Getting Started on a Research Paper

Do you find it difficult to get started on a research paper? Not sure exactly where or how you should begin? Unsure what the assignment is asking of you? Having trouble coming up with a topic to write about? Do you have an idea what your topic might be, but you're at a loss for where to go for information? Here are some suggestions that may help you get started:

1. **Understand the Assignment**

   A. When the assignment is given, take notes on what your professor expects the paper to contain and the criteria that will be graded.

   B. If you have questions after the instructions are given, don't be afraid to ask your professor to elaborate on the requirements.

   C. Read and re-read your assignment handouts and/or notes. Search for and highlight any key words that might direct you in choosing a topic that will be interesting, informative, and meet the general requirements for the assignment (paper length, number of sources consulted and listed, intended literary stile, etc.).

2. **Choose a Broad Topic to Begin**

   A. If your professor has assigned a topic, go with that. If the topic choice is yours, consider different ideas that interest you. Choose a topic you think has promise for an informative research paper.

   B. ***Do not*** worry if you don't know anything about a topic! The whole purpose of a research paper is to discover new things about your topic. Often, a research paper on a subject you have little prior knowledge of will turn out more objective, because it will exclude any personal opinion of the subject.

C. If you have chosen a topic, but are unsure of what facts you might include in your paper, browse some research sources to get a general overview of the information available. Some common sources to consult are encyclopedias, almanacs, periodical articles, and biographical publications. Many of these will include bibliographies, which list other possible sources of information related to your topic. The staff in the FCC library (L212) can direct you to these materials.

D. The Internet is also a great source for information. You can visit any "search engine" website (such as *Yahoo!* or *Google*), type your topic into the subject search field, and browse the related websites it provides for useful information. However, it is ***extremely important*** to use caution in making sure your Internet sources are **<u>reliable</u>**! If you can, stick to web sources with reputable names (for example: the website for *Encyclopedia Britannica* or *The New York Times)*. If you find information you feel will be useful but are not sure about the legitimacy of the source, ask your instructor. Also, FCC's library has searchable online databases containing articles and statistics. Handouts with details and passwords for these databases are available in the library (L212) and Writing Center (L106).

Once you have investigated your topic, get a feel for what you might want to present in your research paper by asking yourself: "Would this topic, supported by the information I have gathered, be interesting and informative to my instructor, my peers, or anyone else with whom I am trying to communicate my research?" If your answer is yes, you are ready to narrow your broad topic. See the Writing Center handout "**Narrowing Your Research Topic**" for more information on this process.