One of the curious things about frequent writing for publication is that you leave a paper trail and inevitably, over time, contradict yourself. In the years that I have written about education, I have had occasion to say many dramatic things, some of which I later regret, others of which I'd like to revise. What I would like to tinker with now is my previous stand on the abolition of the term paper. The title of my old article, “Death Comes to the Term Paper, or The Extinction of Termpapasaurus Rex,” published in a now defunct Santa Monica newspaper called The Outlook in January of 1989, still appeals to me aesthetically, but I now disagree with my premise. We need to resuscitate the beast.

An argument I often used to prop up my case for abandoning the term paper was that if college professors didn’t require students to write term papers, why should high school teachers? Talking with university instructors, I observed that their primary concern was how well students were prepared to write three-to-five-page analytical essays. I took this as evidence that the research paper was dead. What I didn’t realize was that most of my conversations had been with writing program teachers whose students’ writing skills fell below university standards. A few of these college teachers assigned research papers as a culminating project, but most had their students focus on creating coherent short pieces. I should have also been talking with history, sociology, and comparative literature professors.

As students trickled back to visit during the years when I had stopped assigning research papers, I made it a habit to ask how well they thought Santa Monica High School prepared them for college writing. More often than I could comfortably ignore, students told me that they wished they had written a term paper because they felt lost when one was assigned. For a while I ignored them, assuming that they simply had the misfortune of running into a professor from the Stone Age. But as I heard more and more college freshmen—successful ones from universities across the country—repeat this criticism, I realized it was time for me to rethink my stance on research papers.

What I objected to ten years ago was the way term paper projects ate up instructional time. If I could find a way to integrate the assignment into the curriculum more seamlessly, it might not seem like such a pointless exercise. If I could use students’ love for the computer to get them searching for answers to real questions, I might just be able to bring this dinosaur to life. Fortunately, computers have eliminated much of the busywork that used to go into generating a typed paper, and the Internet has made genuine student research possible. Access is no longer limited to an elite group of programmer-types. Most of my students now have some familiarity with computers. Technology has made research sexy. Students who would never in their lives have delved into the Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature now find manipulating a search engine a cool thing to do. Not a bit nerdy. No longer is the preparation of a footnoted manuscript a laborious task because most students are reasonably proficient with a keyboard, and style guidelines for citing sources have been sensibly simplified.

The benefits of a term paper assignment remain the same. Students learn how to search
for information and come to know their chosen subject in depth. They also have a finished product they can point to with pride. Unfortunately, there are some new hazards. Electronic research can be enormously time-consuming, and students can easily become overwhelmed with useless data. In order to help novices avoid getting tangled in the Web, I remind them to do the following:

- Examine Web sites for clues to their reliability. University, government, and museum Web sites are the best sources of sound information.
- Use several search engines.
- Work with a partner and ask for help at the library reference desk when you get stuck or lost.

I also issue some caveats:

- Don’t rely solely upon electronic sources. Books often provide more in-depth information on a topic than any Web site. The Internet can, however, be a way to find the right books.
- Don’t be distracted by bells and whistles. The most valuable sites are often undecorated.

This is the area where I could most use advice from college teachers. I would like to know how they help steer fledgling researchers toward useful information. Too often the Web seems a thousand miles wide and one inch deep. Some professors have students chart their Internet paths, listing sources they did not use as well as those they did use. Is this one more tedious requirement, or is it important information for the instructor? Where do college instructors tell their students to begin the search?

The English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools (California State Board of Education, Dec., 1997) recommends that students learn to “understand the structure and organization of various reference materials” beginning in the third grade. By ninth grade students are expected to be able to “use clear research questions and suitable research methods to elicit and present evidence from primary and secondary sources” and to “synthesize information from multiple sources and identify complexities and discrepancies in the information and the different perspectives found in each medium.”

If we want our children to meet these rigorous standards, they are going to have to write research papers. What makes best sense is to have the assignment move across the disciplines—one year in science, the next in history, the following year in English—but however schools organize the tasks, the message from standards documents throughout the country is clear. Research is an essential skill that all children must acquire.

