Prescription lurks ominously all around high school English departments, but nowhere is its presence more painfully felt than in the teaching of the research paper. While much has been written in the last few decades about discovery and exploration in the composition process, little has changed in the traditional, rule-laden procedure of doing this time-honored essay. Today, as in days of yore, we still witness the disciplined march through bib cards and note cards and sentence outlines. Questions of proper MLA form take precedence over substance and risk taking. For reasons that are not entirely clear to me, Graves’s 1972 mantra that “all writing is experimental” and “unfinished” seems woefully lost when schools get around to teaching research.

This, in part, comes from the academic character of the essay—its implicit demands to be profound, academic, and impersonal. Too many teachers feel a kind of holy obligation to make it arcane and objective. Thus, as our English department met for its monthly meeting, I was greeted with various comments about the inability of students to do proper note cards, to follow sentence outlines, or to avoid plagiarism. Doing research is, for too many, a very disciplined procedure of following directions, of stoically learning form. One colleague might have best captured the essence of the assignment when she railed for ten minutes about the inability of her students to do a “proper” parenthetical documentation. Is this, I quietly began to wonder, what research is all about?

There are, of course, many kinds of research. The fact that we often limit ourselves to traditional academic papers does not mean that interviews, empirical research, and ethnographic studies cannot be valid and satisfying. In the same way, the research paper can and should be connected to the lives and interests of the writers we teach. It can delve into community problems with as much rigor as traditional essays explore arcane philosophical questions. It can, in short, engage students, while teaching them the reason and value for doing such a paper.

This was my objective as I prepared to introduce the research paper. Rather than perceiving it as an exercise in disseminating facts and procedure, I wanted the assignment to take on a more personal, organic character. If interests led students to the community police station or to the humane society, the assignment should be malleable enough to allow for such inquiry. At the same time, if students were sincerely interested in pursuing more conventional topics, that, too, would fit into the expanded parameters of the class. In the end, I wanted the writer to control the paper, rather than the paper prescribing to the passive and disengaged student.

Such an endeavor is supported by scholarship and practice. Gradually we are reading about instructors who are finding success in making their pupils’ neighborhoods their laboratory. We are seeing more research that acknowledges the need for composition to provide students with an “active voice in defining their world” (Giroux 17).
by appreciating the ideological aspects of any learning context. “It is crucial,” suggests Giroux, “for teachers to understand how schools, as part of the wider dominant culture, function to marginalize, disconfirm, and delegitimate the experiences, histories, and categories that students use in mediating their lives” (17). Part of this “marginalizing,” I would argue, comes from writing assignments that fail to value the lives, cultures, and interests of the writers. Traditional research tends to subordinate these issues to lofty topics like “gun control,” or “capital punishment,” while the crime and domestic chaos in the writer’s community are curiously ignored.

If interests led students to the community police station or to the humane society, the assignment should be malleable enough to allow for such inquiry.

My first goal, then, was to make the paper a search for personal answers. Students were encouraged to rummage through their backgrounds and interests, using the research paper as a way to solve problems that directly affected their lives. Ken Macrorie, in his book *The I-Search Paper*, speaks directly to this need for personal relevance in the conducting of research. The I-Search, in essence, is a paper that emanates from student interests, telling stories of the “quests” (preface) in which they engage. Instead of being mired in work that is driven by impersonal concerns, students are challenged to pose four questions about their topic and consider why such research is important to them as learners. For Macrorie, then, the emphasis is on inquiry rather than routine. Research, in turn, becomes a vehicle for genuine concerns, for satisfying writers’ natural curiosity about their surroundings.

In my class, this more personal approach had a dramatic effect. Levar wanted to probe the reason for crime and drug use in his predominately African American neighborhood. Melissa, as a volleyball player, was interested in the school’s policy for men’s and women’s sports. Dustin, in response to the advent of hunting season, researched the topic of animal rights and the ethics of blood sport in modern society. Each student was shaping research to fit the here and now.

Creating a Context for Exploration

As a whole, students are conditioned to be passive and deferential in choosing research topics. When I first broached the research paper, most students approached it with quiet resignation, a note pad ready, a sense of increased gravity. Years of being repositories of information had made them ready for a teacher-driven essay that was far removed from the rhythms of their lives. They were conditioned to see this assignment as impersonal, as strictly academic.

