assignment.

Examples:

Assignment:	Discuss effects of violence on society
Appropriate Topic:	Television cartoons and preschool children
Not Appropriate:	Characteristics of popular TV cartoons

- **Interesting:** Select a topic that you are interested in and that you will enjoy researching.
- **Manageable:** A manageable topic has enough information available. This may mean refining your topic so that it is neither too broad nor too narrow.

Examples:

Too much information available on the topic:	Abortion
Too little information available on the topic:	Abortion in the city of La Puente in 1995-1998 among high school girls.

➡ **Ask Yourself:**

After reading the above definition, do I think I have a good topic?

⇒ **Then Do This:**

If yes, double check with the reference librarian.

If no, ASK A REFERENCE LIBRARIAN for help. Some sources for ideas:

- Your textbook or assigned readings
- A general encyclopedia
- “Research Topics,” “Subject Guides,” or “Controversial Topics” in the Rio Hondo College Library Web site: <http://library.riohondo.edu/>
- Books:

- REF LB1047.3.L35 1991  
10,000 Ideas for Term Papers, Projects and Reports
- REF LB2369.M463 1987  
Sourcebook for English Papers : 1001 Ideas for Term Papers, Projects, Reports, and Speeches
- HM45.A7  
1000 Ideas for Term Papers in Sociology
- H62.F35  
1000 Ideas for Term Papers in Social Science

➡ Ask Yourself:

Is my topic too broad or too narrow?

⇒ Then Do This:

Narrow your topic by phrasing it as a sentence or a question.

Examples:

Too Broad:	Bilingual education
Better Topic:	Bilingual education in the elementary schools hampers students' learning.
Too Broad:	Gambling
Better Topic:	Does online gambling lead to an increase in crime?

- Very little information may be available on topics that are too narrow.
- Take a step back and expand the picture.

Examples:

Too Narrow:	Women's health concerns in New Delhi
Better Topic:	Women's health—a world perspective

Remember to consult with the Reference Librarian on whether there is enough information on your topic!

## Step 3

### Identify Keywords and Concepts of Your Topic

Keywords and concepts describe the main idea(s) of your topic and enable you to focus your research.

➡ Ask Yourself:

What are the keywords or concepts of my topic?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Jot down (make notes of) the terms that you identify as keywords and concepts.

➡ Ask Yourself:

What are the related terms of each keyword and concept?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Develop related terms. Check dictionaries, thesauri, and general or subject encyclopedias. For additional assistance, ASK A REFERENCE LIBRARIAN.
- Underneath each keyword or concept write related term(s).

Examples:

Topic: The effects of violent television cartoons on preschoolers.

Keywords/Concepts: Cartoons  
Violence  
Preschoolers  
Television

Related Terms: Animation  
Violent  
Child  
Animated  
Nonviolent  
Children  
Young child  
Young children  
Kid(s)  
T.V.

## Step 4

### Focus Your Research: When to Use Which Resources

➡ Ask Yourself:

Do I need background information?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Start with reference books such as general encyclopedias and almanacs.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Do I need historical information?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use general and subject encyclopedias.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Do I need current information?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use online periodical databases (such as ProQuest) for magazine or journal articles.
- Use authoritative Web sites. Check the Subject Guides Webpage at [http://library.riohondo.edu/subject\\_guides/index.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/subject_guides/index.htm). To search the Web for authoritative Web sites take the "Web Searching" workshop offered by the Library. For details ASK A LIBRARIAN.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Do I need statistical data?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use reference books such as statistical abstracts.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Do I need journal articles?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use ProQuest and select the "Peer Reviewed" option.





## Step 5

### Find Books on Your Topic

Libraries organize books by subject. For example, most books about science are shelved in the same area. In addition, libraries have an area called “Reference” that contains many of the books you may want to use for background information. Remember that reference books are for room use only and therefore cannot be checked out. The third and fourth floors of the Library provide the student researcher with circulating books that can be checked out. In addition, each book has a unique call number that identifies its location in the library.

➡ Ask Yourself:  
How do I find books on my topic?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use the SIRS online Library catalog. Here is another opportunity to use the keywords, concepts, and related terms that were developed in Step 3.
- ASK A REFERENCE LIBRARIAN.
- Attend a Library orientation with your class.
- Attend a Library workshop on using the catalog.

➡ Ask Yourself:  
What do I do when I have used the SIRS online Library catalog, and asked the Reference Librarian for assistance, and ALL the books I want are checked out or not at RHCL?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use the RHCL Web site to access other libraries’ online catalogs. When you discover a book at another library, remember to call the library in advance about its borrowing policies.

