Writing an I-Search Paper



Chances are the last time you were asked to write a research paper you were given a list of topics to choose from, and chances are most of the topics were ones that you found boring and dull. Well, the I-Search Paper allows you to choose from the things you are interested in, something you have a personal connection with, and what to learn more about.

Writing an I-Search Paper is not different that a traditional research paper in that there are certain steps that need to be followed in order to produce a comprehensive and cohesive paper. Your paper will consist of four major parts

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| **I-Search Parts** |
| 1. **"What I Knew"** (and didn't know about my topic before I started out) |
| 2. **"Why I am Writing This Paper"** (here is where the real need should show up: the writer demonstrates that the search may make a difference in his/her life.) |
| 3. **"The Search"** (story of the hunt) |
| 4. **"What I Learned"** (or didn't learn. A search that failed can be as exciting and valuable as one that succeeded.) |

**Steps to complete an I-Search Paper:**

1. **Select a topic:**

Even though an I-Search paper is usually less formal and more personal than a traditional research paper, its purpose is still the same - to find out information, to conduct research. The difference is that the topic of an I-Search Paper is one the writer has a personal connection with.
It is very important you choose a topic you are truly interested in and want to investigate.

*Here are a few ways to generate ideas if you do not have any ideas :*

* **Use trigger phrases** (i.e. "I always wanted to know how to \_\_\_\_\_\_." "I need help with \_\_\_\_\_\_."
* Take an inventory of places you'd like to travel.
* Make a list of priorities (Include the factors that have the greatest impact on your life, including health, family, economics, education, law, and so forth.)

Remember your goal is to find a topic you want to know something about - one that is driven by a real desire or need in your life. For example, one student who had asthma felt he needed to know everything he could about the disease and its possible effects on his life.
Brainstorm as many possible topics you are interested before you choose!

**Tip:** When you select a topic, be sure that it is a suitable one. It should not only be interesting and informative, but also lend itself to research. In other words, you should be able to locate adequate sources and find appropriate experts to interview. If the information on your topic only comes from your knowledge and experience, then there is no need for a search.

2. **Form a research question:**

Key Concept

To avoid gathering information that you cannot use in your I-Search Paper, you must focus as tightly as you can on one key aspect of your topic. **The best way to achieve a tight focus is to form a research question** - a question that asks exactly what you want to find out from your research.
Keep in mind that you should not be able to answer your question with a single word. Ideally, it should be a question that gives rise to several more detailed questions.

To get started, ask yourself the following questions. One writer's response are shown in the example below:

* **What is my topic?**    My topic is asthma.
* **Why am I interested in this topic?**     I have asthma, but I want to live a full and active life.
* **What do I hope to learn from my research?**    Basically, I want to learn whether I can keep my asthma from interferring with my life. If I can, I need to know how.
* **Research Question:** Can I manage my asthma so I can lead a full and active life?

Once you develop a research question, you then need to divide your initial question into several more detailed questions, all having a direct bearing on your initial research question. For our example, the student developed the following detailed questions relating to his asthma research question.

~ What can I do to keep playing sports and other physically demanding activities?
~ Are there certain foods or plants that I should avoid?
~ How do different environmental conditions affect my asthma?
~ What are the effects of pets on asthma?
~ What kinds of medications are available for people suffering from asthma?
~ Is there some kind of physical conditioning I could do to lessen the effects of asthma?

After forming you research question and subdividing it, you now have a specific goal in mind. Focusing your questioning allows you to gather relevant information and dismiss any information that has nothing to do with your topic.

**Tip**: Once you begin to search for answers to your research question, step back from the question every so often and ask yourself if you need to revise your question slightly or come up with a completely new one. Such changes are a natural part of the research process.

Key Concept

3. **Find sources:** As you conduct research, you will be looking for two main types of sources of information - **primary and secondary. Primary sources include legal documents, letters, diaries, eyewitness accounts and surveys. Secondary sources include interpretations of primary sources written by other authors.**For example, if a historian studied diaries, letters, official military records, and eyewitness accounts to write a biography of a famous military general, he would be using primary sources. If that same historian consulted material from other biographies of the same general from history books that included material about the general, he would be using secondary sources.