The first step in reversing this, I found, was to help students re-envision the assignment and the reason why real people do research, sharing some of my own research interests. Writing, I suggested, should not be like visiting a museum, where one simply absorbs what has previously been done, learning in the process to appreciate its contribution. Rather, I told them, the paper should be about creating new truths, provocative theories, modern stories. While we must respect the traditional practices of doing research, we must allow for voices and personalities to make their presence felt. This more liberating view of composition is constructive and personal. Sandra Perl suggests, in discussing the writing process, that “meaning cannot be discovered the way we discover an object on an archeological dig. In writing, meaning is crafted and constructed. It involves us in a process of coming-into-being” (153).

For my class, this process of “coming-into-being” began with the elimination of a text as a guide and authority figure. Students, I believed, needed to perceive their community as the starting point for ideas and explorations. They needed to appreciate the many types of research that go beyond libraries and required outlines. In short, they needed to re-envision research, seeing it as a critical step in exploring themselves, their values, and their role in the community. While I was convinced that traditional research methods could enhance this search, I was also certain that students needed to appreciate the more authentic and contemporary avenues to garnering information.
Much of the opening day, then, was spent in creating a foundation for what I like to call a more anthropological or social type of research. It began with the premise that learning is a natural part of life. When we first visit a university campus with friends or befriend the new exchange student, we are engaging in a valuable kind of learning. We are, in fact, doing informal research about our world. My challenge to students was to list the activities and interests that would be most conducive to a research project and to reflect upon what could be gleaned from those experiences.

As an example, I asked students to consider the kind of anthropological research that is done each year by scientists as they observe different cultures. The goal, I stressed, was to harvest information from the inconspicuous, whether it was observing the intelligence of their pet or the child rearing habits of their friends’ parents. Such unobtrusive research, I added, teaches us about our lives rather than simply fulfilling the contrived requirements of a research paper. And unlike book driven research, it emanates quite nicely from one’s personal context.

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The idea for this came, at least in part, from Frank Smith’s inspired discussion of learning in Joining the Literacy Club. Smith makes a cogent case for a method of discovery that is unobtrusive and natural—one that mirrors the work of Piaget, Mead, and Goodman. As a group, writes Smith, they taught us that much more can be learned when we “observe how the individuals interact with the world around them, trying to see the world from the other person’s point of view” (120–21).

In place of library research, then, was a collection of possible explorations into the lives of each student. Because I knew many of them, I was able to suggest possible topics and directions for their research. What, I asked them, could an observant person glean from the daily grind of football practice, especially as it compared to the frenzy of game-day excitement? Equally interesting were questions involving the formation of certain groups and cliques around campus. What was perhaps most intriguing was a student’s suggestion that he observe the community’s support of the school’s poetry club and the more passionate involvement of parents with virtually every sports team. What, we wondered, does that tell us about our community? In the end, the final choice—whatever it was—would be a collaborative decision, but the key was to see their lives as both worthy of and rife with possible discovery.

By the week’s end, we had generated a list of topics and begun to establish some general standards for the research we were about to do. Rather than plowing through endless bib and note cards, we decided that most of our support would come from interviews and people-watching. My students were quickly becoming familiar with the idea of empirical research; thus, we would begin with a premise, and, through careful observation and analysis, either confirm or disprove the validity of that contention. Along the way, we would use books and other forms of scholarship as needed. The central goal was to create information that could be used by the researchers, rather than recycling old facts in an effort to grind out yet another wonder about the evils of capital punishment. We wanted the paper to emanate from and be relevant to our present class.

After a week of preparation and brainstorming, I asked students to be ready with a proposal of what they planned to do. As the time neared for the formal presentations, I began to sense the success of this new approach to research. Indeed, a kind of effusive excitement seemed to pervade the class, as students talked among themselves and often visited my office for advice and ideas. Perhaps most evident was a feeling of ownership, of direction. As a whole, students had an investment in what they were doing and wanted to explore and uncover pressing questions. It seemed clear that they were in charge of their learning and were eager to find answers.