This mandate raises a dilemma for high school teachers. If “all” students must acquire research skills, defense of the term paper as preparation for college won’t stand up to scrutiny. Fewer than half of the ninth graders in any urban, public school English class will ever have to worry about turning in a term paper to a university instructor. Then why do they need this practice? How can we make the assignment a valuable pursuit, whatever children’s futures might hold?

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Again this is a place where I look for guidance from college teachers, particularly those in education. Was it sound pedagogical practice when I allowed Diana, a motor-mouthed ninth grader who hadn’t read a book in her life, to do her term project on Tejana singer Selena? Serendipity put the lurid paperback biography in my hands, and sheer instinct made me pass it on to Diana, suggesting that she might want to write about Selena for her term paper. She shrugged but accepted the book.

Diana completed the assignment. The footnotes were a mess, but the paper was alive. She
learned how to use a search engine and how to consider conflicting information. Diana also read a book from cover to cover.

Sometimes, particularly when I read about college professors decrying the pitiful preparation their students received in high school, I worry that I should have stuck with my original requirement that Diana research someone of literary stature. Did I shortchange this student by allowing her to pursue her passion? I’ll never know for sure.

Twenty-five years is a long time to be teaching and still be unsure of what is best for students. What I do know for sure is that I must keep asking questions: of my students, of college teachers, of parents, of myself. I also must not be afraid of changing my mind and curriculum when I think the change will better serve kids.

Teaching is a messy job.

Let the Beast Stay Dead!
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I agree with much of what you say, Carol, about rethinking the term paper assignment. Your views, concerns, and questions about teaching what students need to survive in college and life echo in my mind, as a former high school teacher of thirteen years and a college teacher of nearly ten. As a high school teacher, I, too, wanted to feel secure that what I taught students about writing was valuable and valid for them, that it matched their future needs as they went to college. I also recognized that a goodly number of my students wouldn’t go on to college after high school. Still, it is natural to feel guilty for not teaching something we both know we could have taught.

I also hear you saying some important things about not teaching the term paper, however. This one form of writing is extremely time consuming, since it calls for synthesizing multiple skills—researching, critical thinking, manipulating material, formatting, citing according to an accepted style, and writing. Writing long papers, blending multiple voices and sources, and learning documentation styles is a very different assignment from most other writing experiences in English classes. When English teachers really think about it, this assignment is the ultimate beast, yet it has lived over time as a kind of culminating assignment for “rigorous” classes across disciplines.

You call it a “beast” and a “dinosaur,” even hinting that because of its isolation in the curriculum, it has been in the past “a pointless exercise.” Maybe you’re right, and just maybe you shouldn’t move to resuscitate it or feel guilty for your choice to abandon it in your curriculum. Maybe there are elements of the research paper that high school teachers should teach, but perhaps there are other ways to get at the necessary skills without having students create full-blown term papers.

Because of its sheer bulk and minutiae of requirements, I felt the term paper funneled too much energy and time in only one direction.

Maybe we should just let the beast stay dead. Like you, I have to admit I chose not to burden my high school English teaching with writing the dreaded term paper. My reasoning was simple—let teachers in other disciplines who believe this assignment is the ultimate in writing experiences handle it. Let the biology teacher, the history teacher, the physics teacher assign such writing. They would put the emphasis on the research and content and not on all the mechanical aspects of the research paper that English teachers emphasize. Let the students experience the search for and handling of information first in the context of one of their other subjects.

Second, I don’t think high school has to prepare students for everything they will experience in college. High school teachers have a broader audience to serve than college teachers do. As you note, many students in urban English classes won’t ever “have to worry about turning in term papers to a university instructor.” For those who do go to college, let the instructors who want to tackle this
assignment teach the steps. Writing—lots of writing in various genres—always seemed the best idea to me in my high school curriculum. Because of its sheer bulk and minutiae of requirements, I felt the term paper funneled too much energy and time in only one direction. I, like you, wanted my students to have other writing experiences, writing assignments that I thought were more helpful and relevant to developing good writers.

