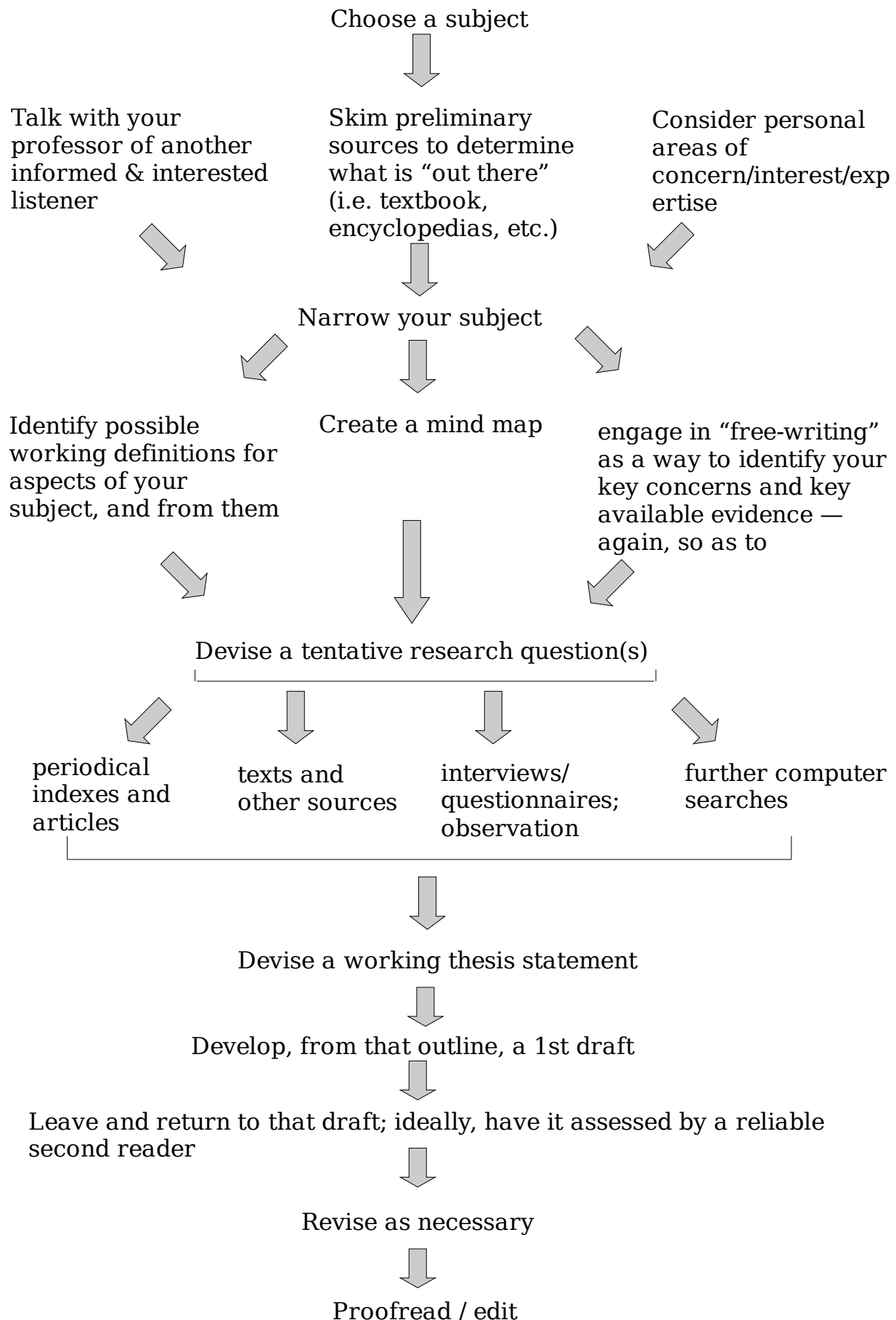


# WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER

This handout provides a model that you can follow in conducting research and developing your findings into a paper. It must be understood, however, that there is no single “best” approach to writing research papers; the process you use will ultimately depend on your particular inclinations as a reader, a thinker, and a writer. Whatever the methods you use, however, it is essential that you begin the research/writing process by **narrowing your topic**, whether it is one that you have chosen yourself, or one that has been assigned to you. Otherwise, your ensuing research will be unmanageably open-ended. It is also essential, once your topic is manageably-narrowed, that you develop a position or claim you wish to test, or else, a question for which you wish to find an answer. This position, claim, or question — your **working thesis statement** — will guide you in your subsequent research and in your selection of the information you will consider in your writing. It will also go far to assist you in organizing the contents of your paper, and in staying focused on its purpose.