The first place you should begin your search is your school library, but you also need to use your interview as a substantial source of information for your paper.

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| **Library Resources** |
| **Resource**  **Source of Information** |
| **Online Catalog**  books listed by author, and subject; in some libraries this catalog also lists audiovisual materials – videotapes, CDs, films, etc. |
| ***Reader’s Guide to*** articles in magazines and journals***Periodical Literature*** |
| **Online databases** indexes to major newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, back  issues of newspapers |
| **General and specialized** encyclopedias (electronic or print), biographical references, atlases,**reference books & CD-ROMS** almanacs |
| **Videotapes & audiotapes** movies, documentaries, instructional tapes, audiotapes of books |
| **Librarian/media specialist** help in using reference materials and finding sources, including  audiovisual materials |

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| **Community Resources** |
| **Resource Source of information** |
| **World Wide Web and** articles, interviews, bibliographies, pictures, videos, sound **online services** recordings; access to the Library of Congress and other libraries |
| **Local government agencies** facts and statistics on various subjects, policies, experts on local  government |
| **Local offices of state and** voting records, recent and pending legislation, experts on state **federal government officials** and federal government |
| **Local newspaper offices** accounts of events of local interest, historical information on city  or area |
| **Museums, historical societies,** historical events, scientific achievements, arts and artists, special **service groups** exhibits, and experts on these subjects |

4. **Evaluate your sources**: Just as members of a jury have to decide which witness is credible, or believable, and which are not, you have to determine the extent to which you can trust sources of information. Here are some questions you can use to put your sources to the test.

1. **Is the information up-to-date?** Information is generated so quickly now that it is easy to find current material. If information on your topic is constantly changing, be sure you are as up-to-date as possible.
2. **Does the information seem factual?** Check the information against your own knowledge and other sources. If you find an inconsistency between two sources, check it against a third source to determine if the information is accurate.
3. **Does the source seem objective and logical?** Some sources may be biased, or slanted toward one point of view. Others may use poor logic. You would not, for example, expect an objective assessment of one political party's platform from the leader of the opposing political party.

5. **Prepare source cards**: Since you will be using more than one source for your paper, you will need a way to keep track of all your information. One method is by using 3x5 index cards and number the source. The information you write on your source cards will be written in the same format as it will appear on your Works Cited page at the end of your paper.

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| **Guidelines for Recording Source Information** |
| 1. **One Book with One Author:** Write the author’s last name, then first name; book title (italicized); place of publication; name of publishing company; year of publication.Weinstein, Allen M., M.D. *Asthma: The Complete Guide to Self-Management of Asthma and Allergies for Patients and Their Families.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987. |
| 2. **Book with More than One Author:** Write the first author, last name first. Other authors, first name first. Record other information as for a book with one author. (See Source Card #1) |
| 3. **Magazine Article:** Write author’s last name, then first name; article title; magazine name; day (if given), month, and year of publication; beginning and end page numbers. If no author, start with the article title.  |
| 4. **Newspaper Article:** Write author’s last name, then first name; article title; newspaper name; day, month and year of publication; section number (if there is one) and page number.Goode, Erica. “Can an Essay a Day Keep Asthma and Arthritis at Bay?” *New York Times.* 14 April 1999. natl. ed. : A19. |
| 5. Encyclopedia Article: Write author’s last name, then first name; article title; encyclopedia name; edition number, followed by the abbreviation *ed.*; date of publication. If no author is listed, start with the article title.Gallagher, Joan S. “Asthma.” *The World Book Encyclopedia*1 1995 ed. |
| 6. **Radio or Television Program:** Write episode or segment title (if any); program name, series title (f any); network name; local station call letters and city (if any); and day, month, and year of broadcast.“Stress and Kids’ Asthma.” Rpt. Michelle Trudeau. *All Things Considered.* National Public Radio. KUT-FM, Austin, Texas. 30 April 1997. |
| 7. **Film or Video:** Write title; director or producer; medium (for video recordings); distributor; and year of release.  |

