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ABSTRACT

The term "research paper," in the sense of researched paper, is a tautology: all expository discourses are researched in some way. One of the first duties of writing instructors is to help students see the difference between reporting on information that already exists about a topic, in what is sometimes referred to as a "library paper," and using information as evidence to support a claim or to illustrate a generalization. But how does the writing instructor teach students to use information effectively in support of an original thesis? Students need to learn how to extract information selectively, then learn to manage what they have selected. Three ways that students can be taught to manage information would be as follows. First, instructors should eliminate the use of generic terms such as "comparison essay," or "pro-con essay" and instead speak of the paper in reader-based terms, as something that has contextualized aims. Rather than have students mechanically "narrow a topic," shift to real and urgent issues; the topic will narrow itself once the student apprehends the presence of an issue that matters. Secondly, instructors should help students to become immersed in their issue through reading and field research. Linda Flower offers 9 steps for problem-solving strategies that can be helpful. Third, instructors should call attention to the kinds of information to be managed and suggest particular strategies for managing them. (TB)

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Information Management and Composing: Reassessing Our Research Paper Protocols

The term "research paper," in the sense of researched paper, is a tautology: all expository discourses are researched in some way, to some degree, as Richard Larson reminds us in his well-known article, "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing" (College English 44 [1982]: 811-16). Larson asserts that research, which furnishes the substance of all discourse "except, possibly one's personal reflections on one's own experience . . . is itself the subject . . . of no distinctively identifiable kind of writing" (813). Hence we seriously misrepresent "research" to first-year composition students when we teach them the "research paper" as if it were a distinct genre. One of the problems, of course, lies in the way we define "research." Although a travel article on Stonehenge is as much a "research paper" as, let us say, a scholarly investigation of the specific manner in which Stonehenge functioned as a prehistoric observatory, many teachers would identify only the latter example as a bona fide "research paper." That is to say, when many

teachers speak of research papers, they are really thinking of scholarly investigations: formal academic papers that make use of specialized source materials to advance an original insight into a narrowly focused, discipline-specific, area of inquiry. Unfortunately, the "original insight" part of that second definition tends to be under-emphasized or ignored altogether because composition teachers, either consciously or unconsciously, often use the research paper assignment to test students' information-gathering, assertion-supporting, and documentation skills. These easily quantifiable skills take precedence over the more fundamental dynamics of composing such as the original unfolding of a compelling insight into a particular problem; of being "objective" and "formal" without being detached and wooden.

Of course, first-year college students must know how to use the library, must learn to extract material from sources as evidence in support of claims asserted in a coherently developed argument, and must learn to document these citations properly. These are analogous to grammatical skills: indispensable, but not central to instruction in composing.

We want students to be able to draw meaningfully from their sources, and learn to integrate them effectively into their discussions. Let me reflect on this point for a moment: I think we are so obsessed with the likelihood of plagiarism that we forget to show students how to draw the line between the researched information that students can rightfully make their own and the intellectual property of others, requiring proper citation.

Students are only too happy to comply with our obsessions, citing and annotating with a gusto approaching paranoia, but in the process, advancing no substantive argument whatsoever. One of our first duties is to help students see the difference between reporting on information that already exists about a topic, in what is sometimes referred to as a "library paper," and using information as evidence to support a claim or to illustrate a generalization. Even when the aim is the former--of reporting information without advancing an original thesis (commonly assigned in high schools), the task can be made much more interesting to both writer and audience by encouraging presentation of facts from an original perspective, by encouraging writers to center on what they find most peculiar or intriguing about their topic; to encourage them to think of their audiences as eager to be awed as well as informed by their topic.

In his essay on Oranges (1967) John McPhee is certainly bent on edifying and awing in one fell swoop:

The sour oranges of Afghanistan customarily appear as seasoning agents on Afghan dinner tables. Squeezed over Afghan food, they cut the grease. The Shamouti Orange, of Israel, is seedless and sweet, has a thick skin, and grows in Hadera, Gaza, Tiberias, Jericho, the Jordan Valley, and Jaffa; it is exported from Jaffa, and for that reason is known universally beyond Israel as the Jaffa Orange. The Jaffa Orange is the variety that British people consider superior to all others, possibly because Richard the Lionhearted spent the winter of 1191-92 in the citrus groves of Jaffa.

Not a single footnote here, even though McPhee most certainly, at one time or another, had to “look up” most of the facts in this passage. Students must look beyond the superficial mechanics of citing and attributing to the dynamics of integration, of weaving retrieved information into their own consciousness (i.e., to “acquire ownership” of that new information), in order to heighten fascination about the topic, as John McPhee does so supremely well. But before students can do these things, they need to immerse themselves in the material, ponder over it, let it soak into their pores--rather than prematurely set out on a rote skin-grafting operation.