Let us consider the following model, and then “imagine our way through it” by applying it to a sample research topic.



## Subject-narrowing techniques

One narrowing technique is to identify possible working definitions for aspects of your topic, and then to develop from these definitions a tentative research question for which you feel you would be interested in/capable of finding answers.

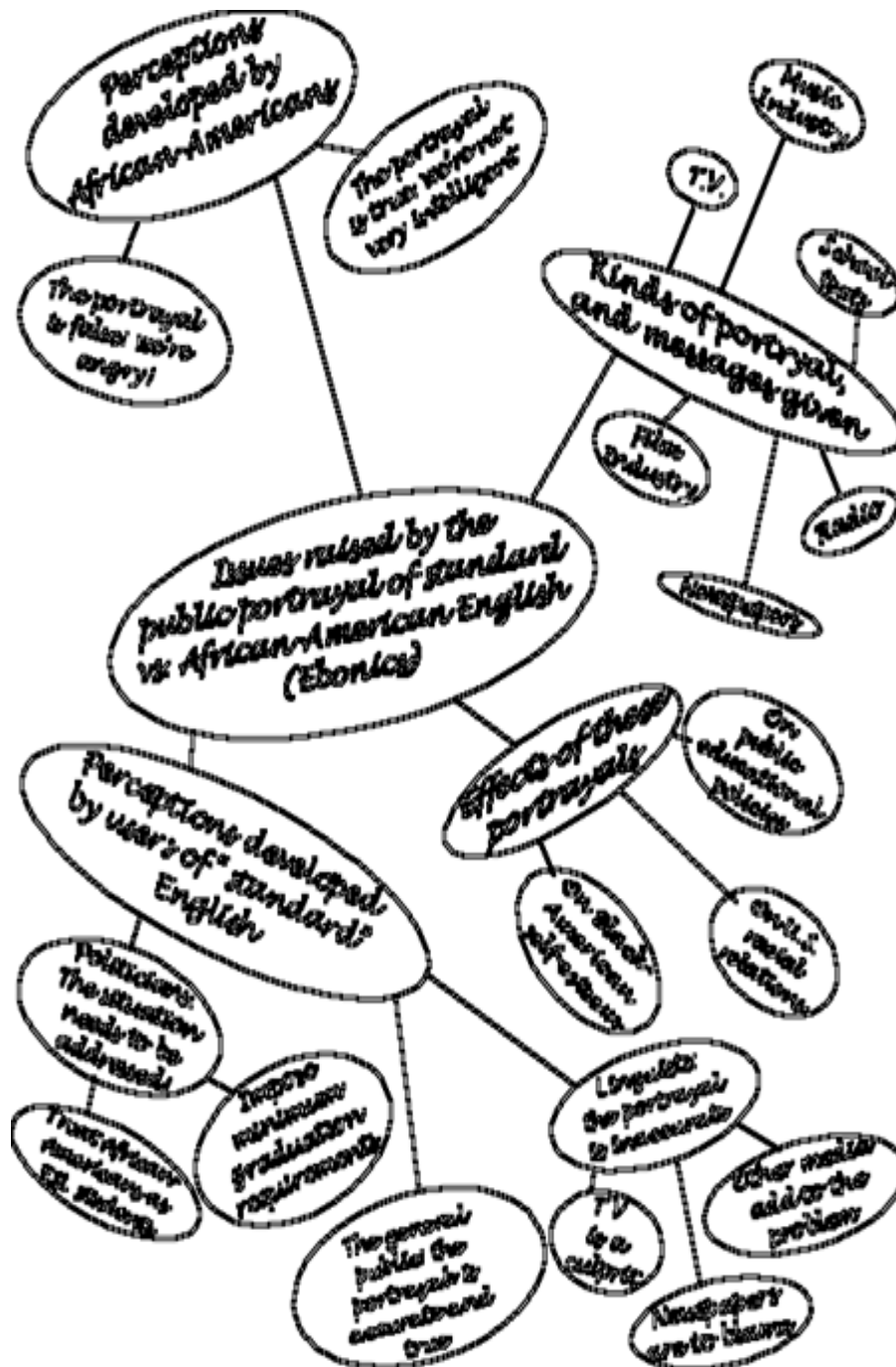
Broad Subject: "The Public Portrayal of 'Standard' Language"				
Preliminary Focus: "Issues raised by the public portrayal of standard versus non-standard language"				
<u>Issues</u>	<u>Public Portrayal</u>	<u>Standard</u>	<u>Non-Standard</u>	<u>Language</u>
- educational	- television	- English	- Hispanic-American	- grammatical rules
- theoretical	- radio	- French	- Southern (?)	- vocabulary
- social	- newspapers	- Spanish	- African-American ("Ebonics")	- spoken performance
	- literature	-		- listening ability
	- recording industry	-		- reading ability
	- primary / elementary school textbooks			- written performance
	- high school textbooks			

