American Journal of Nursing blog: diverse nursing voices and stories


By Amanda Anderson, a critical care nurse and graduate student in New York City currently doing a graduate placement at AJN.

It takes a certain kind of super strength to be a grad student in springtime. Some days, I’d rather sit on a bench and watch the daffodils sway in the breeze than search for citable references to back up assigned claims. But after three years of graduate study, I’ve found a method that eventually grounds me. A looming deadline helps me hunker down with all necessary objects—iPad, keyboard, headphones, dirty stares for chatty undergrads. Most of my time is spent searching, until I’m finally ready to write. Edits are fairly quick, and my adherence to APA (American Psychological Association) style comes naturally now.

My system for writing a research paper is not new or undocumented. Research papers span all disciplines, but with little structural variation—a research paper is simply that: a paper that discusses research. Once I am able to will myself to focus, my research papers can be written in five basic steps.

Write a Thesis
Writing a research paper (for a school assignment or a work evidence-based practice project) can be intimidating, but fear can be eased by starting with just one sentence. A thesis statement should say exactly what I, the writer, plan to say to you, the reader, and how I will say it. It can vary and change throughout your writing process, but it should always guide you. In research papers, the thesis statement should usually fall somewhere in your first paragraph.

To write a thesis, you must first understand your assignment. What exactly will you write about? How? What matters about your topic? If it’s for a class, what are requirements of your assignment? With an understanding of all of the paper’s elements, you can begin your first and most important sentence. A proper thesis statement of this blog post might be:

“Writing a research paper is hard for me because of the distractions of springtime sunshine. However, this is an important task in grad school, and if I stick to a process, it can be completed. This blog post will tell you about the process that works for me, and the resources you can use to implement it for yourself.”

This simple statement acts as a road map for my writing process, and also gives my readers a heads-up on what to expect:

- What I’ll write about (writing a research paper in springtime).
- Why I’ll write about it (I must complete research papers to graduate).
- How I’ll explain myself (sharing the writing process and resources for implementation).
Research

Once you’ve written a thesis statement and broken it down into each question (what, why, how) that it will answer, you essentially have the research paper. (Some writers literally cut the thesis statement up with scissors into a bunch of key words and phrases. I like to duplicate it in outline form.)

By looking at the separate elements of your thesis, you’ll see exactly what to research, and exactly what to write. To support my springtime thesis, for example, I’d search for articles using the key words writing, processes, springtime, distraction, writing resources, and research papers.

The actual search for thesis-backing sources should be done through an academic database, like Academic Source Complete, PubMed, or CINAHL. These databases can be found on your school or hospital’s library site, typically under “Databases.” If you’re researching for a work project, hospital libraries can sometimes be difficult to find, but they are treasure troves of information, once located, with Web sites often housed on hospital intranets.

To search for the elements of my thesis, I’d connect things in a database search box with Boolean operators, or words like AND/OR/BUT that create a research phrase. In short, I could enter: writing AND “research paper” AND nurs* AND springtime AND process. Many databases allow you to search an entire phrase, or select connecting words from drop-down menus, in addition to a whole complement of other symbols that librarians are experts on (I’ve gotten to be good friends with the Ask-A-Librarian chat function that my school provides).

Unsurprisingly, when I plugged this search into Academic Search Complete on my school’s library Web site, it brought me zero results. It’s probably safe to say that no one has written a study on springtime, nursing, and research papers. However, when I deleted springtime, my search produced 24 results. A lot of times, research for a paper is a matter of trial and error and refining your search.

Unless you’re writing about a niche topic, you’ll often end up with too many results. To narrow it down, I typically start by stripping out articles that fall outside of the publication dates specified by my professor—most nursing programs ask for studies published in the last five years. Further narrowing comes by selecting the type of article (periodical, academic journal, etc.), since most professors prefer academic, peer-reviewed journals (in some circumstances, citations of blogs of academic journals, like this one, are becoming more widely accepted). Rule of thumb: leave out sites like Wikipedia and WebMD; here are some recommendations on evaluating sources.

Your search can be repeated on Google Scholar, where you can simply input your Boolean phrase like a normal Google search. Google Scholar prominently shows how many times each article has been cited and where—a feature that easily can lead to more sources.

Organize Your Research

Once I have some studies that seem reputable, I organize them. The actual organization of studies often leads to deeper understanding of my topic. And if I follow recommended processes on literature reviews, I tend to find as well that the organization stage produces a greater sense of whether my evidence has validity.

While professors may not require the creation of a literature review table, it’s a good habit to follow, and there are some great articles that spell out specifically how to organize and validate your studies; AJN has a number of articles about this step in the process. Organization of my example thesis might look like this:
After deciding on the studies to include in your paper, format their citations. I learned this the hard way—losing precious points on APA style typically comes from leaving your references until right before deadline. APA is a simple formula that people often freak out about, and if you apply it as soon as you’ve selected your sources (you can always delete and add), a lot of anxiety is taken out of the process. I stay away from citation programs, too; they often cause formatting errors, and don’t actually teach you APA format, which is a skill that’s essential to learn.

There’s nothing I love more than a fully finished reference page before I start writing. This practice not only gets the tedious work out of the way, but it also displays your sources in an easy format, so that you can write with them in mind and plop in-text citations into the body of the paper.

**Write an Outline**

Sitting down to write an entire paper is daunting. Just like you snipped up your thesis statement, chop up your paper into an outline. For each bullet on an outline, write a paragraph or two in a separate document. Your outline should be based on your thesis and your assignment requirements, and should keep you on the straight and narrow path towards completion.

Once you have a skeleton paper, plug in a simple paragraph formula to flesh it out—I stick to four sentences per paragraph, and one citation. This formula can be adapted, but it holds true in most formats; for the majority of the paragraph, you are transitioning to a new idea, explaining that idea with a source, paraphrasing or quoting the source, and transitioning on. The work of a paragraph can often be finished in four sentences, especially when you know your topic and evidence as well as you should.

**Quoting and paraphrasing.** Obviously, a research paper is full of research that needs to be quoted or paraphrased. The APA prefers paraphrasing or putting the information in a cited source into your own words to direct quotation, and you should familiarize yourself with this practice. If you fully understand your topic and the information you’ve selected to support it, paraphrasing will simply be an extension of your knowledge. Imagine you’re sitting at the dinner table, talking about your research paper to your spouse or roommate. If you can convince a dinner partner of your stance, with your selected evidence, in your own words, you can paraphrase.

**Add Transitions**

If you’ve broken down your paper into steps on an outline, you essentially have a paper. It just needs connective tissue. If you wrote in different successive documents for each bullet on your outline, copy and paste them into the same document.

For each paragraph, you must begin with a simple transitional word or phrase that lets the reader know that they are moving on to a different thought, or a different view of the thought. For example, I just used “for example” to let you know that I was going to tell you a few specific ways to transition between ideas and paragraphs. Transitions don’t have to be dramatic or jargon-y, they just have to direct.

With a logical series of transitions between sentences, paragraphs, and sections, you can find your way to a conclusion. Whether it’s during a Sunday church service or just this blog post, we all love the words, “In conclusion.”
I hope you find that these steps, or some variation thereof, make a sometimes intimidating task seem a little less so.

Ms. Anderson, allow me to say HAT'S OFF TO YOU! I am a graduate student and research papers have been extremely daunting for me. I already feel more empowered to write better papers with the use of this simple outline you have provided. One of the reasons I keep subscribing to AJN is for education and practice helps such as this. Thanks again and best wishes in your endeavors as a graduate student and beyond!