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Source: *College Teaching*, Winter, 2007, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Winter, 2007), pp. 31-32

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27559303>

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PROVE YOUR CASE: A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING RESEARCH PAPERS

Stephen L. Broskoske

Abstract. This article presents a new approach to teaching the process of writing research papers to college freshmen. Instructors explain the analogy that a student writing a research paper is like a lawyer defending a court case: lawyers frame their case (as students define their topic), search out evidence (as students search for sources), present the evidence (as students write the paper), and make a closing argument (as students draw a conclusion).

Many faculty who assign research papers to freshmen report the same problem. Griffin (1998) indicates that students who are writing search for a sense of direction to guide their writing process. Similarly, Olwell and Delph (2004) assert that students do not understand that an author needs a thesis to steer the writing process. Further, Barlow (2004) suggests that students do not fully engage in writing a research paper because they view papers as research for research's sake. Because many students lack a true grasp of the overall task, they also lack an understanding of how to proceed in preparing the paper. Without a sense of direction, students do not under-

stand what to look for in the professional literature or how to present the information when they write. Consequently many college freshmen submit a position paper filled with opinion and unsubstantiated claims rather than an academic paper filled with research.

To combat this problem, faculty have tried different creative approaches. Foley (2001), in searching for a writing model to present to freshmen, asked students to write about a famous person via a celebrity obituary. Seshachari (1990) created a jigsaw puzzle assignment to help students realize that they use select information from various sources to create a new picture or viewpoint on a topic. Olwell and Delph (2004) divided writing into several steps that students would complete before writing the paper. They based their approach on the premise that students who develop a thesis can then

develop supporting arguments, which will lead to a higher-quality research paper. As part of this process, Olwell and Delph required students to submit an outline in the form of arguments to support a thesis and identify specific works from which they would draw their arguments. I would like to add to this list my method of creative methods to teaching research papers.

Recently, I tried a new approach to teaching research papers that seems to help students understand the task more thoroughly before they begin. Through a series of three PowerPoint slide shows,¹ I present to my students the analogy that writing a research paper is like a lawyer defending a court case. Students can relate to this analogy because there never seems to be a shortage of high-visibility court cases in the news to which I can refer—for example, Michael Jackson, Saddam Hussein, and the Enron leaders. I draw out the analogy in terms of how lawyers frame their case (as the students define their topic), search out evidence (as the students search for sources), present the evidence (as the students write the paper), and make the closing argument (as students draw a conclusion). I find that if I frame their thinking in this way, the students write better papers.

First, I begin with the topic. I find that students often submit ones that are too broad and lack focus. For example, I typically receive topics such as “distance learning” or “assistive technology.”

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Before beginning a case, a lawyer has to frame it properly. Similarly, a writer has to frame the topic so that it is definable and defensible. The topic of distance learning is too general; however, "Is Distance Learning Effective in Teaching and Learning?" can be defended. Many students have wanted to research assistive technology but did not know what to research or how to approach the task. If the topic is framed as "Benefits of Using Assistive Technology in the Classroom," it can be defended. I find that a topic defined in this manner can help guide students through the next steps in the process.

The second phase is searching out evidence to support the case. Referring to a current high-profile court case, I indicate to students that although a lawyer might feel or believe certain "facts" about the client, these so-called facts are merely conjecture unless they are substantiated by evidence. Then I draw the analogy that the evidence researchers use is information from professional literature. This leads to several other discussions:

- *What constitutes believable evidence?* The sources must be respected, scholarly material. After all, not all witnesses are believable. A witness may not add to the strength of the case, which may lead the jury to discount the testimony of that witness.

- *Is there sufficient evidence to support your case?* I prompt students to do a preliminary search of the professional literature to ensure that there is sufficient research to support their topic. If not, I

instruct them to either adjust the focus of their topic according to the material they are finding, or select another topic.

- *Selecting more sources rather than fewer is better, because you have more on which to report.* I point out to the students that, for a writer, fewer sources means not having as much to write about, and thus it is difficult to write a multipage paper using limited sources.

The third phase is presenting the evidence in court, which is analogous to writing the paper. At this point, I show students how to present their evidence in the context of the paper. Just like lawyers, the students should introduce evidence to argue key points that will help them make their case. When viewed from this frame of reference, students can realize the importance of using an authoritative tone and writing in the active voice. After all, evidence is presented live by witnesses on the stand.

The fourth phase is making the closing argument, which is the most critical in a court case. A lawyer begins by reiterating to the jury his or her argument. Using a persuasive tone, the lawyer continues by briefly reviewing the entire case, highlighting the key points that support the claim. The lawyer then draws a conclusion and rests his or her case. From this part of the analogy, students realize the important role of the conclusion section of the paper.

Finally, before actually going to court, a lawyer would review the entire case to make sure there are no "holes"—areas

that could be discredited due to lack of evidence. This is analogous to looking over the paper to ensure that sufficient sources were cited to support the claims presented and that the student made no unsubstantiated claims.

Although this approach is not for everyone, it effectively helps many students write better research papers. In a survey of thirty-seven students who were recently exposed to this method, 91 percent reported that they would recommend this method of writing research papers to a friend, and 79 percent indicated that they plan to use this approach in preparing a research paper for another class in the future.

Key words: higher education, research papers, writing

NOTE

1. To view the PowerPoint files referenced in this article, visit my Web page at <http://www.misericordia.edu/academics/education/drsteve>.

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