

Writing a Research Paper: Quick and Easy Guide

by Anna Georgantonis Keah

A sample of the opening pages

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Step 3 Mind Map and Thesis Statement

Create a mind map in the form of a bubble chart as you brainstorm about what you know of the topic including information from your preliminary search for sources.

After your preliminary review, make a mind map which is a bubble chart of your knowledge on the subject. Write down everything that you can think of about your topic, insights you had before and after the preliminary review. As you think of one aspect, branch off into other aspects. The idea is to take a snapshot of what you currently know or want to explore about your topic. This is a spontaneous, freethinking exercise. It does not have to be organized and formal. Get your creative juices flowing!

In this brainstorming process, you will collect more information than you will need, and you will use it as a means of narrowing down and better understanding various aspects of your topic that interest you. Construct a thesis statement, one sentence that summarizes the main point of your paper and include it on the first page of your paper.

Hint: The mind map becomes the springboard to your research project.

This is not a time to hold back. Write down everything that you can possibly think of that relates to your topic. You will be surprised at how much detail will come to mind once you get started. If you have chosen a good solid topic that thoroughly intrigues you, the mind map will flow easily. If you are struggling, perhaps this is the time to change your topic. The mind map really is a blueprint of your brain about your interest in and understanding of your chosen topic.

As you think about your topic, notice that major categories or areas of interest begin to develop. Write them down, and then branch off from these key areas of interest into more detail. The more detailed your mind map is, the easier it will be to write your outline later. You are not going to use everything on the mind map on your outline or even in your paper, but the brainstorming session will help you pinpoint what really interests you about the subject. You might only use half of the information on the mind map, but at least you will know why you picked the topic and where you want to go with it ultimately. You will be surprised at how much you already know about the subject and the many aspects that are yet to be explored. The mind

map truly is the fertile ground from which your research paper will spring to life.

Hint: Imagine your mind is a blank page then fill it up with ideas, thoughts and reflections about your topic.

How I Did It...

My mind map was relatively easy since I had explored my topic from the personal perspective of my illness and had also spent some time on the internet doing my preliminary search. As I brainstormed, I remembered to include major areas of interest about my subject. I listed these major categories and started writing down everything I could think of related to my knowledge of stress. I really had not thought about it that much. At first, I included my knowledge about the illness from personal experience, then I started freethinking about what I had discovered on the internet. It is not that difficult to brainstorm about the many aspects of a topic if you have had some personal experience with it. I started to list my symptoms, both physical and emotional. I explored ways that this illness had changed my life. I tried to pinpoint potential causes. In short, I racked my brain on every aspect of my life since I had been diagnosed with fibromyalgia. After I reviewed a few articles, I was able to compare what I had read with what I was experiencing. I recorded all this information on my mind map which was soon a combination of what I knew and what I still needed to find out.

My mind map gave me a starting point on which to build my research. It gave me the impetus to go forward. It truly offered the motivation to move forward with my paper. I have, in the past, constructed even more than one mind map.

After the mind map, it is a good idea to construct a thesis statement, which is a summary statement describing your main point. The thesis statement should appear in the first paragraph of your paper. It can help keep you on track as far as the purpose of your research. My thesis statement is the last sentence in bold of the first paragraph of the sample papers at the back of this booklet. Review them for a good example of a strong thesis statement.

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Step 4 Headings

From the mind map, identify five to seven major headings for your research paper. This is called the classification pattern of writing.

Major headings will organize your research topic into manageable categories, and they will form the Roman numerals for your outline. In addition, the headings will be placed into the body of your paper so that not only is your paper easier to write, it is easier to read.

This pattern of writing is called "classifying" since you are taking bits of information and classifying them into major common areas. By creating these categories early on, you will have a guide to follow when sorting out all the data you discover.

I. Overview

II. Origins of Stress

III. Repercussions of Stress-Related Disease

IV. Physiology of Stress

V. Treatment of Stress-Related Disease

VI. Findings

Hint: Use your headings as the Roman numerals for your outline.

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How I Did It...

I knew the headings for my paper would somehow evolve from the mind map, so I kept that in mind as I was brainstorming. I tried to think of major categories that interested me, problems I had actually encountered with my illness.

When I went back to review my mind map in search of headings, they just seemed to jump out at me. The headings I ended up choosing were clearly logical dividers for the many aspects of my topic: Overview, Origins, Repercussions, Physiology, Treatment and Findings.

I had really combed my mind to determine these headings and had given it much thought. For my first heading, I knew I wanted something introductory: Overview, Definition, History or Background. For my final heading, I wanted to prepare my audience for a definitive ending: Conclusions, Findings, Recommendations, Observations, or Deductions.

After deciding on my headings, my thoughts truly took a different turn. I could organize my research through these categories. By creating these subject areas, my review of sources could now become more organized. As I was drawn to facts and data that interested me, I was able to classify this information into the areas of my research.

After the headings fell into place, I even went back and added more to my mind map. There was something about listing the headings that seemed to make my research effort gel. I was able to categorize every piece of information I came across, then I could focus on organizing all that data within each category. Creating headings truly gave me a sense of organization and, ultimately, a well-organized research effort.

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Step 5 Finding Source Materials

Find 10-20 sources on your topic. You can find materials on the internet, in libraries, on databases, and even in your own collection of books. Remember that the internet contains many sources but is not considered a source in and of itself.

Seek out lots of articles and materials on your topic. The more information you read, including opposing views and perceptions different from your own, the better you will understand your topic and the more interesting your paper will be. You probably will not use all the materials you review. By the way, remember to staple articles as you print them in order to keep track of all that paper. Academic sources include books; articles from periodicals, journals, magazines, and newspapers; pamphlets; TV documentaries; videos; personal and professional interviews and the list goes on and on. Be creative in looking for sources. The sky's the limit!