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| 8. **Personal or Telephone Interview:** Write interviewee’s name; interview type (personal or telephone); and day, month and year of interview. (See Source Card #3) |
| 9. **Online Sources:** Write author’s last name, then first name (if listed); title of document; underscored title of database or site; date of electronic publication; name of sponsoring institution; date information was accessed; <URL> [or] name of online service. (See Source Card #2) |
| 10. **Portable Databases:** Write author’s last name, then first name; title of document, article, or part of work; title of work; database title; edition, release or version; publication medium; city of electronic publication, electronic publisher, and electronic publication date. |

**Source Cards**

**Source Number**

Smolley, Laurence A. and Debra Fulgram Bruce. *Breathe Right Now: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding and Treating the Most Common Breathing Disorders.* New York: Norton, 1998.

Book with more than one author

Peak Flow Meters. *American Lung Association Website.* American Lung Association. 15 Apr. 1999. <http://www.lungassociation.org/asthma/astpea k ow.html>

Online source

Anders, Emma R., M.D. Personal Interview. 12 April 1999.

Personal interview

6. **Take notes from your sources:** Unless you are one of those fortunate people with a photographic memory, good notes are invaluable. If you take good notes, you will have a record of important information you will need when you sit down to write your paper. When you take notes you can quote directly, summarize or paraphrase.
 a. **Direct Quotation**: If the author of a source has a particularly effective or memorable way of saying something, you may want to quote him or her. Be sure to copy the passage you intend to use exactly as it appears in your source. To avoid accidently plagiarism, put clearly visible quotation marks at the beginning and end of the quoted passage.

*Allergens*

 “There are numerous substances and conditions that can

 trigger asthma. The largest category of triggers is allergens.

 Allergens are substances that produce an allergic reaction

 in people who are sensitive to them. They include pollens

 from trees, grasses, and weeds; mold and mildew; dust

 mites; and animal dander.”

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        b**. Summary**: A summary note includes only the main idea and the most important supporting details of the passage. It allows you to save space because it is shorter than the original material. Write the note using your own words and sentence structure.
        c. **Paraphrase**: A paraphrase note includes most of the author's ideas, not just the main ones. Like the summary note, it is written in your own words. You paraphrase to simplify the material you have read.

**Source Number**

*Allergens*

 Asthma can be triggered by allergens, the most

 common of which are pollen from plants; mold

 and mildew; and dust mites; and animal dander.

 page 23

Summary

*Allergens*

 Of the numerous substances that can trigger

 asthma, allergens are the largest category. These

 are substances that cause a reaction in people who

 are allergic to them. Allergens include pollens from

 plants; mold and mildew; animal dander; and dust

 mites.

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Paraphrase

**Taking Notes from Sources**

**Step 1:** Record your notes on 4x6 index cards that are easy to retrieve and organize.

**Step 2:** Use a separate note card for each item of information and for each source

**Step 3:** Put a subject heading consisting of a key word or phrase in the upper-left corner above each note.

**Step 4:** Write the source number in the upper-right hand corner of each note; write the number of the page or web address in which the information was found at that bottom of the note.

**Step 5:** Keep computer printouts in a folder. Highlight key words and phrases and write in the margins

7. **Write your thesis statement**: Your thesis is the main idea for your report. It is the answer to your research question. The writer who began the research question: Can I manage my asthma so I can lead a full and active life? found through research that the answer to his question was "yes." He could lead a full and active life if he carefully managed certain factors that had a direct bearing on his asthma.
**To frame his thesis, he turned his research question into a statement and added the factors he would have to consider in order to manage his asthma.** By adding these factors, he developed a short summary of his search results.

 I can manage my asthma so that I can lead a full, active life by following my doctor's instructions on medication, by avoiding pets, by sticking to an exercise program, and by minimizing the effects of allergens that can trigger asthmatic episodes.

Key Concept

8. **Develop an outline**: An outline for a writing project is like a road map to a traveler. Good outlines and good maps give guidance and keep people going in the right direction but leave them free to change their plans. Outlines also guide the organization of your ideas.

