

"Research Paper." 21

1. Another term for "boring."

THE LITERARY ANATOMY

Reviving the Research Essay

the muse of footnotes

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“Research Essay”—two words that are guaranteed to elicit groans and scowls from the most cheerful of students. It’s no wonder that the personal essay has become the kinder, gentler alternative. But I would like to make an appeal on behalf of the scorned ex. To begin with, the research paper is a cornerstone of cross-curricular education; it can be assigned in history, health, and English classes alike. Moreover, it integrates a diverse array of skills: online and library research, the formation of opinion, the synthesis of information, the ability to document and substantiate, the capacity to filter and select. Despite the research essay’s self-evident benefits, many teachers tend to assign creative nonfiction and personal narratives to add variety and pleasure to what appears to be an onerous task. While I agree that students need variety, I believe it is possible (and important) to infuse the research essay with creativity and self-expression.

A brief glimpse at the history of the essay genre provides insight into the research essay’s fascinating evolution. The Roman five-stage model of composing a speech (invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery) was a significant model for the five-part essay writing process we still by and large obey. Overall, the rules for oral and written composition altered little from Cicero’s day until the nineteenth century. In the late 1800s, many viewed Harvard University as the dominant influence on essay writing, yet Harvard’s pedagogy was primarily interested in writing about literature rather than writing about students’ experiences or community research. Harvard’s 1874 entrance requirement in English composition states that “each candidate will be required to write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and expression, the subject to be taken from such works of standard authors....”¹ With the focus on literature, the wider scope of students’ interests was frequently ignored.

The early twentieth century sought changes that greatly altered how we teach the research essay today. In 1911, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) was formed largely in opposition to elite schools' canonical reading lists and the limitations imposed by their near-sighted approach to essay writing. NCTE's first president, Fred Newton Scott, made it clear that he was interested in promoting "an understanding of writing that reemphasized self-expression."² The NCTE's dissatisfaction with the Ivy League was a part of a larger movement by the progressives, who believed (among other things) that writing should have a usefulness beyond school. A typical writing assignment of the progressive educators might be a class writing project that would collect data about some local social problem and prepare a report to be sent to the appropriate public official. Here, we can see the assignment's attempt to connect students to the community's concerns, and therefore, to the student's life. We can also see the emergence of the research essay.

I propose that we revisit the original objectives that inspired the research essay and incorporate even more means of creative self-expression and social engagement. The following exercises strive to help students understand that a research essay is a creative endeavor and one that will inspire great change if done properly. Granted, the type of research essay one assigns will vary, but most essays can incorporate the ideas I've devised. The goal is to provide students with the type of assignment that makes them want to write out of a desire to express what they have been thinking about in silence. As Vladimir Nabokov wrote, "The pages are still blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible."

exercises

1 Topics of Personal Impact

The first opportunity teachers have to engage students with the research essay is the topic itself. From the beginning, I believe it is important to encourage students to research a topic that they need to explore in order to answer a personal question. With this in mind, my students have come up with (and successfully researched) topics like: What car should I buy? What training will improve a pitcher's throw? What college should I attend? Or, what benefits might a diet change like vegetarianism offer? Other topic ideas have involved students researching their own family histories. One student researched what she thought were "strange" family Christmas customs, among them, her mother's habit of putting candy in shoes. The student's research into the cultural roots of this tradition helped her and her entire family appreciate the evolution of their seemingly idiosyncratic custom.

A more expected but still beneficial topic is current events, especially as they impinge upon the students. For instance, a few of my students who are concerned about the draft being reinstated have researched the likelihood of it while assessing its benefits and drawbacks. Whatever the topic, it is crucial for students to discover a topic that will compel them from beginning to end.

2 Unleash the Curious Cat

After my students choose their research topics, I encourage them to freewrite in response to a series of guided questions. Below are some questions I would recommend as useful prompts to help students begin to shape and assess their ideas:

- Why should readers care about this topic?
- What questions do you want your research to answer?
- How could your essay inspire personal (or societal) change?
- What concerns do you have in association with this assignment?
- How could you make the research essay creative?
- What will you do if your research fails to support one of your points?

After the students finish their five-minute freewrites to each question, I spend the last half of class discussing their answers. I recommend that you be very clear about your expectations. For instance, do you require them to include conflicting research as a part of the opposition? Do you want them to critique the source? Use the freewrites to excite them and to thwart potential problems.

3 Point-of-View Makeover

Judging by how many times I've heard it, it would seem that the panacea for all creative writing problems is "to change the point-of-view." While a point-of-view change may or may not enhance a poem or a short story, approaching a research essay with a unique POV can help engage critical thinking abilities. For example, students of mine have chosen to adopt the point-of-view of their opposition, the opposite sex, another nationality, or a different age group. In a recent class of mine one student wanted to move in with her boyfriend and needed her parents' permission to do so. To prepare for the "talk" she would have with them, she wrote a research essay from the perspective of an adult who opposed living together before marriage. After completing her research essay, she actually changed her own mind. On a slightly different note, a few of my younger students have asked if they could speak from the point-of-view of an inanimate object or a visitor from outer space as a way to satirize some of our common practices (such as, tanning).