That said, I take issue with some of your other remarks. There are probably some benefits to writing a term paper, and one is having a finished product that students “can point to with pride.” That is, a term paper can make students proud if they complete the assignment and produce a paper that hasn’t received a low grade for misuse of sources, handling of quotes, and errors of documentation. It is good to teach students to search for information—that may be the biggest benefit and the real reason to do research assignments—but I seriously question whether or not they “know their chosen subject in depth” or that they are working to find “answers to real questions.”

Although I had written countless term paper assignments throughout my education, the joy of doing research and writing didn’t come until I was writing my dissertation. At the dissertation stage, for the first time, I had a “real question” I wanted to answer. I don’t see our high school students finding many real questions to answer that are acceptable to teachers. Instead, the term paper assignment and the subsequent need of a question to research come first, and most students will grab at any question, particularly those suggested by eager teachers, so that they can get started and finish the assignment. After all, this is a bulky task, and the sooner students get started, the sooner they finish.

You worry that your approach to Diana, who reads an entire book for the first time, completes her term paper, learns how “to use a search engine and how to consider conflicting information” was wrong. You think perhaps you should have “stuck with [your] original requirement that Diana research someone of literary stature.” On the contrary, I applaud your offering the “lurid paperback” on Selena rather than a literary figure of stature to Diana. Knowing your student, you provided Diana with fodder for that “real question” that ought to govern research at all levels. Diana’s success with the assignment occurred because it wasn’t a pointless exercise for her.

As teachers wanting students to do significant research and writing of term papers, I don’t think we can talk out of both sides of our mouths. “Class, I want you to come up with a real question that you have for your research. And, oh yes, that real question has to be something I would approve of or that would be a real question to me or other literary experts.” Students recognize “pointless exercise” right away when we give such messages.

The English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools that you cite appear to be a rigorous support for getting students involved in writing term papers from an early stage in their education. Ambitious standards, to say the least. Realistic standards? I’m not at all convinced.

At my former college, English faculty were concerned about the lack of thought, the superficial writing, the nature of jumping hurdles rather than becoming better writers that seemed to occur during the research quarter of our freshman writing course; thus, we began to examine closely what we were asking of students.

Books and research assignments ought to be planned so that students balance electronic resources with materials on the library shelves.

We looked at our model Writing for Engineers course for some guidance. Engineering majors took only the first two quarters of freshman writing, then were immersed in their major for a year before finishing the sequence with a research course. Not only did we like the idea of spreading out the writing over more than one year of college, we liked the fact that students had a disciplinary context and an authentic discourse community before they began researching and writing for engineering audiences. We wondered if this program might work better for all of our students, so we went to each department in the college and asked
them to articulate the kinds of writing needs their students had for that particular major.

As a result of our groundwork, we created a research course to be taken in either the sophomore or junior year of college that had more focus for the students. The additional context, the maturation of the students, and “real questions” from their majors provided students with the ability to handle information and develop a piece of documented writing of substantial quality. The idea that ninth graders are expected to “synthesize information from multiple sources and identify complexities and discrepancies in the information and the different perspectives found in each medium” seems unbelievably ambitious to me. Our college English department felt that not until their sophomore or junior year were students finally capable of this level of critical analysis.

So, what should high school English teachers be teaching students about research? You ask for some advice from college teachers. The most important part of the term paper assignment is the research element itself. Whether or not students go on to college, they can use what they learn about doing research thoughtfully, effectively, and critically all their lives. Some may use Internet and hard copy sources to write term papers, but many more will no doubt use research, particularly on the Internet, to find answers to real questions about getting jobs, seeking medical care, doing their taxes, or planning a trip. You note other problems with Internet sources, and I and some of my colleagues answer some of your concerns in another article in this issue.

Probably the most comforting aspect of the research assignment, then, for high school teachers is to know that whatever they do to teach research skills is not a pointless exercise, not wasted time. How to access credible sources, how to evaluate sources, how to handle conflicting information—all of these are valuable research skills. Students still need to know what’s available in “hard copy.” Books and research assignments ought to be planned so that students balance electronic resources with materials on the library shelves. Gaining some background on established print sources also helps students cope with the overwhelming useless data available on the Net.

