

# Rethinking Research

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## Research Observation #1

**W**hen years ago I was teaching an extraordinary class of juniors. Together we began their paper assignment, a traditional research paper over a literary work of their choice. I helped them as they learned to use the resources of the local university library and the city-county library system. My students had no concept of the amount of information available, and they were awed. After seeing their hard work and enthusiasm, I looked forward to reading their papers.

The papers were dreadful.

I could not avoid my responsibility in the debacle. I rethought my assumptions and then assigned an I-Search paper to the same group of students.

The papers were wonderful.

A student whose I-Search question was *Do I Want to Become a Veterinarian?* wrote about her visit to a veterinary hospital and watching surgery:

The last patient I had time for was a 13–14 year old female dog. The doctor could not tell just by looking at the aged creature what the problem was. [The veterinarian] felt it might be a cancerous tumor. They started an IV and shaved her, put her on the respirator, and began to make an incision along the mid-abdominal section. Now it was time to explore. It did not take long at all to find the problem. Sure enough, it was a cancerous tumor on her liver. There was no possible way to save the liver, and the dog would always be in pain, so they called her owner at work and asked what he wanted them to do. The hospital suggested euthanasia and the owner agreed. They injected it through the IV and she was still opened up. I could see her life and everything slowed down to a stop. It was just as if they took her batteries out. The emotion was thick, no one said anything for a minute and to myself, I said a prayer for the dog and her owner . . .

## Research Observation #2

A group of students were in the library looking for information to answer the question, *What if Harold had defeated William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings in 1066?* Each of the students in the group identified a “little question” to answer:

- Who is Harold?
- Where is Hastings?
- Why is the Battle of Hastings historically significant?
- Who is William the Conqueror?
- What did he conquer?

One young woman was beside me all the time asking questions, trying to figure out answers and connections. I answered her questions with questions, and both of us were becoming increasingly exasperated. Finally, I said, “Think!” She looked at me and replied, “But I’m used to finding the answers in boldface type.”

## Research Observation #3

Using research information from the Internet and from print sources, students are presenting projects

in various forms: papers, illustrated posters, hyper-media, a play script. But if I ask them to explain the meaning of their findings, they can't. They haven't analyzed and synthesized the information, and they don't understand what they've read. The students aren't plagiarists—they simply don't have the strategies to process and understand the information. The exception is a group of low-performing students who have turned their research on sharks into a hilarious takeoff on the TV series *Baywatch*. Students and teachers alike thoroughly enjoy their performance, during which facts about sharks are included in a "Shark Rap."

#### Research Observation #4

While I was leading a workshop on teaching research, one of the women commented that her daughter had been an excellent high school student and had done well on her research paper assignments, but in college she wasn't able to use any of the strategies she had been taught in high school. College teachers didn't demand note cards or bibliography cards. The research writing style she had been taught so carefully in high school wasn't appropriate. The reason most high school teachers give for assigning research papers—"They'll need it in college"—wasn't true this time. Her high school teachers were teaching to expectations no longer in existence.

**Conclusion: Research is a process, not a product, and the most important skill is thinking.**

Twenty-five years ago, we stopped thinking of writing as a *product* and began to see it as a *process*. We identified the interconnecting and interlocking skills that students need to become successful writers—and we began to place more emphasis on the process than the product. It's time to do the same for research. We can't expect students to produce outstanding research papers unless we teach them strategies for gathering information, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating that information through critical thinking.

One of my favorite research-based activities is the "Unanswerable Question." After the students have finished reading and discussing a literary selection, I ask each of them to write three still-unanswered questions on 3 × 5 cards. We answer the

literal questions together—the ones to which answers can be found in "boldface type," so to speak. Then I distribute the critical thinking questions to groups, with instructions to generate an answer. The answer must be based on three pieces of textual evidence, although they can use other sources in addition to the text. They will have to use inferential and deductive thinking skills to generate an answer. Students inevitably come up with wonderful discussion questions: Why is the devil portrayed as black? for "The Devil and Tom Walker" by Washington Irving; How old is Grendel? for John Gardner's *Grendel*. The conversation within the groups as they're coming up with evidence and the discussions as a whole class are rich and thought-provoking. The discussion of "The Devil and Tom Walker" was led by a group of African American students and explored the symbolism of *black* in western culture. By discussing Grendel's age, the students identified him as the embodiment of evil; the answer was "as old as time."

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One of my students used a black triangle to symbolize the husband and father in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."

