MAKING THE RESEARCH PAPER RELEVANT

I remember writing a research paper on hot air balloons in a freshmen composition class years ago. I had no interest in hot air balloons. I knew nothing at all about them. I merely was told to find a topic and write a research paper. The night before the assignment was due, I went to the library (long before the Internet), grabbed four to six books on the subject, went home, and began to copy important phrases from those books into my "essay." I think I remember getting a good grade on that assignment, yet I didn't learn a thing.

For several years, a fairly quiet debate has been waged concerning the relevancy of the traditional academic research paper. As a handful of rhetoricians who have been critical of the research paper point out, the major problems stem from the fact that students tend to see the traditional research paper as an activity that doesn't require much thought. But the systematic and long-standing use of this particular activity, assigned in a variety of courses across the curriculum, suggests that instructors find the research paper valuable in some way.

There are several reasons that this assignment has become institutional and widely accepted. We want students to see the research paper as a learning experience, to learn the basics of doing research and using the library and the Internet for academic purposes, and to learn a few things about the topic they've chosen or have been assigned. These goals are especially valuable for instructors of writing, whose charge it is to prepare students for the writing tasks they will encounter in their college careers. Moreover, research paper assignments should promote critical thinking and intellectual inquiry. Instructors also see the research paper as a means of assessing their students' learning, to be able to measure, in a discernable way, what our students are learning both in class and while doing research. The research paper was intended to meet all of these goals and objectives.

However, it has become something else entirely. While instructors see research assignments in a positive light, students tend to see them as irrelevant and "easy." And the students may very well be correct in their assessment. Jennie Nelson points out (*Composition Studies: Freshman English News,* Fall 1994) that students approach research paper assignments in a way that would make their instructors shudder. Essentially, students see this as an exercise in regurgitation—that is, they are given or choose a topic, go to the library or the Internet, and pick the first four or five "sources" they find (regardless of the content of the sources). Then they merely copy interesting passages into their papers, sometimes not even taking the trouble to integrate the source material into their own sentences and paragraphs. Obviously, this bad habit has only been made worse with the rising popularity of the Internet—where it's extremely easy, perhaps too easy, for students to search a topic using a search engine, copy and paste some of the more impressive-looking passages into their papers, and then move on to the next assignment. Using the Internet, they don't even have to type.

Nelson calls such a method the "Compile Information Approach." Her study found that 74% of her students made regular use of this method. Also alarming is the fact that 11% use what she called the "Premature Thesis Approach," a method by which students develop a thesis for their papers (i.e., they reach a conclusion) before they begin the research process.

What we're seeing every day in the classroom should call into question the value of the traditional research paper; yet, this type of assignment, which one of Nelson's students called "dumb busy work," seems to have an unchallenged, authoritative foothold in the curriculum. This doesn't seem to be changing.

Now, with each composition class I teach, I try to develop new methods of approaching the research paper assignment that may make the experience more relevant and rewarding. It's an essential part of the curriculum, as students need to learn important research skills, and I'm constantly struggling to come up with new ideas for this assignment. Some of the ideas I

have found useful have come from textbooks I've used in the past, and some I developed on my own.

The Investigation

I teach the "writing process," as do most of my colleagues, and I stress the importance of process during the research assignment. I require my students to follow a fairly rigid, step-by-step process. First, they develop a research question(s) based on the topic they've either chosen or been assigned. (I do both.) This seems to give them a more goal-oriented approach to the actual research that they conduct. They have a question or questions that they want to answer, and the sources that they eventually find will provide them with answers. I tell students that the answers to their questions will determine the thesis and the organizational structure for their essays. I try to make sure that they choose and/or develop research questions that they can't answer without doing research. Second, they submit an annotated bibliography, so that I know they have found and at least examined the sources they want to use. I take a hands-on role in this approach. Students will meet with me in office conferences to discuss their questions, and sometimes I will use the library's online catalog to help them find potential sources, using my desktop.

Thinking About College Majors

Often, my freshmen students find that they are thinking about a particular major or two. When I find a student for whom this is the case, I will ask that he or she develop a research topic that relates to that potential major. For example, if a student is considering majoring in engineering, I may give him these research questions for the assignment: What does an engineer actually do? How many different kinds of engineers are there? What's the current job market for engineers? What is the average salary? How much education is required for one to become a professional engineer?

It's true that the answers to these questions depend on several variables, but that's what makes the assignment useful. The student who is considering a particular major can learn a few things that may help him or her make this tough, important, life-altering decision.

Avoiding the List

I stress to my students that they are not to create a list of facts and submit that as a research paper. I emphasize the importance of thinking about source materials as useful elements of support or evidence in a paper. My hot air balloon research paper was merely a list of facts. It was invented by X. It was invented in the year Y. It has been used to do Z. I had no argument. My "facts" were not used to support any claims I was making about hot air balloons. The assignment was irrelevant.

Using the Library: Trivial Pursuit

This semester, to make certain that my students experienced the library and learned how things work in that strange, "old-fashioned" building, I gave them four or five questions, taken directly from an old Trivial Pursuit board game. I was careful to assign questions that I thought the students would be able to answer, and I told them that I wasn't interested in correct answers. I was interested in seeing the methods they used to find the answers to their questions. I wanted to see *how* they did their research. I wanted them to experience, in a hands-on way, how the library works. They were not allowed to use the Internet, and they were required to photocopy the pages in the source materials that they used to find the answers. From an examination of the students' work thus far, I believe the assignment had some merit.

I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling that the research paper has lost its value and relevancy, and I think the problem may be with the way we approach the assignment and the types of assignments we're making. And while I don't profess to having this problem solved, I'm working every semester to get better. With the new approaches I've taken, my students seem to be learning, and that's all I ask.

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