

Writing a Research Paper: A Step-by-Step Guide

Know what type of research paper you need to write for the class. You could write a perfect essay... but it could be the wrong type and bring down your entire grade.

Before You Start

Informational: You will explain a concept for a specific audience. This will be factual and unbiased. Your goal is to share knowledge with others or to show your knowledge. *Ex: This paper will explain everyone's role at a typical 24-hour fast food restaurant.*

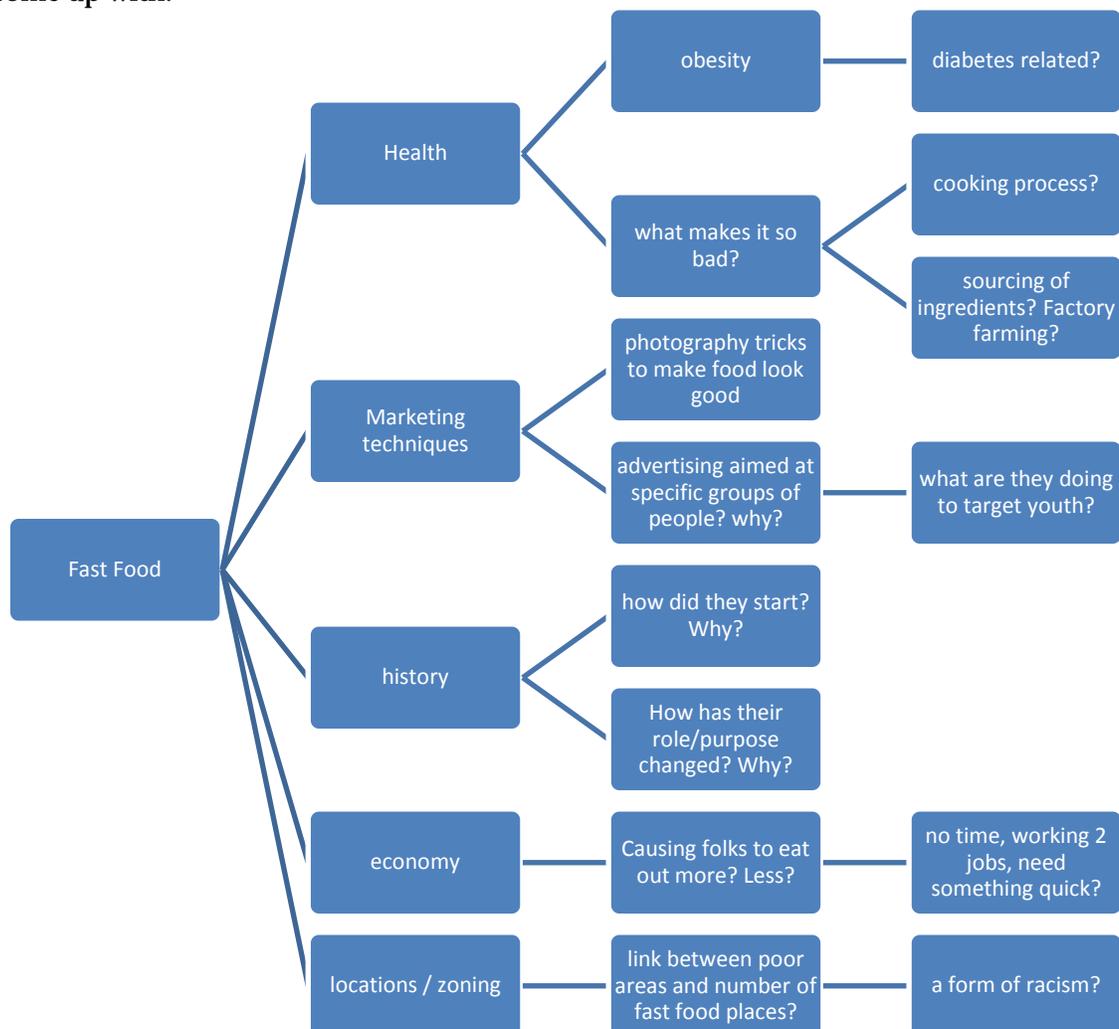
Persuasive or Analytical: You will make a claim/argument and use evidence from your research to back up this claim (usually 3 or more specific points). *Ex: TV advertisements encourage youth to eat fast food by doing X, Y, and Z things.*

Exploratory: This depends on the professor, but typically it means you must write a chronological narrative of your research process. This is like a diary in which you explain every step you took, including which search terms you used, which databases, etc. In this case, your writing begins before your research. *Ex: Because my Aunt Kathy died from Type 2 diabetes, I decided to focus my research on the link between this disease and American fast food restaurants.*

1.

Brainstorm for an idea/topic that you would be interested in researching and that meets your assignment requirements. This can be fun. Grab a friend and see everything that you can come up with.

Brainstorm for Ideas



2.

Develop a working thesis. Often this will start as a specific research question, such as: How do TV advertisements encourage teens to eat fast food? As you research the topic, you will find the answer and be able to turn your question into a working thesis.

Choose a Narrow Focus

Keep your research topic narrow; you're writing an essay, not a novel!

Problematic:

People are obese because of fast food.

Americans? Chinese? Chinese-Americans? Teens? Children? 20-somethings? Middle-aged folks? The elderly? The poor? The middle class? The wealthy?

Big claim! Everyone who eats fast food is obese? What about fast food can lead to obesity?

Strong Start:

American TV advertising encourages youth to eat fast food by using specific techniques (to be researched...)

This is specific about the type of advertisements, group of people, and (eventually) techniques.

(After researching, we should be able to list at least 3 specific techniques to focus on in a 5-paragraph or longer essay.)

Before you start your research, develop a list of search terms (and all of their synonyms!)

3.

List Potential Search Terms

Advertising / Ads	Fast food	Youth
Television / TV	McDonalds	Kids
Marketing	Wendys	Children
Public Relations / PR	Burger King	Teens / teenagers
	KFC	adolescents
	Taco Bell	
	Junk food	

Use the Three Rivers library Web site to find books or articles.

4.

This video shows how to use an academic article database and tips on searching:
<http://tinyurl.com/academicdatabases>

Start Searching

Tips:

- Always use the PDF version of articles when possible
- Hold the ctrl button AND the F key to pull up the "search" feature on any Web page, so you can look for keywords and skim the article at first.
- Do not try to copy the URLs of articles and e-mail them to yourself; they will not work later!
- If you copy & paste the article into an e-mail or Word document, remember to take all the citation information as well!!
- When you find relevant articles, look at the "subject terms" list. These are potential keywords and phrases that you could add to your search list!
- If you're doing an exploratory essay, keep notes on your process (with dates), as well as any questions or thoughts that come up along the way.

Now you must read and find evidence to answer your question and/or support your thesis. If evidence changes your thesis, that's fine! Sometimes you need to shape your essay around the evidence you find. A thesis isn't set in stone early in the drafting process.

5. Reading & Drafting

The drafting process is the same as any essay, so look for our handout on that. Also, remember to include a properly formatted Works Cited page, and always cite any ideas or words that come from your sources. Failure to do so results in plagiarism.