

The Research Process

1. **Choose your topic.** This topic should have an economic dimension. It should be narrow enough to permit a sharp focusing of ideas, but not so narrow as to make the acquisition of information unreasonably difficult. It has to be manageable in the time allotted.
2. **Acquaint yourself with the existing literature.** At this stage previous work on the topic is identified and read. The chief bibliographic source in economics is the Journal of Economic Literature, a quarterly subject-classified listing of all recent articles in economics and related journals. An extensive list of other sources, including computer searches, is provided at the end of this handout.
3. **Think critically about the material and the topic and identify, if it hasn't already been identified, the specific focus on your inquiry.** In economics this frequently takes the form of framing a hypothesis or limited set of hypotheses which are to be explored in the paper. A hypothesis is a tentative theory or supposition which is provisionally adopted to provide a focus for the research (e.g., inflation helps the younger poor but hurts the aged poor).
4. **Organize the research to assess the validity of the hypothesis or hypotheses.** Hypotheses can be tested either theoretically (i.e., can they be deduced from accepted axioms?) or empirically (i.e., by confronting them with data) or both. Econometrics provides the standard techniques for empirical work, but, if you have no background in econometrics, other more descriptive forms of data presentation and analysis may be used.
5. **Make an outline.** We cannot over emphasize this. Although your outline will probably have to be revised several times as the writing proceeds, this is a worthwhile investment of time. The surest way to spend a large amount of time on a poorly organized paper is to start writing without an outline. A tentative outline is also useful during the research stage. You will be surprised at how much discipline a well constructed outline will impose as you do the research and the writing. An outline will also greatly facilitate consultations with faculty on the progress of your research.
6. **Draw your conclusions and write a rough draft.** This is the toughest step, but it will force you to put all your ideas together. At this stage weaknesses in the argument will become apparent and frequently you will gain some additional key insights during the writing. You will discover that you can improve on this rough draft a great deal if you put it aside for awhile and come back to it later.
7. **Write the final paper.** If the other steps are done well, this step is relatively easy. You can concentrate mainly on style, organization and the elimination of weaknesses uncovered while writing the rough draft. Be sure to draw out the implications of your conclusions. An author must always be prepared to answer the "so what?" question!