

سر شناسه : مشكوة، مريم، 1347 – Meshkat, Maryam  
 عنوان و نام پديد آور : Academic writing: a practical guide for graduate students/ Maryam Meshkat.  
 مشخصات نشر : تهران : دانشگاه تربيت دبیر شهيد رجائي، 1389-2010م.  
 مشخصات ظاهري : 176 ص.  
 شابک : 978-964-2651-59-7  
 وضعيت فهرست نوبسي : فيبا.  
 يادداشت : انگليسي  
 آوا نوبسي عنوان : آکادميک ...  
 موضوع : زبان انگليسي – معاني و بيان  
 موضوع : گرايش نوبسي دانشگاهي – مسائل، تمرين ها و غيره  
 شناسنامه افزوده : دانشگاه تربيت دبیر شهيد رجائي  
 شناسنامه افزوده : Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University :  
 رده بندي کنگره : PE 140/م57 1389  
 رده بندي ديويي : 808/0428  
 شماره کتابشناسي ملي : 2044933



دانشگاه تربيت دبیر شهيد رجائي

عنوان : Academic writing: a practical guide for graduate students/ Maryam Meshkat.  
 تالیف : Meshkat, Maryam  
 نوبت چاپ : اول - 1389  
 انتشارات : دانشگاه تربيت دبیر شهيد رجائي  
 ليتوگرافي : رضا  
 چاپ : ناطقي  
 ناظر فني : علامرضا کارگريان مروستي  
 شمارگان : 1000 جلد  
 قيمت : ۳۲۰۰ تومان  
 شابک : 978 – 964 – 2651 – 59 – 7  
 ISBN: 978-964-2651-59-7

کلیه حقوق این اثر برای مولفین و دانشگاه تربيت دبیر شهيد رجائي محفوظ است.

نشانی: تهران، لویزان – کد پستی 16788 – صندوق پستی 163 – 16785 – تلفن: 9 – 22970060

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# Academic Writing:

A Practical Guide for Graduate  
Students

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*To the memory of my father*

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## How to Write a Research Paper



## *Chapter One*

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### 1. Choose the topic

In order to write a research paper the first step is to choose the topic. This is also the most important stage. It will impact all the time that you spend writing the paper and may also influence and shape your thoughts for future work. So go through this step with great care. In order to choose a topic, follow these steps:

### 1.1. Specify your area of interest

The very first step you have to take is to specify the area in which you want to work. You will be successful if you start working in your area of interest. So how do you find that area? Well, your area of interest gives you pleasure. You just can't wait to start reading about it and when you start you can't stop. There is nothing better for you to do than to find out more and more about this area and to see what it is, what it is made of, how it works and how it is related to other areas. You wouldn't want to spend your time any other way. That is what interest is all about. We are all interested in something; we just need to find out what it is. When you are interested in what you are doing; you are motivated and remember study after study has shown that motivation is the key to success. It is very difficult to fail if you are motivated to do something. So choose an area which motivates you. The question which is probably on your mind right now is "How?" This is how: You are writing the paper for a specific course. Collect all the books introduced for that course and look through them. First of all, look at the table of contents. See if anything in the table of contents catches your eye. Something you've always been curious about. We all have unanswered questions, maybe one of the topics deals with your unanswered questions. For example, my unanswered questions are always about why different people react differently under similar circumstances or in similar situations?

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So, if I'm doing a paper for a Methodology course I might find answers to my questions under a section titled "Learner Variables". If you do not find anything interesting, look at the syllabus, something might catch your eye there. Maybe you are not interested in methodology at all but would like to do something on Linguistics. So try and relate linguistics to methodology. For example, "How can the rules of word-formation facilitate vocabulary learning?" So you have bridged methodology and linguistics. If you cannot find anything interesting talk to your instructor and see how she can help.

### 1.2. Read extensively in this area

Now that you have found your area of interest, the next step is easy and pleasant and if you have specified your interest correctly there is nothing in the world you want to do more than find out about this area. You want to know all there is to know. You want to know what it is, how it works and how it is related to other areas and even how it can be manipulated or applied for a specific purpose. So there will be lots of trips to the library, lots of surfing on the net, listening to the radio or watching TV if they are broadcasting programs about it. You might even be so interested and lucky enough to find someone who has worked in this area before you and maybe set up an appointment with them to find how they can guide you and give you new ideas.

There is one point you need to be aware of, if you have chosen a topic for which you cannot find any references, meaning you cannot find books, articles or any form of written material about, the smart move would be to modify your area of interest. Try to revise and adapt your area of research to an area where there is enough material for you to work with.