What was perhaps most instructive was the wide variety of topics that radiated from the
assignment. Where more traditional approaches had yielded the typical papers on abortion and drug legalization, this year’s assignment was clearly more personal and community-based. Sarah, who had always been close to her grandparents, was adamant about designing a research project around the stories she had been told. Her thesis, she declared, would involve the changing lifestyles and values of Americans and the implications of such changes. As she announced her proposal, she was immediately greeted with ideas for how to make her project even more successful. One student suggested that she broaden her paper to several of the elderly in the community, trying in the process to garner a consensus or pattern of some sort. “One couple might not be enough,” another student added. “If it’s going to be meaningful, you’ll need to see if you can make some generalizations.”

Other suggestions further enhanced Sarah’s original proposal. Mark thought that some background data on the continual increase in violent crime might help illuminate the problem in our nation. Many agreed that our society had degenerated in many ways and were interested in knowing if there were lessons from past generations that could ameliorate the problem.

Other proposals inspired an equally strong sense of curiosity and ebullience. Johnelle would use her brother’s harrowing experience as an injured college football player to showcase the dark side of big-time college sports. Because he had several friends with whom he had competed and who could be interviewed, she thought that much of her paper would emanate from the personal stories she could obtain. Most of us agreed that she would need an ample amount of library research to augment the personal examples. In particular, many wanted Johnelle to find statistics on the number of student athletes who actually graduate after failing to become professionals. Others wondered what happens to people who get hurt immediately before being drafted into the professional ranks. In broaching the topic of professional and college sports, Johnelle had clearly tapped an interest among many of the students in class. The suggestions flowed freely. Clearly, our work had become collaborative as well as personal.

Why, some may wonder, does a more nontraditional approach seem to generate such enthusiasm? Part of the answer, I think, lies in the more natural, less prescriptive tenor of the assignment.

Once we eliminate the inhibiting influences of textbooks and official regulations, much of the impetus for creation falls upon the student. “The brain is like an artist,” argues Smith. “It learns creatively and anything that stultifies its creativity interferes with learning” (99). Much of the creativity Smith alludes to is unleashed when students are encouraged to consider their world as a valid research topic, when they are allowed and even expected to design the topic and procedure for doing this research. The research paper, argues Richard Larson, “can take a wide variety of forms, down to and including the ordered presentation of one’s reflections and the interpretations of one’s most direct experiences unmediated by interaction with others or by reference to identifiable external sources” (182). In other words, research does not have to be tethered to books and libraries. It can, like a hidden treasure, sit inconspicuously in our neighborhoods.

Johnelle would use her brother’s harrowing experience as an injured college football player to showcase the dark side of big-time college sports.

As the assignment moved to its culmination, I could see the difference in the sheer amount of work being done by students. Rather than completing a perfunctory process of fact finding and note taking, students were setting up interviews, visiting intriguing places, and conferencing with me on the development of their findings. This evolution, this fluid and organic aspect of empirical research, marks another significant departure from the prescriptive library research paper. Where traditional notions of research follow a rather predictable and even methodical sequence, the student-driven version moves, changes, and probes. Because questions are forever in flux—and because students are sincerely committed to finding answers—the paper becomes a kind of puzzle that everyone wants to
solve. Throughout the process, students are surprised, disappointed, and intrigued. How often can one attach such emotional responses to the research done on gun control or capital punishment?

Within a few frenetic weeks, we had moved from discussion, planning, and research to final drafts. As a part of the final paper, I asked students to prepare a presentation, which included a formal reading and discussion of their findings. I wanted each pupil to evaluate and ponder their conclusions, while peers appreciated the relevant subject that was being explored. Of course, as with any assignment, some were more successful than others. Still, virtually all of them transcended the passive, teacher-driven regimen that had come to characterize the traditional prescriptive paper.

Final Projects

Projects began with Heather's look at her community's humane society and the treatment of animals around her city. All of this work, we learned, was part of a project on the treatment of animals and the controversy involving adoptions and animal rights. Because hunting is such a popular sport in our area, many were quick to listen and participate. They were aware of her research in the community and the concern she had toward abused or unwanted pets. As she began her presentation, I was moved by the depth of her exploration and the variety of sources she had used.