4 Setting the Stage

My students get a kick out of the Peanuts comic strip in which Snoopy types "It was a dark and stormy night..." (the opening line of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1830 novel) atop his doghouse. I have found it useful to remind them that a research essay can draw upon similar dramatic and poetic effects to engage the reader's interest immediately. If a student is writing about gun control, he might create an opening scene in which a hunter trudges downstairs on a cold, autumnal morning to retrieve his rifle. For a literary research paper, a student could begin by placing a specific character in an unexpected setting or in a contemporary milieu. A student researching the works of Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë could open the essay by imagining one of Dicken's young waifs in Brontë's Lowood. Later, the student can explain how the creative introduction relates to the research topic, but first let his or her imagination be free.

5 Citing from 50 Cent

Students expect that they will have to quote in their research essays, but usually their citations come from people they have never heard of, reinforcing the idea that research essays are removed from their lives. I think it's important to encourage students to search for quotations from sources that excite them: a line from a favorite novel, poem, song, or an excerpt from an oral interview with a family member or townsperson. One student was writing a research essay against invading Iraq, and he quoted the following lines from "This War" by Sting. Granted, the quote has to relate to the topic, but quoting from a source students already respect helps them to understand that many elements of their lives, including listening to the radio, can be incorporated into their writing process.

6 Lights! Camera! Action!

Research papers frequently suffer from an incantation of "he said," "she said," "he did this," "she did that." To jazz up the grammatical monotony, I like to emphasize the role of verbs. I ask my students to flip through their first drafts and hone in on three verbs that are not working hard enough, three verbs that fail to convey as much information and/or emotion as they could. One way to help them understand just how specific a verb can be is to do what I like to call a Vocational Verb exercise. I ask my students to pick three professions at random—such as, firefighter, chef, and gymnast—and then to list verbs that are particular to that line of work. The list might read: *douse, hose, dice, boil, vault, tumble*. As a fun culmination to this exercise, I have my students replace their boring verbs with verbs from the vocation list.

7 A River Runs Through It

Young writers know to include metaphors and similes in their creative writing, but they often grow straightlaced and monotone when it comes to their research essays. One way to use their creativity is to have students construct an extended metaphor that runs throughout their entire essay. One student researched what it takes to become a successful interior designers and opened her essay with a scene in which she was cutting curtains along a pattern. Throughout the essay, she compared her career to a sewing pattern. Sometimes she would need to follow expectations exactly (such as getting certain degrees and experience), but her career would also require her to veer from the pre-fabricated route to create unique ideas for her clients. In the end, she returned to the original image of her tying the final knot in her newly-sewn curtains.

8 Just the Facts, Ma'am

While students tend to regard research essays as a sequence of regurgitated facts, it's good to remind them that there are many different kinds of facts. I recommend that students apply their inventiveness to the very act of fact-finding. One excellent way to change students' relationship to facts is to ask them to conduct their own interviews. This requires students to identify local "experts" and to reach out to the community. Often, my students find that simply interviewing a teacher from another discipline (or a classmate's parent) provides immediate and in-depth answers to their specific questions. Other students have even created surveys to poll fellow classmates. Whatever the idea, I think it's helpful to allow students the opportunity to conceive of alternate methods of research.

9 The Afterlife

I've noticed that students' creative writing tends to have a rich and lengthy afterlife. When my students write a poem they will frequently work on it after the assignment, inscribe it in cards or on pages of their notebooks, share it with their friends, or attempt to publish it. By contrast, the research essay stops dead in its tracks the moment the grade is applied. To extend the research essay's life beyond the grade, I try to engage students in structuring the afterlife of their essays. What that is depends largely on the assignment. An essay about political issues could result in asking students to send their findings to U.S. senators or to the local school board as a way to influence and participate in democracy. Another idea is to create a book the class self-publishes. For this to work well with the research essay, I've had my classes choose a broad topic with each student writing on a well-focused sub-section. For example, if the class topic were global warming, individual topics could be the history of global warming, the contributors to global warming, the disagreements within the scientific community, etc.

In the end, I ask my students to reflect on what their research essays have offered the world that did not exist before they commenced their inquiry? I have them underline a single sentence that has never been said before or circle a question that has never been asked heretofore as a means of celebrating and acknowledging the originality that is inherent to successful research. By using these techniques, I find that they are as proud of their research as they are of their most outlandish acts of self-expression—even their new neon-colored hair.

Notes

1. *The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Writing*. "A Brief History of Rhetoric and Composition." www.bedford-books.com/bb/history/html (2/20/2004).

2. *Ibid.*

