In this day of immediate Internet access, process-oriented writing instruction, and student-centered, constructivist teaching it seems foolish to cling to the old rationale that spending hours in the library researching and writing a term paper—complete with note cards, bibliography cards, and outline—teaches students the skills that will be required of them in college. First of all, students can gather much of the information they need without even entering a library. The Internet is a vast electronic resource on which they can find information on just about any topic without leaving their computers. Programs like HyperStudio and functions like hypertext allow students to create note cards, bib cards, and outlines electronically, complete with illustrations and animation, if they wish, and to link to an unlimited number of sources related to their subject. Second, the widespread emphasis on drafting, responding, and revising precludes the linear, product-oriented research paper of the past, which was often so dry and fact-laden that response and revision were painful, if not impossible, tasks. Finally, the belief that college composition classes require advanced knowledge of and experience with the long, traditional research paper is simply no longer true. Most first-year composition courses require several short papers on a variety of topics arrived at through prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, clustering, webbing, etc. Drafts are expected, often required, as are peer response and revision. When research is required, the most up-to-date methods are always taught to students, who have ready access to campus computers on which to write and research. Many college teachers also require students to use nonprint sources such as film, television, or personal interviews in their research. In some cases, students are forced to unlearn what they learned in high school and adopt new ways of thinking about and carrying out research.

True, we must be wary of the “information explosion” to which our students are exposed daily. We, and they, must learn how to evaluate resources—electronic and otherwise—and use them wisely. But we must also rethink our reasons for having students do research in the first place. We need to remind ourselves of why research is conducted in the real world—because there are interesting questions to be answered and new ideas to be explored, not because someone has assigned a topic in which the researcher has little or no interest. Somehow the true motivation for research has been lost in the perfunctory assignments we give students, which often result in just another boring, empty exercise—an obstacle to be overcome, a trial to be endured in order to receive that all-important grade.

For all the well-intentioned teachers out there who are bored with the traditional research paper assignment and want to try something new, this issue of English Journal offers help. There is innovative, exciting research taking place in English classrooms, libraries, and computer labs, and we can learn from and borrow from those teachers who describe their successful experiences. Susan Gardner, Hiltraut Benham, and Bridget Newell start us off by explaining how we and our students can learn to evaluate electronic sources. Gregory Shafer, Sirpa Grierson, Heidi Wilson and Frank Castner, and Mary Nicolini describe their alternative approaches to research with their students, and Nancy Patterson, Victoria Shaw Haviland, and Mary Jane McCali show us how middle school students can do successful research using hypertext and HyperStudio. Taking a different approach, Richard Beach and Margaret Finders demonstrate...
how ethnography can prompt student research in school, while Dennis Lawrence and his students research their community, even making an interactive connection to the Internet. Taking ethnography a step further, Lee Thomas and Linh Cao reveal how students can do language research within their own families. A librarian's perspective on research is always useful, and Kathryn Johnston gives us some practical ideas for collaboration between teacher and librarian, while Eileen Simmons reminds us that process, not product, should be the focus of student research.

Research can be exciting—for our students and for us—if we broaden our perspectives, open our minds, and take advantage of all the new resources available to us—including this issue of English Journal.

VRM

Call for Orbis Pictus Nominations