### 1.3. Write down any ideas that interest you

As you read through the material you will come across ideas and questions that you find interesting. At this point you need a pen and paper to jot them down. Do not rely on your memory because you may come up with lots of interesting ideas and will not be able to remember them all. So have a notebook ready for the purpose of writing down whatever you find interesting as you are reading. Now these ideas do not all have to be very bright, some of them might even sound ridiculous but do not worry about it at this time. Just jot down whatever you find interesting. Then try to see which of these you have some sort of experience about and can use your previous knowledge to build on. Previous knowledge and experience can make the task a lot easier.

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### 1.4. Brainstorm alone and with others

Try to think of new ideas. Look at the subject at hand from different perspectives. If you are interested in learner variables try to look at these variables from the point of view of an instructor, classmates, principal, future employers. If we go back to my favorite topic you can look at the learner through the eyes of the methodologist, the syllabus designer, the curriculum developer, the tester and the education planner.

Since different people see the same thing differently you can also ask your friends, classmates, instructor, parents and siblings for their ideas and see how they react to what you say and want to do. The beauty about asking others is that you never know what they will come up with and you never know who will show you where you are going wrong and what factors you need to take into account which you haven't. So discuss your ideas with whoever has the time and is willing to listen and give you feedback. You will be surprised with the results.

### 1.5. Narrow down and decide on the topic

The area of interest is usually broad so the next step you need to take is to narrow down your choices and ultimately focus on one relatively narrow topic to be able to write the actual paper. All the ideas you came up with in the previous section can help you narrow down. You may use one of these

ideas to focus on. You may want to combine some of them into a bigger topic and focus on that or you might even use them to know what you do not want to work on at all.

One rule you have to keep in mind is that your topic must not be too broad or too narrow. If it's too broad you cannot cover it in one research paper and if it is too narrow you will not have much to say. So you have to know how long your instructor wants your paper to be (this may be given in pages or number of words) and then decide on the topic.

Remember, a very important point to keep in mind is to go with topics that have ample source material. There is no point in choosing a topic where no one has worked before. This is not the time to do it. When you acquire the necessary training to handle such topics you can choose and work on such a option.

Another principle to take into account is that what you choose must be directly related to your course. This has already been explained but this is not somewhere you can go wrong. You cannot write a paper on learner variables for a course on linguistics no matter how much learner variables interest you. If you are doing a course on linguistics you could do a paper on "Language Use by Different Learners". In this paper you could focus on language and learner variables. So you have done what you are interested in and also related it to the course of study.



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Therefore, you can make your choice based upon interest; that is the area you have chosen and all ideas you have jotted down, and practicality; you choose that which is neither too narrow nor too broad, has enough sources and is directly related to the course you are taking. Now that your choice is made it is time to start gathering the required information.

### Review Questions:

1. What is the first and most important step for writing a research paper?
2. How do you specify your area of interest? How do you know if you are really interested?
3. Can you rely on your memory when you come across interesting ideas? Why not?
4. What do you do when you brainstorm? What is the objective of this activity?
5. What does it mean to narrow down on a topic?

### Thought Questions:

1. Why is the topic you choose of utmost importance?
2. How do you think reading extensively can help you in writing the research paper?

3. Why do you think previous knowledge and experience make the writing of a research paper easier?
4. Do you think brainstorming can help do away with any prejudice you might have and not be aware of?
5. You are always told to narrow down on a topic. Why is that? Can you ever narrow down too much?

## 2. Gathering Information

The stage is set and you are ready to go. The next item on the agenda is to gather information. This is how:

### 2.1 Looking through different references

When you want to gather information you need to look through different references to find out what other people have done on your chosen topic. In order to do this, you need to check all places where information is stored and try to find the information you need.

#### 2.1.1 Looking through textbooks

The first place to look for information is in textbooks. Find the textbooks that have information about your topic and go through them. To find out

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whether any given book has information about your chosen topic the first step is to look at the title carefully. Does your topic come under this title? If so then take the book and look in the table of contents at the beginning of the book or at the index at the end to see if your topic is covered in the book. Usually the index has information in more detail so that would be a better choice.

The next step is to read the material. The mistake that many students make is that they think they have to read the book cover to cover for this purpose, however this is wrong. If you check the index it tells you which pages have information that you want. It might be one or two pages or a whole chapter. Anyhow you only need to read the material directly related to your topic and not the whole book.

### 2.1.2 Looking through journals

The next place to look is in journals. In journals you will find articles about different topics. The advantage of journal articles over books is that they present the latest findings of the field. It takes time for books to be written, proofread, published and distributed. And when the customer buys them the information is at best one to two years old. However, this is not true for journal articles. Articles are a report of the state of the art and the public has