TRI-CAMPUS FRESHMAN ENGLISH
Research Component

What is Required in Freshman English Courses

As of Spring 2005, all ENGL 110 and 111 courses should have one "library day" during which, with the help of the writing instructor, a campus librarian introduces students to the library resources and some of the tools available for academic research. Because a complete immersion in the library is not possible in one day, we ask that this class session be augmented by additional preparation and discussion. Subsequent class periods should be spent integrating this library work into the larger class goals, and this synthesizing work should culminate in a writing assignment with a research component. While there are almost infinite ways to imagine such assignments, instructors should direct this work in a manner that is appropriate to the ENGL 110/111 context. That is, the research component ought to be presented as a way to reinforce and develop the academic inquiry that typifies all 110/111 assignments.

Some Concerns

- While we are being asked to include a research component in one of our writing assignments, we should *not* be assigning a full-scale "Research Paper." We simply do not have time in the semester to take our students through all the steps of the research process. We must devise tailored, specific assignments for research that spell out parameters for the work students must do. Without structure or limits, these papers risk becoming information dumps or tours through "what the experts think." We have to stress that the students' goals and students' ideas still drive the writing.

- Research is not a new or different genre; it is an extension of the kind of writing students have been doing all semester in their Freshman English course. The focus is still primarily on sustained engagement with texts and the ideas and writing that comes from this work.

- Research includes a day in the library with a librarian, but it should not begin or end there. That is, we not only need to teach students how the library works; we must also help them learn how the university works. This means introducing students to the concepts, goals, and methods of research and looking squarely at the questions of who does research and why do they do it. It is as useful, for example, to consider *what* an academic journal is as *where* it is.

- While proper documentation and citation of sources is an important piece of successful research-based writing, stylistic concerns should not eclipse the primary goal of the research assignment, drawing out thoughtful response to and engagement with others' ideas.

Evolution in Research: From Nomadic Hunter-Gatherers to Agriculturalists

The library tour can be a freeing release from the constraints of textbooks and carefully constructed assignments, but we cannot confuse the act of discovery with the *goal* of the research work. If we overvalue the finding of sources, we run the risk of surrendering the ground we've gained all semester by suggesting (perhaps only implicitly) that the "answers" are out there to be found. If we treat research as an act of hunting and gathering, our students become subordinates and not peers of the writers they cite. Range replaces depth and engagement devolves into endorsement as students look to the "experts" to supply the content of their papers.

The "agriculturalist" model works with fewer texts and asks students to participate more actively with the sources they choose, "cultivating" this more bounded area. Instead of thinking of the project as a collection and presentation of information, students approach the writing as an opportunity for locating a fruitful discussion that becomes the ground for the assertion of their own ideas. The gathering of information is actually a bad imitation of empirical research anyway because it cannot possibly be done in the short time of a semester. We must urge students to think through framing sources. This means less thinking about data, evidence, and proof and more time spent on illustrating a way of seeing, offering a reading, a take, an interpretation.

Defining Roles for Sources: Lens and Artifact

One of the best ways to help students to organize their research is to underscore the *roles* that different texts (and different kinds of texts) will play in their writing. Instead of asking students to find materials "on their topic" (an expression that calls to mind a large, inert elephant sitting "on" the students' proposed ideas), we can ask them to see at least two kinds of work happening in an active, dynamic research process. If we think of a basic research assignment as, one, a "thing" to be looked at and as, two, a "way of looking," we might better define these roles as an *artifact* to be described, cited, analyzed, and interpreted, and a *lens* for providing the "meaning" of this artifact. That is, many interesting research assignments can come out of this controlled experiment in identifying a lens and artifact (or, in other words, a frame and case) and exploring the interaction of these two elements.

A lens and artifact assignment can remind us that research isn't only valuable when it is modeled on the sciences, when a "thesis" is supported or "proven" by "evidence" and facts. Indeed, most research in the humanities eschews such scientific values and instead pursues analogies, correspondences, and suggestive connections. It is enough to reveal or unspool some significance, to pose a familiar object in a new light. Consequently, some of the best undergraduate research writing looks in great detail at a specific, concrete "artifact" (a videogame, an advertisement, a literary text, a personal testimony) through a vocabulary established by a theoretical or critical "lens" (Foucault's "panopticism," Bordo's "hunger as ideology," Achebe's idea of Conrad as a "racist," or Allison's claim that "art should astonish"). The two greatest problems with student writing—a tendency toward vague, open topics and a preference for light or simplifying ideas—disappear when we ask them to provide these two interactive pieces.

At its best, this process yields truly "new" research with this recognizable analogy-based title: "Final Fantasy: The Videogame as Benjamin's 'Aspiring Art'" or "The Vegan Lifestyle as Ideology" or "Watching *The West Wing* as a Substitute for Real Political Action" (actual papers we've received).

However, because the 110/111 research component is such a finite and limited assignment, it is not practical to have students locate *both* components for their papers. It is probably best to confine the research component to only one "role" in the process, as in the following examples.