But how do we teach students to use information effectively in support of an original thesis? They first need to learn how to extract information selectively, then learn to manage what they have selected. Why is it that, as Robert Schwegler and Linda Shamoon have pointed out, “Students seem overwhelmed by what they find in outside sources”; why are they “incapable of weaving the information they have gathered into an argument that presents and defends their point of view” (“The Aims and Process of the Research Paper”; College English 44 [1982]: 817)? My guess is that teachers neglect to help students manage the information they have gathered so that they can use it to build an effective argument.

Let me then suggest three ways of helping students develop strong information management skills. For starters, we ought to dispense with those genre or subgenre taxonomies (i.e., the definition essay, the comparison essay, the narrative essay, the pro-con essay, the research

paper-- genre distinctions that working writers never make), and emphasize instead more reader-based, more fully contextualized aims (for example, to determine the effects of x on y during x number of weeks, and arrive at a plausible statement of consequences). Rather than have students mechanically “narrow a topic,” shift to real and urgent issues; the topic almost always will narrow itself once the student apprehends the presence of an issue. I would even refrain from using the word “topic,” or “thesis”--schoolbookish expressions that have a way of defusing even the most provocative ideas for papers. Thomas Trzyna reminds us that “[p]rofessional researchers start with an hypothesis or an observation, not with a topic; they look for answers, not for an exercise in debate” (“Approaches to Research Writing: A Review of Handbooks with Some Suggestions”; College Composition and Communication 34 [1983]: 202). Instead of assigning topic-narrowing exercises, then, teachers should invite students to visit sites where issues arise: a classroom for learning-disabled children, a senior citizens residence, a hospital ER, a health spa, a missionary food kitchen, an animal shelter or pet store, a recycling plant--or some campus site such as the theater department’s costume shop, the library’s bindery or rare books and manuscripts collection, the physical plant, the health center. The immediate advantage of site visitations is the opportunity to become immersed in the situations as they really are, and to be able to talk to people, experts in their fields. Vague topics result from detached, indifferent research. But what about literary criticism,

some may ask. Even issues that seem purely textual can be situated visually. If you're teaching Walden you can show slides or a video, in case a field trip to Walden Pond would not be feasible.

Secondly, before any serious drafting of an essay can get underway, the writer must become immersed in the concerns raised by his or her area of inquiry. Taking a mental inventory is a good way to start. Ken Macrorie, in Searching Writing, asks his students to brainstorm about what they already know (or have just learned) about their topic, and then what else they need to find out about it. At this stage, teachers might introduce a set of problem-solving strategies, perhaps using Linda Flower's protocols (the first six of nine steps):

- (1) Explore. Concretize the problem (Flower writes, "People solve only the problem that they picture to themselves" [Problem-Solving Strategies for Writers, 2nd Ed.: 64])
- (2) Make a plan to do (purpose? how to achieve?) and a plan to say (formulating a statement of goal; articulating key concerns to be discussed needed for fulfilling the goal).
- (3) Generate ideas specifically related to the goal
- (4) Organize these ideas (expand code words, nutshell, build issue trees; analyze the problem in depth)
- (5) Understand readers' needs for the problem at hand
- (6) [Stylistic level] Transform writer-based prose into reader-based prose [shared goals, reader cues, Rogerian persuasion strategies]

Steps 7-9 involve revising, testing, and editing.

By becoming involved with the exigencies raised by the issue being investigated, rather than with the rules of the assignment, students will have a better sense of what kinds of information they need to locate and incorporate. For example, a student who is concerned about campus security may benefit from visits to the campus police by looking into the escort services available for female students, by surveying students about their experiences with on-campus harassment, and then by searching through the professional literature for relevant critical discussion. How the writer will be using all of this information depends, of course, on aim and intended audience. Will it be a feature story for the student body? (“How Safe is Our Campus?”) Will it be a feasibility study? (“Campus Security: Where Reform is Needed.”) Will it be a scholarly investigation into the psychopathology of harassment? Or the societal implications of harassment policymaking?

Each aim will require somewhat different information management strategies--and that brings me to my third recommendation for helping students develop good information-management skills: Call explicit attention to the kinds of information to be managed, and suggest particular strategies for managing them:

1. Factual information: assimilate into one's own knowledge base and expository style, rather than quote verbatim and document.
2. Expert testimony, experimental results: direct quotation (or paraphrase) + documentation (full documentation if addressing a

scholarly audience; minimal documentation otherwise). Emphasize original analysis of findings; include the analyses of others only when needed to further develop original analysis. Discourage “leaning” on the original interpretations of others

3. Illustration (verbal or iconic): reproduce and document source in full. Emphasize original interpretation/evaluation of illustrations; include interpretations/evaluations of others only when needed to further develop original analysis

When Ken Macrorie tells us that “[m]ost research papers written in high school and college are bad jokes . . . because they pretend to be so much and are actually so little” (Searching Writing 161), he is reacting to the sad fact that all too often writing teachers are far more concerned with the mechanics of researching a topic, than with producing an original essay that incorporates researched information effectively. In short, teachers have put the genre cart before the rhetorical situation horse.