

Teaching the Research Paper

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Some years ago, I had a student who was a marvelous writer. Jayne's first 401 essay, titled "The Sterile Cage," was a moving narrative about what it was like to spend several years as a child suspended in a stainless steel device designed to help her recover from a bone disorder. In our first conference, I told her I loved the paper and the voice she found in it.

Eight weeks later, when she handed me her research paper on child psychology, that wonderful voice was gone. The paper was dry, the prose wooden, and the writer seemingly missing in a swamp of facts. "What happened?" I asked. "Where was the writer who comes across with such power in your essays?"

"This is a *research paper*, dammit," she said. "It's supposed to be this way."

At that moment, it occurred to me for the first time that the research paper, a required paper I had often dreaded teaching, was really the most important assignment in my class. It challenged me to convince my students that everything they had learned until then about writing applied to the form they knew best and hated most. They believed essays were "creative writing," and research papers were a different beast altogether. Some believed that writing personal essays was an enjoyable vacation from the academic writing they were doomed to pursue when they left my class. The

research paper, one of those things they were “doomed” to write in other classes, was a kind of payment I exacted for giving them the chance to be “creative” on other papers.

It never occurred to them that “academic” writing, exemplified by the research paper, could be “creative”; that is, it could be a paper in which the writer and the writing count. And it never occurred to them that the writing process they had developed while composing an essay about their grandfather’s death could be applied to this more traditional and familiar form. It is crucial that we help them make these connections.

The research paper assignment is important for other reasons as well. For many students, it is the first time they work from an abundance of information. While personal essays often grow from draft to draft, the researcher collects a wealth of information *before* attempting the first draft. This experience of having on hand, for research assignments, more “stuff” than you can use forces student writers to tighter focuses and more purposeful writing. Freshmen also come to Freshman English with virtually no experience in the library. They are, in fact, intimidated by the place. If it does nothing else, this assignment gives students some valuable library skills. And finally, the research paper provides less introspective students with an alternative to the essay. Let’s face it. Some of our students are uninterested in examining and reflecting on their lives, but they may be interested in exploring some aspect of the world around them. These students often find research papers much more comfortable.

Research Paper Versus Research Report

When you announce that a research paper is required, expect a groan. With a few exceptions, students initially dread the assignment. That attitude comes, in part, from their own mistaken assumptions about the nature of research, assumptions their instructors—in both high school *and* college—often seem to share. Because many teachers long ago despaired about getting much original or interesting work in research papers, they insisted on the one thing students should be able to get right: footnotes, bibliographies, formal structures, and other conventions. The result of this legacy is the privileging of form over content. Students quickly get the message that in this kind of writing what they think doesn’t matter.

“Research was a certain number of pages with a certain number of quotes on a certain topic,” one student wrote when asked about high school papers. “All of these ‘measurements’ were given to us before we

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started working. I found it very hard to learn much more than how to link quotes together from these papers.” Another student wrote:

You weren’t expected to learn anything yourself with the high school research paper. The best ones seemed to be the ones that had the most information. I always tried to find the most sources as if somehow that would automatically make my paper better than the rest. . . . Everyone followed the same guidelines and format. So, it seemed that whoever found the most interesting facts won. . . . The subjects never gave me the desire to keep researching because I wasn’t personally interested.

What many students call research papers are really research reports. In other words, students believe they must go out and collect as much information as possible on a topic and stitch it together into a quilt that reports on everything that’s known about that topic—a recycled encyclopedia entry. They describe an assignment that sounds to me like those machines that pick up golf balls on driving ranges: scoop up as much scattered information as you can, throw it together, and then hand it to a teacher to take a whack at. The process usually involves heavy use of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Reader’s Guide*, a large stack of five-by-seven note cards bound by a thick rubber band, and mindless hours in the library passing love notes until the night before the paper is due. Then it’s the mad dash to write it. Students are not expected to build their papers around their own ideas about the topic. In many cases, they don’t even get to choose their topic. Use of personal experience or observation is often forbidden, as is the pronoun *I*. When these formal papers are assigned in high school, students are sometimes told that this work will prepare them for college. Then when they dutifully write these papers in college, their instructors complain about how bad they are.

It’s time we recognize that this approach to teaching research and research writing is a disaster. It alienates students from the genuine spirit of research, and it turns the research paper into a genre of writing that has little apparent connection to any of the other writing that goes on in the composition course. It produces students who are phobic about the library, certain that “facts” inevitably poison prose, and convinced that their ideas are irrelevant.

It’s helpful to persuade them that the research paper we require in Freshman English bears little resemblance to a research report. We *do not* want a summary of what’s known about their topics. What we *do* want is for them to *use the ideas of others to shape their own ideas* about their topic. What they think matters in the research paper as much as it does in the personal essay. Though their own experiences may be central to their

research, they will be looking beyond them, to other sources of information, to find out what they want to know.

* Absolutely key to the success of this assignment is challenging students to use their own curiosity to fuel the process. That means open topic choice. Weeks before we begin the research paper, I challenge students to begin thinking about what they've seen or experienced that raises questions research can help answer. I use lots of examples of topics that grew that way. One student summered on Cape Cod, and one rainy day her father invited her to tour local graveyards searching for the stone of an ancestor. She noticed the different gravestone designs, and the way they were grouped. She wondered, What accounts for those differences? She had a topic. Another student, coming out of an extremely abusive relationship with her boyfriend, wondered why she stuck with him so long. Her paper focused on how the abuser fosters dependency that's hard for a victim to shake. It was a powerful paper partly because of the revelations it provided the writer.

As with other writing, sometimes subjects lead to subjects. One of my students, walking past Thompson Hall (the oldest building on our campus) one day wondered about the building's history. As he started to research it, he encountered a news clip about a student strike at UNH in the spring of 1970. His paper became a critique of how the students and the administration handled the controversy.

For many students, this assignment will be the first time they are researching a topic they are genuinely curious about, and it often transforms the experience for them.

* "This time I was able to really stay focused and realized that maybe I wasn't a great authority on my topic," a student told me, "but I'm writing to discover, not to impress people that I know everything."

Alternatives to the Formal Research Paper

I once did an in-service seminar for high school teachers on this approach to the research paper. When I passed out the paper on the gravestones, a paper that nicely wove a narrative of the writer's journey to Cape Cod graveyards with exposition on the meaning of the symbols on the stones, a lively argument ensued.

"This isn't a research paper," said one English Department head. "This is—I don't know what this is, but it's too informal, it lacks scholarly detachment, it lacks an introduction with a thesis, a body, a conclusion."