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Research can be built into writing assignments. For *The Secret Sharer*, by Joseph Conrad, I asked the students to identify an image pattern that recurs throughout the novel—light and shadow, land and sea, for example. They then used the dictionary to research the etymologies of words Conrad used to create the images. This helped them discover deeper meanings of ordinary words. Students have been successful using the same research assignment with Emily Dickinson's poems. When students discovered several unexpected meanings of "invention" in "Faith is a Fine Invention" and placed those in juxtaposition with "microscope" and "emergency," they generated some interesting interpretations of the poem.

This assignment carries over into other literature exercises. The students who read *Grendel*

became curious about the possible meanings of “monster” and discovered that one of the original meanings is “a warning.” That led to a discussion about what Grendel might be a warning of—perhaps that a society creates its own evil.

Creative writing and visual assignments also develop student thinking skills for research. Asking students to assume the role of one character in a novel or short story and write a letter to another forces them to internalize the characters’ personality traits in order to complete the assignment. When students use colors, shapes, and symbols to demonstrate their understanding of characters and their relationships in novels and short stories, they are using inferential and deductive thinking to express their ideas to their classmates. One of my students used a black triangle to symbolize the husband and father in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The reason: She had learned in biology that the black triangle was the symbol for a deadly virus, and she saw the husband as a deadly virus infecting his family.

Every spring, conversations among English teachers turn toward the research paper. My colleagues on the Oklahoma State University Writing Project Listserv, elementary through college teachers, began an intensive discussion in response to a high school teacher’s question. The discussion was not so much about the research paper as it was about the process of teaching research thinking and then helping students put their thinking into writing of some kind.

Pat Mumford, a Tulsa elementary teacher, shared her perspective on research:

Research starts from a caring adult who is willing to sit back and ask questions rather than give answers . . . Just the other day in the cafeteria a child was trying to purchase some cookies. The cafeteria lady told him he did not have enough money. I chimed in, “How much money do you have?” Before he could attempt to count the change on the table, she told me the answer. I think too many adults do just that.

Richard Cooper, a former high school history teacher remembered:

As a historian . . . I always felt that students really didn’t understand what “real” research was, thus when they were asked to do a research paper, one for which they had to choose the subject, they really didn’t know where to begin or what were good sources, bad sources, or not sources at all.

They didn’t know the difference between general knowledge and the information they needed to note. What I’m trying to say is, they didn’t know how to research, so how were they going to write a research paper? . . . Most all of the students would see the time and effort we put into the research process, realizing that the writing will be only as good as the effort one spent on the prewriting (research). Now, of course, all this was selfishness on my part; I’ve always enjoyed the searching and finding more than the writing. But I wanted the students to discover that research was much more than having three to four books, three to four magazines, and one to two encyclopedia sources . . . We always had fun—like being detectives.

College teacher Britton Gildersleeve describes how her students begin to develop confidence in their abilities as researchers as she guides them through the process of a research paper:

What my students have told me in years past is that this is the place where they began to believe they could do research. I try hard to break things into small components, as unintimidating as I can make them. I tell them of my own endeavors, always overwhelming to me at the outset, and we work through our projects together. Many who begin tentatively finish with incredible enthusiasm, exhausted (like any good workout leaves you, intellectual or otherwise) but pleased with themselves. And even those who don’t do as well as they’d like, do much better than they thought they would.

These listserv observations provide a structure for teaching the research paper: questioning rather than answering, having fun searching for the information, and building confidence as the students put the information together into writing, following the conventions of the genre.

When I looked back at the first I-Search assignment, I realized that part of its success was the research experience my students had with the traditional research paper. The I-Search paper is still the assignment for my junior classes, and I never fail to be amazed and pleased at the results. Unlike that first success, however, I now consciously build into my English classes research thinking and opportunities to use the research in various kinds of response writing and visualization activities. These become the sources for the critical/analytical papers students write before they embark on their I-Search, which is a natural bridge to the more structured, formal traditional research paper.

The pressure to cover content frequently leads us to “just answer the question.” But as we look at the world our students will live in, we can’t do that. The information explosion has made research thinking skills more important than ever. Our students, college bound or not, must be able to ask critical questions, enjoy the search, and have confidence in their own decision-making abilities when there are no definite, clear-cut answers. This, I think, is the real reason for research—to give students the resources they need to live in a world

where the answers aren’t “in bold face type,” on fill-in-the-blank worksheets or multiple choice tests, or in teachers’ manuals.

### **Work Cited**

Macrorie, Ken. *The I-Search Paper*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1988.

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