➡ Ask Yourself:  
What if I have done all of the above and still get nothing?

⇒ Then Do This:

- ASK A REFERENCE LIBRARIAN about Interlibrary Loan (ILL) of books. ILL requires at least three weeks advance notice.

## Step 6

### When You Need Articles

Many research paper assignments require the student researcher to include information found in articles from periodicals. A periodical is a magazine, journal (peer-reviewed), or a newspaper.

The fastest and best way to locate articles is through a periodical index. Periodical indexes are available in print (paper) and online through the Internet. Print periodical indexes provide citations, references, or information to locate an article. Many online periodical indexes provide the added advantage of the complete article.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Where can I find articles from recent (current) periodicals?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use ProQuest, SIRS, and other online databases to locate articles that originally appeared in print periodicals.
- Attend a Library ProQuest workshop to learn how to use ProQuest. ProQuest also provides an online tour at <http://www.proquest.com>.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Where can I find older articles for a topic that happened before 1986?

Example:

The Watts Riots of 1962.

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature. ASK THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN for assistance.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Where can I find articles about a health or medical topic?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use Health Reference Center, an online database which is accessed from the Library Web site. ASK A REFERENCE LIBRARIAN for assistance.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Where can I find articles and information about a person's life (biographical information)?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use Biography Resource Center, which is accessed from the Library Web site.  
ASK THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN for assistance.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Step 7

### Search For Web Sites About Your Topic

You, the student researcher, can use several approaches to locate information about your topic through the Web. Effective Web research means that you can find appropriate Web sites quickly and includes the use of:

- Subject Guides
- Web Directories
- Search Engines

These Web resources, when used effectively, can yield authoritative (quality) Web sites.

Subject Guides quickly provide links to other Web sites for a particular topic. Subject guides are developed by Librarians who have researched and evaluated Web sites on a particular topic. You use these prescreened Web sites as authoritative sources. Rio Hondo College Librarians have compiled subject guides on numerous topics that are often requested by Rio Hondo College students. To access Rio Hondo College subject guides and links to other subject guides, go to [http://library.riohondo.edu/subject\\_guides/index.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/subject_guides/index.htm).

Web Directories, especially those that select and evaluate Web sites, are another good source for Web sites. For a good example of a Web directory that provides authoritative Web sites see the Librarians' Index to the Internet at <http://www.lii.org>.

For links to a number of Web directories see the Library "Web Directories" page at [http://library.riohondo.edu/research\\_help/websearch\\_tools.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/research_help/websearch_tools.htm).

Search Engines can provide a multitude of Web sites about your topic. Remember, it is up to you, the student researcher, to evaluate Web sites and determine if they are appropriate and authoritative.



NOTE: Instructors do not accept Web site information that is untrue, inappropriate, out of date, or not authoritative. Plan to attend a Search Engines Workshop offered by the Rio Hondo College Librarians. Please call (562) 908-3484 for more information.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Where can I find a few good Web sites about a general topic? For example, abortion, gun control, capital punishment?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use the Rio Hondo College Library Web Site's Subject Guides at [http://library.riohondo.edu/subject\\_guides/index.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/subject_guides/index.htm).

➡ Ask Yourself:

Where can I browse an evaluated list of topics with links to Web sites?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use a Web Directory such as the Librarians' Index to the Internet at <http://www.lii.org>.
- Also see the links to Web directories at [http://library.riohondo.edu/research\\_help/websearch\\_tools.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/research_help/websearch_tools.htm)

➡ Ask Yourself:

How can I locate Web sites about a very specific topic?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use a Search Engine such as Google at <http://www.google.com>.
- See links to other Search Engines at [http://library.riohondo.edu/Research\\_Help/search\\_engines.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/Research_Help/search_engines.htm).
- Attend a Search Engine Workshop. ASK A LIBRARIAN for more information or for assistance with your search.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Step 8

### Evaluate Your Sources

You, the student researcher, have collected the sources for your research paper. Good! You may have a number of journal articles, Web site information, books, etc., for your assignment. Before you continue you must evaluate each source and determine if it is suitable for your research paper.

It is essential that you evaluate information found on the Web. Why is this you ask? The main reason is that anyone can create and post any type of information to the Web. There is no person or organization that ensures the quality and authority of information that is placed on the Web. The Web is a “buyer beware” environment. Therefore it is up to you, the student researcher, to determine whether a Web site is authoritative. Ask the Reference Librarian for help in checking out the author’s credentials.



NOTE: Instructors want students to use information that is objective, authoritative, accurate, and timely (especially for current event topics).

