Writing the Research Paper

1. Choose a topic: Make sure it’s one you’ll enjoy, because you’ll be living with it for a while! Check web directories, search engines, and electronic journals for ideas.

2. Begin preliminary reading of those resources mentioned in #1 to narrow your topic to a researchable issue.

3. Develop a preliminary thesis statement or a research question (e.g., How has the growth of the ski industry impacted the environmental integrity of Vermont? OR The practice of home schooling among Vermont families does not affect a student’s ability to succeed in college.).

4. Develop a working outline that places your topic within its academic discipline and lists all the important aspects of the paper. The following might be a good ‘starting’ outline for the ski/environmental issue mentioned above.
   a. Introduction
   b. Ski industry
      i. Green Mountains defined from a political/economic view
      ii. Vermont economics
      iii. Tourism
      iv. Recreation
      v. Health and fitness
   c. Environment
      i. Green Mountains defined as an ecosystem
      ii. Ecosystems as a whole
      iii. Impact on environment
         1. snow making
         2. population growth
         3. habitat interruption
         4. endangered species
   d. Conclusion

5. If you are presenting conflicting issues, you MUST include arguments from BOTH SIDES in your preliminary material. If you emphasize one side to support your conclusions, you should show evidence of how that view is more important than the other side.

6. Use library catalogs, online journal indexes, subject directories and search engines to gather resources. Use terms from your outline to locate websites, books, journal articles that support your topic or question.

7. EVALUATE every resource you find. Is it relevant, authoritative, timely, primary or secondary, reliable, or biased?

8. Compile a working bibliography of appropriate and relevant resources. ALWAYS create full citations for each resource. A good rule of thumb is; if you can’t cite it, you can’t use it. Print web pages and journal articles. Hang onto books until you finish!

9. When taking notes, use your outline to identify where a note will fit in the paper. When you’re done, you can rearrange the notes. LABEL everything (author, page) so you can tell later where you got it information from.
10. Modify your outline to reflect your findings

11. Write an introduction that shows where your topic fits into the ‘big picture’, defines all the terms or concepts and shows the significance of your topic or question. The introduction should introduce ALL the parts of your outline.

12. Arrange your notes, putting related information together and write the paper in sections.

13. Avoid plagiarism. Know the difference between summarizing and paraphrasing. If you include someone else’s ideas, be sure to add a footnote (author, page). Put quotations in quotation marks.

14. Consider your audience (reader) when writing your paper. Don’t use colloquialisms or slang in an academic paper. Normally a research paper is written in the third person. Use phrases like; ‘research seems to indicate’, ‘evidence seems to support the conclusion that’, ‘individuals should’; rather than, ‘I chose this topic because’, ‘I found evidence’, ‘I think’, or ‘you should’.

15. Use transitional sentences, words or phrases to connect ideas of sections of your paper together (e.g., In addition to, in contrast to, however, in conclusion, another point-of-view, although).

16. You might have to write a brief introductory paragraph that introduces the points in each section of your paper.

17. Spell and grammar check your paper. Proof read it for clarity, transition between sections, an introduction that introduces all major points and a conclusion that sums it all up.

18. Create a bibliography of all resources included in your narrative. This list is normally in alphabetical order and includes the following information: author, title, publisher, pages. The list is called the List of Works Cited and the resources MUST be in exact format according to the citation style your instructor has specified. That means every comma, period, formatted date, underlining capitalization, and italicizing must be exact according to the style.

19. Word process the final paper according to your instructor’s guidelines. Unless instructed otherwise, a research paper should include a cover page, a Table of Contents, the narrative of your paper, footnotes (or endnotes), and a List of works Cited.

The following resources are available to help you in your writing:


B. The Internet Public Library provides a step-by-step approach to research and writing on a simpler level. http://www.ipl.org/teen/aplus/stepfirst.htm

C. The library also has the following handouts to help you build a research paper:
   1) Guidelines for presenting a research paper (APA style)
   2) Samples from APA style guide for bibliographies
   3) Samples for MLA style guide for bibliographies
   4) Online searching tips and strategies
   5) Note taking
   6) Government documents
   7) Using different types of resources
   8) Locate statistical resources