Does research have to be tied to term paper assignments? I think not. Students can research a real question and report on their findings orally to the class. Cooperative groups can take different aspects of a topic or question, do their research, and come together to create a group report—either oral or written. Writing a full-blown term paper may provide a satisfying experience that prepares some students for college writing, but it is not the only way to teach students important research skills that will be used in and out of school settings for the rest of their lives.

Like you, Carol, I hope as we continue to teach, we don’t ever stop asking questions. When we stop questioning our beliefs, our practices, our assignments, we stagnate as teachers. Maybe the important thing about being English teachers—and being alive—is not so much arriving at THE answer, but continuing to wrestle with the question of what best serves our students.

Carol Responds to Susan

Since we began our long-distance conversation, I have collected thirty-four quite remarkable term papers from a class of tenth grade students. The purpose of the assignment was for students to explore in depth the work of a writer whose books intrigued them. They were to choose an author whose work they had already enjoyed and read two additional books by that person, then research biographical and critical information about that author. I wanted their term papers to be a record of their research, as well as a personal reflection upon the writer’s work. I thought you might be interested to hear what these sixteen-year-olds have to say about the assignment. While they are clearly not experts in terms of the research experience or writing skills they are going to need for college, these kids have strong feelings about any misuse of their time. The week in February that they refer to was a series of pupil-free days my district had set aside for professional development. The due date for the papers was the day students returned from this break.

From Dan Nabel, who wrote one of the more scholarly papers on symbolism in two William Faulkner short stories:

I think that doing a research paper is a good idea; it gives us experience with such a thing—I mean, we’ve never written anything this long before and its good to have exposure to it. I really liked being able to choose pretty much everything about the paper—who we got to do it on, and what we wanted to write about. I think that was the most
enjoyable thing for me, because I got to choose someone I was interested in and study him. Now, it may just be because I like this sort of thing personally, but I think other people at LEAST enjoyed that part.

The time frame was very nice, especially with that week off—that was REALLY nice. We had plenty of time, and I felt no rush at all. The actual assignment didn't take as long as I thought it would and I was REALLY thrilled when I was reading *Paradise Lost* and found the ACTUAL spot that Faulkner made a reference to. I think that was a really cool thing and that one moment made the whole thing worthwhile. Overall, I wouldn't be opposed to doing it again. We had relatively little hard work to do during the period when we were writing the paper which was wonderful and it was probably the funnest project I have ever done.

The idea of having a student who reads *Paradise Lost* for pleasure and still writes “funnest” is one of the things that will keep me in the classroom forever.

Kjerstin Barrett wrote her paper on Arthur Conan Doyle:

I thought the term paper was okay, not too bad. The only thing was that I procrastinated too long and had to do practically the whole thing over that week off in February. Another problem I had was the eye strain I got from the long hours I spent on the computer finding information. It was interesting though. At first I thought I was going to have a really hard time finding enough info to write five pages, then I found it hard to narrow it down to only eight. I also thought it was going to be really hard to write, but I found that once I got all of my information and I started writing it just came naturally. It actually wasn’t that bad, it just took a long time.

Trust me when I say that Amos Goodman actually uses such a formal tone for an informal note. That’s Amos. He researched Paul Auster:

I thought that the research project was an excellent assignment. For me, and many others, it was our first chance at writing an essay of this length and caliber. It proved to be invaluable.

Part of why this project was a success was the amount left up to us students. Since we were able not only to choose the subject, but the thesis as well, it was virtually impossible to not be interested. And interest leads to more research and enthusiasm, which created some wonderful papers.

I am all for the return of this project next year. I think it would be helpful to read more essays on novels we have read as a class, and then discuss the writer’s point of view, and most importantly, the writer’s skill in communication. Also, when the assignment is first assigned, remind students that they are all capable of writing a paper of this length, as several students in my class were contemplating a teacher change, to avoid this paper.

No one told me that anyone was contemplating a teacher change. The things you learn when you ask. With responses like these, I will most certainly be assigning literary research papers again next year. As for the year after that, I’ll keep thinking and asking my students for their responses.