Another narrowing technique is to create a "mind map" or "cluster" (please see the following page).

A third narrowing technique is to engage in some free-writing — that is, to try working through some of your ideas on paper by writing them out without regard for spelling, grammar, or even for relevance and logic, to see if by so doing you can discover some kernel of interest, significance, or meaning to pursue (or some problem that needs to be further-researched in order to be resolved).

### **Conducting focused research based on a tentative research question, devising a thesis statement, and creating an outline**

The next step in the research/writing process, once you have narrowed your subject, is to pose yourself a **tentative research question**.



Sample question:

*“Does the portrayal of Ebonics in the media lead to public misconceptions and unfair negative value judgements about African-American dialect?”*

Having posed yourself a tentative research question, your next step is to engage in **focused research** that will reveal to you whether or not ample, accessible, and credible information exists to assist you in answering that question. If you cannot find information to assist you,

you may have to reconsider your narrowed topic and formulate alternative research questions.

Perhaps you have located published work on these facets of your topic:

- Newspaper coverage of the Ebonics issue that portrays Ebonics as slang.
- Newspaper coverage of the Ebonics issue that associates African-Americans with dialect, poverty, poor school performance and crime.
- Scholarly articles analyzing African-American dialect - as well as other American variants of “standard” English - in terms of linguistic, social, historical, cultural and geographical influences.

As you engage in your focused research into these three areas, you should be taking systematic notes, ideally on index cards because these can be arranged and rearranged as you identify possible connections between pieces of your evidence. Indeed, your index cards, when you have finally organized them into a useable arrangement, can greatly assist you in creating a formal outline for your paper!

Once you have carefully considered the evidence you have gathered through focused research, you should be ready to turn your research question into a **working thesis statement**.

In the sample case, that thesis statement might read **“Much of the public debate on Ebonics displays misinformation about what exactly a dialect is. Misinformation propagated by North American newspapers, alone, includes unjustified negative value judgements and the belief that Ebonics is simply slang.”**

And now, using the notes you have taken, and with this working thesis statement as your guide, you should be ready to draft a **working outline**.

## **Creating the Outline**

Below is a generalized model for a research paper outline.

**Thesis:**

- I. INTRODUCTION
  - A. Definition, Description, and History (as appropriate)
  - B. Statement of Purpose
  - C. Information Sources (including research methods and materials)
  - D. Working Definitions (if appropriate)
  - E. Limitations of the Report (if appropriate)
  - F. Scope of Coverage (sequence of major topics in the body)
  
- II. BODY
  - A. First Major Topic
    1. First subtopic of A
    2. Second subtopic of A
      - a. First subtopic of 2
      - b. Second subtopic of 2
        - (1) (And so on—subdivision carried as far as necessary)
  - B. Second Major Topic
    1. (and so on)
  
- III. CONCLUSION (where everything is tied together)
  - A. Summary of Information in II
  - B. Analysis of Information in II

A good outline also conforms to the following guidelines:

- It obeys the “rule of two”: each “main topic” should contain at least two subtopics; subtopics, if followed by sub-subtopics, should again contain at least two.