Authoritative means that the person writing the information is an expert on the subject, has a reputation in the field, or is a noted journalist, professor, etc. If information is from an authority in the field it can be considered quality information. In other words, don’t use the National Enquirer as a source for authoritative information!

The student researcher must evaluate the authority of magazine and newspaper articles found in print or online (ProQuest, SIRS, etc.)

Journal articles from peer-reviewed journals are a good source for authoritative information. These journal articles are written by knowledgeable authors and are reviewed by other experts on that subject before being published. Instructors usually encourage students to use journal articles in student research papers.



NOTE: Use the “Peer-Reviewed” option in ProQuest to locate articles from peer-reviewed journals.

Objective means that the material is fair, balanced, and reasoned.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Who is the author of the book, article, Web site, etc.?

What are the credentials of the author?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Review the book, article, Web site, etc. and determine if the author is respected and an expert (authority) in his/her field.

➡ Ask Yourself:

What is the publication or update date?

⇒ Then Do This:

- For current event topics the date should be recent. For historical or background information older information is acceptable.

➡ Ask Yourself:

Is the book, article, or Web site biased or objective?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use the information about the author/organization to determine this. For example, information published by the National Rifle Association is biased toward gun ownership.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## Step 9

### Cite Your Sources

An essential part of a research paper is the Works Cited page. This is where you will give credit to and acknowledge the authors and sources of the information you used to complete your research. The list is made up of citations, which are references. A reference gives the reader (your instructor) enough information to locate the book, article, or Web site you used. Works Cited pages follow a very structured form. Most instructors require that students format citations according to guidelines from:

- MLA - Modern Language Association
- APA - American Psychological Association



NOTE: Read your assignment to determine which guidelines to use.

For the MLA formats most frequently used by Rio Hondo College Students, go to [http://library.riohondo.edu/research\\_help/Citing\\_Sources/index.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/research_help/Citing_Sources/index.htm).

This Web page is also available as a handout from the Reference Room on the 2nd floor of the RHC Library. Additional MLA formats are found in the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers and at the MLA Web site at <http://www.mla.org>.

For the APA formats use the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association or see the APA Web site at <http://www.APA.org>.



NOTE: To make your creation of the Works Cited page easier, always make copies of the title page and copyright page for books. Keep printouts of Web sites and articles found in online databases (ProQuest, SIRS, etc.)

#### ➡ Ask Yourself:

Do I need a Works Cited page, a list of sources used, or a bibliography for my research paper?

#### ⇒ Then Do This:

- Review your assignment. Ask your instructor if you are not sure.

➡ Ask Yourself:  
Where can I find examples of MLA formats?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (REF LB2369.G53).
- Go to the Rio Hondo College Library Web site at [http://library.riohondo.edu/research\\_help/Citing\\_Sources/index.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/research_help/Citing_Sources/index.htm)
- Go to the MLA Web site at <http://www.mla.org>

➡ Ask Yourself:  
Where can I find examples of APA formats?

⇒ Then Do This:

- Use the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (REF BF76.7.P83) or see the APA Web site at <http://www.apastyle.org/eleceref.html>.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Step 10

### Important Reminders

- Start your research early!
- Be prepared when you come to the Library: bring a copy of the assignment, clean computer disks, your copy card, money, paper, and pen/pencil.
- Make an appointment for a research paper consultation with a Librarian. Call (562) 908-3484 or extension 3484 for details and to schedule an appointment. With a scheduled appointment, the Librarian will be able to assist you uninterrupted.
- Come to the Library and ASK A REFERENCE LIBRARIAN for help. Call (562) 908-3484 from home; e-mail the reference desk at [http://library.riohondo.edu/Research\\_Help/ask\\_a\\_question.htm](http://library.riohondo.edu/Research_Help/ask_a_question.htm). For e-mail reference, allow at least 48 hours to receive a reply.
- If doing research from home, get a copy of the database passwords from the reference desk.
- Attend a Library orientation with your class. Ask questions and take notes during the orientation!
- Attend Library workshops. Call (562) 908-3484 for details or ASK A LIBRARIAN.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Research Paper Checklist

Review the "Important Reminders" on page 16 before you begin your research!

- o Step 1: Understand The Assignment
- o Step 2: Select Your Topic
- o Step 3: Identify Keywords and Concepts in Your Topic
- o Step 4: Focus Your Research
- o Step 5: Find Books
- o Step 6: Find Articles
- o Step 7: Search for Web Sites
- o Step 8: Evaluate Your Sources
- o Step 9: Cite Your Sources

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_