While some think that a student-centered research paper does not teach necessary academic research, Heather's paper should dispel such fears. Indeed, in composing her paper, she consulted both books and statistics, deftly using them to accentuate her premise that animals are deserving of equal rights. In addition to her more traditional work in the library, where she gathered statistics on the deplorable conditions of animals, she visited the humane society and interviewed workers. Especially interesting were her informal discussions with community people, where she asked them their views on animals. She concluded her work by enlisting the help of hunters, who unwittingly aided her cause by giving her graphic accounts of how bloody hunting often is.

As she began to read her paper, beginning with a tale from a hunter, the entire class was riveted. Heather had done more than research. She had unearthed a revealing element of her life, forcing everyone in the room to think about themselves and their values. In the end, her paper was a collection of interviews, fieldwork, and more traditional research. Clearly, she had transcended the typical research paper, and her enthusiasm was testament to its success.

Heather's final draft, which was eight pages in length, was one of several very dramatic examples of how student interest can be evoked through a less prescriptive approach. However, it was hardly the only one to delve into community concerns. One of the most provocative papers came from Johnelle's look at her brother's career as a college football player. After two years on the team, her brother had sustained a career-ending injury and had finished school without playing. Yet, despite this inactivity, he had plenty of ominous stories to tell Johnelle about the crass and competitive world of college sports. Do athletes use steroids and other performance enhancing drugs? "Yes," replied Johnelle, as she reviewed her discussions with her brother and his friends. "Much of it," she added, "is simply one of the prerequisites to being a winner." While not all of the athletes would confirm this, others she interviewed left no doubt as to the use of drugs to make an athlete a little bit better.

Johnelle's research went beyond the claim that drugs are a part of college athletics, suggesting that other students are actually paid to attend class, take tests, write papers, and complete courses for players. Again, Johnelle found past players who spoke about such abuses and the idea that it was all part of a mentality where the ends justify the means.

Fortunately, Johnelle augmented her intriguing report with statistics from various library sources—books and magazines—that chronicled the ignominy some athletic programs have brought to their universities. Such information helped broaden the scope of her paper and remind students that the violations and dubious ethics were not limited to a few universities.

Other reports followed as students displayed a clear sense of liberation from the kind of research that limits one to a library. In the end, most students had expanded their ability to appreciate and take advantage of the world of information-gathering and creation. "Much research," argues Larson, "relies upon books, but books do not constitute the corpus of research data except possibly in one or two fields of study" (184). Such a fact, it seemed to me, was understood by the vast majority of my students.
as they finalized their presentations and submitted their essays. Research, in the end, must be meaningful. It must transcend prescriptive, obligatory routine in a way that motivates and touches students. It must be as social and developmental as the writing process itself.

Works Cited


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**answers for ANY QUESTIONS? (page 37)**

1. Why did the chicken cross the road?
2. Who's the boss?
3. Why does a fireman wear red suspenders?
4. How are you fixed for blades?
5. To be or not to be?
6. What's up, Doc?
7. Who's on first?
8. Is the Pope Catholic?
9. Where's the beef?
10. Brother, can you spare a dime?
11. Are we there yet?
12. Do you know the way to San José?
13. How's tricks?
14. Do you believe in miracles?
15. Ain't she sweet?
16. They shoot horses, don't they?
17. Fuzzy wuzzy wasn't fuzzy, was he?
18. What did you do in the war, Daddy?
19. Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?
20. Who's minding the store?
21. Why me?
22. What do you say to a naked lady?
23. What's new?
24. What's your sign?
25. Do you have the time?
26. Do you love me, do you really love me, now that I can dance?
27. Wanna bet?
28. Don't I know you from somewhere?
29. Is there a doctor in the house?
30. What's my line?
31. Did I miss anything yesterday?
32. Polly want a cracker?
33. How's the weather up there?
34. What's cooking, good looking?
35. How now, brown cow?
36. Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light . . .?
37. Who's the fairest of them all?
38. Why do fools fall in love?
39. Where's Waldo?
40. Where is love?
41. Can you top this?
42. Are you dead?
43. Your place or mine?
44. Trick or treat?
45. Where in the world is Carmen Sandiego?
46. What did I do to deserve this?
47. Where have all the flowers gone?
48. How much is that doggy in the window?
49. Which came first—the chicken or the egg?
50. Tennis, anyone?