Researching the "Artifact"

Because many of our course texts are excellent models of framing, interpreting pieces, we may simply ask students to extend the conversation we have been having all semester with the assigned readings. The research component, then, becomes an effort in supplying a concrete and specific "thing" that can allow the writer to animate and perhaps revise the ideas she has encountered in the course readings. If, for example, the course readings include bell hooks on "education as the practice of freedom" and Jeanette Winterson's argument that our contemporary culture thwarts imagination, a student might research a particular school, curriculum, or proposal and consider it in light of the "critical vocabulary" she has established in previous papers.

If, in another example, course readings have been literary representations of family (as in a 111 course), the student might choose to find and examine an account of a particular family or representative "artifacts" of family life such as wedding plans, family photos, or children's toys. In neither example is the goal simply to find an "example" to support a pre-existing thesis. Rather, the research helps students to relocate these earlier discussions in a zone in which they have more control; the work of the course becomes *their own*. The new materials can help students to revise and reconsider the conclusions of the previous papers.

Researching the "Lens"

If we want our students to learn about the scholarly community and the logic (and the hassles) of academic databases, we may prefer to have their research oriented around an encounter with these "lenses." To best accomplish this, it is best to begin with an "artifact" that the students are already familiar with. This, again, can be set up with the course texts. In 111 especially, you might ask students to consider one of your literary texts as the *subject* of the research assignment. From there, students turn to a database such as the MLA bibliography to discover the range of response that the text has engendered.

But 110/111 assignments can go further than this in fostering critical research. You might, for example, ask students to begin with an accounting of their interest in a particular item of popular culture—a film, a song, a piece of clothing—and work outward toward a discovery of just how much academic work already exists in approaching similar cultural materials. Again, they may not find sources that are exactly "on" their topic, but they can become familiar with the ways that a range of academic disciplines approach similar and related materials. So, for example, if a student wishes to write about skateboarding, this student might do so through the "lens" of masculinity studies, ideas about play and sport, arguments about youth culture and rebellion, or even

examinations of urban and suburban spaces. The key is to convey that one can write an academic paper about *anything* because "academic" is a style of thought, not a content. Researching the lens means discovering these interpreting academic communities.

Shorthand Tools

The lens and artifact model is just one model for thinking about research, and most teachers will have modified or alternative ways to conceive of the roles that texts will play in research. Here are just a few ways to streamline the sometimes complicated process of getting students moving.

- Bibliographies. We use bibliographies and lists of sources that are "in circuit" when we do research, and we might model this controlled use of sources by providing students with bibliographies. One of the most depressing parts of the research component is seeing students find an article or book that is precisely on their topic (and one that perhaps even offers a promising title) and then discovering that the article or book is poorly written and myopically argued. Students are often not able to distinguish between good academic writing—rich, suggestive, and persuasive—and CV fodder—those pieces that look like chapters of dismal dissertations. Bibliographies can help.
- Course reserves can serve a similar purpose. Many instructors use a carefully selected list of library texts in lieu of an open library or internet search.
- Critical editions. Many editions of literary and historical texts offer supplementary materials that can be mined for historical and critical contexts
- The Tri-Campus Writing Center can help supplement or augment the work that you and the librarian are doing with research. If you'd like a Writing Center representative to help you present research concepts and tools to students, please ask for assistance. (We're working on this part.)

Plagiarism

Finally, no presentation of research goals is complete without an introduction and discussion of the dangers and consequences of plagiarizing work. Because the research component asks for "new" material outside of the course texts, plagiarism is more common and we must be that much more cautious with our assignments and our procedures. Still, the kinds of assignments outlined and described here can lead students away from simple cut-and-paste plagiarism. If, as with all 110/111 papers, we ask students for interactive, analytical work—if we can communicate that the student's shaping, responding voice is always primary—we can gradually wean them of the idea that lifting ideas or work out of context is in any way associated with research.

Scott Campbell, Tri-Campus Writing Coordinator

Library Session English 110 or 111

Session Length One course period

Description This class is the UConn student's first formal session on academic research. After a brief overview of their Library's resources and organization, students learn how to construct and implement an effective information search; how to locate, retrieve, and evaluate targeted materials; how to cite resources in a paper or presentation; and where to go for further assistance. This session is most effective when tailored to a specific course assignment.

Objectives After completing this session students will:

- Understand how materials are organized in the Library
- Be familiar with the Libraries' homepage
- Be able to develop a search strategy and implement a literature search using both key words and controlled vocabulary.
- Be familiar with HOMER, the Libraries' online catalog
- Be able to use general academic databases for locating journal articles
- Distinguish between scholarly and popular information resources
- Be able to evaluate search results and select appropriate items to pursue
- Understand how to read citations for various formats
- Understand the concept of ethical use and documentation of information
- Distinguish between the Free Web and Library resources on the Web and know basic evaluative strategies.

Contacts To schedule your class session, please contact

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