Portion of a “poor” outline	Portion of a “good” outline
II. Body <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. First Major Topic</li> <li>B. Second Major Topic               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Subtopic                   <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Sub-subtopic</li> </ol> </li> </ol> </li> <li>C. Third Major Topic</li> </ol>	II. Body <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>D. First Major Topic               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Subtopic</li> <li>2. Subtopic                   <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Sub-subtopic</li> <li>b. Sub-subtopic</li> <li>c. Sub-subtopic</li> </ol> </li> </ol> </li> <li>E. Second Major Topic</li> </ol>

- It avoids overlap: each topic addresses a distinct idea.
- It maintains coherence: subtopics and sub-subtopics relate directly to their major topics, rather than leading reader and writer off on tempting tangents.
- It maintains internal parallelism: all items at any given level are

grammatically-similar

Parallelism violated:	Parallelism maintained:
<p>A. Definitions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is a dialect?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. distinguishing features of dialect</li> <li>b. a dialect is not just slang expressions such as “getting jiggy with it”</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Ebonics               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. working definition</li> <li>b. What did Labov write about it?</li> <li>c. later work on Black English</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<p>B. Definitions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is a dialect?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. distinguishing features of dialect</li> <li>b. common misconceptions concerning dialect</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. What is Ebonics?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. a working definition</li> <li>b. Labov’s analysis of Black English</li> <li>c. later scholarly analyses of Black English</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

- It provides clear and informative headings

Not informative	Informative
<p>B. The Portrayal of Ebonics in North American Newspapers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the Globe and Mail portrayals</li> <li>2. the New York Times’ portrayals</li> <li>3. the Washington Post’s portrayals</li> </ol>	<p>B. The portrayals of Ebonics in North American Newspapers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the Globe &amp; Mail's association of Ebonics, African-Americans and inner-city crime</li> <li>2. the New York Times' association of Aftican American english with poor school performance</li> <li>3. the Washington Post's portrayal of Ebonics as defective and lazy use of English</li> </ol>

By the time you have created an effective formal outline, you will be ready to write a first draft of your paper. Indeed, many writers work from rough, skeletal outlines to create first, exploratory drafts, and only then, after revising those drafts, do they commit themselves to a formal outline.

Note, too, that some writers do not find the need to use a formal outline; by the time they have created a first draft from their initial, organizational “skeleton,” they are ready to stick with that draft, revising and fine-tuning it, until they feel they have accomplished their purpose.

Thesis: Much of the debate on Ebonics displays misinformation about what exactly a dialect is. Misinformation propagated by North American newspapers, alone, includes unjustified negative value judgements and the belief that Ebonics is simply slang.

## I. Introduction

- A. A brief overview of the Ebonics debate; a brief definition of Ebonics
- B. Purpose: to show the extent to which public portrayals of Ebonics is linguistically misguided
- C. Information sources and methodology: critical textual analysis of newspaper articles in the Globe and Mail, New York Times, and Washington Post from 1994-1998; a survey of linguistic studies of Ebonics from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ .
- D. Scope:

## II Body

### 1. Definitions

- 1. What is a dialect?
  - 1. distinguishing features of dialect
  - 2. common misconceptions concerning dialect
- 2. What is Ebonics?
  - 1. a working definition
  - 2. Labov's analysis of Black English
  - 3. later scholarly analyses of Black English

### 2. The Portrayal of Ebonics in North American Newspapers

- 1. the Globe and Mail's association of Ebonics, African-Americans, and inner-city crime
- 2. the New York Times' association of African-American English with poor school performance
- 3. the Washington Post's portrayal of Ebonics as defective and lazy use of English

## III Conclusion

- 1) Linguists and the general public have radically different views on dialect in general and Ebonics in particular.
- 2) Linguists should be involved in education of the general public on this critical issue.

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