**TIP**: Remember, ***voice*** is the sound and rhythm of the writer's language. You should allow your own voice to show through your words.

9. **Document your sources**: In an I-Search Paper, you use information and ideas that you obtained from outside sources. It is very important that you give credit to these sources by citing them in the body of your paper and by listing them at the end of your finished paper.

**Citing Sources in the Body**: When you are writing the body of your paper, you must decide what to give credit and how to give it.

* ***What to Credit***: If the same information can be found in several sources, it is considered common knowledge. You **DO NOT** have to document it. For example, it is common knowledge that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington D.C. in 1963. However, any information that you obtain from outside sources that is not common knowledge must be document.
* **How to Credit**: There are several ways to give credit. The two most widely used methods are footnotes and parenthetical citations. We will be using the latter.

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| **Guidelines for Giving Credit Within the Paper** |
| Place the source citation in parentheses at the end of the sentence in which you have used someone else’s words or ideas. The following examples follow MLA format: |
| **1. Source with one author:** Last name of the author, followed by the page number(s) if any of the work being cited. There is no comma or punctuation between the author’s name and numbers: (Berg 23). |
| **2. Source with no author give:** Title or shortened form of it, followed by the page number(s), (if any): (“Peak Flow Meters”). |
| **3. Source with two or more authors:** All authors’ last names, followed by the page number(s), (if any): (Smolley and Bruce 128). |
| **4. Author’s name given in a paragraph:** page number only. (23). |

10. **Works Cited Page**: At the end of your I-Search Paper, you need to include a Works Cited list that includes all the sources you have used in your paper. A Works Cited list my include both print and non-print sources, such as films, interview or electronic sources.

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| **Guidelines for Preparing the list of Works Cited** |
| 1. Follow the format you used on your 3x5 source cards. |
| 2. List your sources you used in alphabetical order by the author’s last name (or, if no author is listed, by the title). Ignore *A, An*, and *The*, and use the first letter of the next word. |
| 3. Begin each listing at the left margin. If the listing is longer than one line, indent the remaining lines five spaces. Double-space all entries. |
| 4. Put your *Works Cited* on a separate piece of paper at the end of your final I-Search paper. Center the words *Works Cited* at the top of the page. And don’t for get to include a header on this page as well. |

11. **Evaluate and Revise Your Draft**: Did you know that many famous writers revise their works several times? Very few writers get it right the first time. To refine your writing, read through your paper at least TWICE! First evaluate the content and organization and for the second reading, look at style.

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| **I-Search Paper: Content-and-Organization Guidelines** **for Self and Peer-Edit** |
| **Evaluation Questions \*Tips \*Revision Techniques** |
| **1. Does the thesis statement \*Underline** the thesis statement **\*Add** research results to the**answer the research question Box** the research results summary thesis statement until it is **completely?** in the thesis. If one or more results a complete answer to the  are missing. Revise. research question |
| **2. Is the story of the search \*Number** each step of the search **\*Rearrange** the steps of the**in logical order?** in the order it happened. If the search so they are in numbers are out of order as you logical order. read through the paper, revise. |
| **3. Are the results of the \*Circle** the major results of the **\*Add** information from**search adequately supported** search. **Underline** sentences outside sources. **Elaborate****by information from outside** containing information from on each major result with**sources?** an outside source. If you an interesting or surprising underline fewer than three detail from an outside sentences, revise. source. |
| **4. Are enough print and \*Highlight** information taken **\*Consult** a library’s online**nonprint sources used ? Are** from note cards. Revise if both catalog and the Reader’s**they recent, reliable, and** print and nonprint sources are Guide. **Add** information**objective?** no used, or if some seem from these sources to  unreliable. your report |
| **5. Does the conclusion \*Bracket** each sentence that **\*Add** statements that **describe how the research** describes the effects of the explain the effects of the**experience affected the** research experience on the research experience.**writer?** writer. |

12. **Publishing**: (Proofread Your Paper) Before you prepare a final copy of your I-Search Paper, make sure it is free of grammar, spelling and punctuation errors. Check your format of parenthetical citations, Works Cited and headers and headings.