Hint: TV documentaries can be an interesting source of information for your paper.

With so much information at our fingertips these days, there is an endless supply of sources of data. You want to really scrutinize everything you read. Just because it is in print doesn't necessarily mean it is a valid, documented source.

Usually, if you are reading something with a bibliography, the author has done his/her homework in researching the subject. Look over the source before you start reviewing it. Does it have an author and publication date? Is it an excerpt from a larger work?

Conducting an interview yourself is a very valuable way to obtain information. When interviewing someone in person, it is a good idea to tape the conversation WITH the permission of the person being interviewed. Often, you can email a professional, author or expert in the field with carefully constructed interview questions, and they will respond. So many of my students have done so and been surprised with the results. It's worth a try!

Hint: Before your interview, think up four or five interesting questions to ask the person you are interviewing. Be imaginative!

The internet can be a great way to find materials, but you really have to be careful about what you pull up. Websites can be credible sources, but you have to verify that to yourself. What are the credentials of the experts giving information?

Whenever possible, print articles so that you can take notes in the margins as you read them. Materials can be copied as long as your intention is to use them for strictly academic purposes and not for profit. If watching a TV documentary or video, take notes and make sure to write down the time, date and name of the program.

Your school library or the public library contains a wealth of information AND librarians to assist you in wading through it. Your school library will have subject-specific databases which contain articles by subject. Some examples are PsychLit, InfoTrac and others. These databases include only scholarly articles in the field, allowing you to search for reliable sources. Feel free to explore alternative sources, however, in search of the truth. The internet has given us access to all sorts of investigative sources that research topics thoroughly. "Mainstream media" is not always the most reliable and completely documented source. Explore other options in your pursuit of truth. Look into alternative news sources.

Hint: Make sure the websites you use are reliable sources.

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How I Did It...

Finding source materials was a little difficult because my mobility was rather limited at the time, so I did much of my research on the internet. I did, however, manage to go to the public library and access some information. While surfing the net, I was very careful about what to use. Before I even reviewed an article, I checked it for reliability. If it did not have an author or if I could not verify the origin or credentials of the writer, I did not always use the article unless it was a reputable website. In this day and age, ANYONE can post information on the web, so I was very discerning about what I chose to research for my paper.

I collected MANY articles! As a matter of fact, I did not use a number of the articles I found. My goal was to set up a broad spectrum of data. I did a brief review, and if I thought there was a remote possibility I might use the article for my paper, I copied it. I always stapled my articles as soon as I printed them since I can sometimes be disorganized about paperwork!

I started looking out for articles in the local newspaper and TV documentaries that covered my topic. When you put out feelers like this, it is amazing what will come to you. The research project really became a part of my everyday coming and going. I was determined to find out all I could about stress-related disease. I talked to people to find out what others were doing to deal with this illness.

In the end, I found out that 80% of all illness is stress-related! Wow! Not just my little disease but many others were impacted by stress. I was now ready and equipped to get down to the bottom of the issue!

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Step 6 Taking Notes

As you review the sources you have found, begin the process of taking notes on what you are finding out about the topic.

Here is a handy method for taking notes and getting ready to write your paper. Label each source that you have found (books, articles, pamphlets, encyclopedia entries, articles off the internet and so on) with a number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) so that you can keep track of each source. These numbers are strictly for your tracking purposes.

Start reading your materials and underline or highlight points of interest. As you make these notes either on a legal pad or on the articles themselves, always remember to write the number you assigned by the note as well as the page number if there is one.

After taking notes, cut out significant quotes making sure to mark each quote with your reference number and page number. Cut out parts of the articles you copied and place your

reference number on each. Cut out the notes from your legal pad as well. Each strip of paper will have the reference number and page number, so you will be able to shuffle them however way you wish.

Next, separate the strips of paper according to the major headings or categories of your research paper. Because you have decided beforehand what your headings will be, it should be easy to see into which category each quote or paraphrase fits.

As you sort through all your notes, you will see a pattern emerge, and your research will start to take a certain direction and form.

Remember that you are not necessarily reading every word of these documents. You are skimming your materials to find something of interest, something vital to your research. When something catches your eye, then you can stop and read in a more in-depth manner.

If you are reviewing a book, you do not have to read the entire book to use information from it. Look at the back of the book at the index to find the subject matter that pertains to your topic, then read that section of the book. With articles, you want to zero in on those sections of articles that coincide with your areas of interest. After you have taken notes on all of your sources and cut them out, set them aside for inclusion in your paper.

Now you have compiled a wealth of information on your topic in a manageable, clearly identified format. These strips of paper, which are like note cards, can be used within the text of your paper to present and develop your ideas and back up what you are writing.

Hint: The more notes you take the better, then you will have many from which to choose.

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How I Did It...

The first thing I did to start the note-taking process was to get comfortable with a cup of tea, gather all my articles and books in a neat stack, and label each with a number, circling the number to distinguish it from other markings. Now each source had its own identifying number.

As I perused each article, I wrote at the top of the article the name of the heading to which it pertained. For instance, if it referred to "treatment," I marked it accordingly, "treatment," and so on. As I skimmed the articles, I underlined important thoughts and highlighted others. I never highlight whole blocks of information, just key words, then the important information is more distinct for me.

Some articles I tossed; they just were not interesting enough or relevant to my topic. Others I could see would be crucial in my understanding and development of the paper. I had gathered together about 30 articles and books, so this process took several weeks.

At first, I went completely through and read every article.

End of sample

Read the rest - the complete eBook is available at bibliobookstore.com