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A System for Teaching College Freshmen to Write a Research Paper

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## A System for Teaching College Freshmen To Write a Research Paper

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THE DISAPPOINTMENTS IN TEACHING a composition course involving research are well known: students aren't interested in their topics and can't read very well; the papers often are illogical and lack a thesis; note cards are simply spliced together into a report, at best—and, of course, there's plagiarism. By trial and error, I have evolved a system for teaching the research paper which nearly eliminates these problems.

In my present teaching of how to write research papers, I begin by teaching students some of the techniques of reading the kind of material in which they will do their research. Then I teach them to ask questions about the material they have read and about the topics of their own papers. Finally, I help them to organize their papers around the questions they have learned to ask of their topics.

The first step in this sequence is the teaching of the basic reading skills of finding the main point and major supports of an article in a magazine or a chapter in a book. The teaching of these techniques is in no way a misuse of class time. I found that students were pleasantly astonished to discover that the main point of an article can usually be found in one sentence near its beginning or very near the end, and that the title is often a clue to the main point. These discoveries are steps towards more efficient note cards. Research papers are also often flawed by the students' lack of another reading skill, the ability to distinguish between fact and speculation in sources. I now assign one reading selection early in the term primarily for the purpose of pointing out speculative language such as "perhaps," "may be," and "a possible explanation." I half-expected my students to take offense at such "low-level" instruction; on the contrary, they sat up, paid attention, and took notes with enthusiasm.

The second step in the system is to select truly universal topics. The three that I am using now are family, work, and education. These topics affect everyone; students come to class with at least rudimentary opinions already formed.

The third step is to assign the topic in question form and to pose the question in such a way that it applies to the student personally. The question will be something like "What should I do about X" or "What kind of X will be right for me?" For the topic "family," we read and discuss two articles on marriage and children. The question is, "What family style should I choose for myself? Why?" We discuss the

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alternatives: marriage, staying single, living-together arrangements, etc.; no children, just one or two children, many children. The student's thesis will be something like, "The best family style for me will be marriage with no children." The answer to the question, "Why?" gives the student an outline: I. (Reason #1), II. (Reason #2), etc.

Step four of this system is for the student to write an opinion paper, without doing any library research. (The student writes three pairs of papers in a ten-week quarter. An opinion paper is about 500 words; the research paper that follows it is about 750 words.) He or she will try to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the different "family styles," based on personal experiences (as a member of a family of some kind), observations (of relatives, friends, neighbors), and accumulated random reading. (In the opinion paper I permit students to say such things as, "I read in a magazine last year that . . .," but I tell them that for the research paper they must either locate the reference and document it, or delete it.)

The fifth step, a crucial one for the future research paper, is for the student to revise the opinion paper for better logic and organization. Since I grade the opinion papers before the students do any research, I can head off any potential disasters. I gain valuable control over my students' work and can often prevent an otherwise inevitable failure.

The sixth step is for the student to prepare a list of the questions implicit in the opinion paper. I instruct the class to challenge each assertion they have made. ("Does marriage provide emotional security?" "Is it cheaper to stay single?" "Will an only child be spoiled?" "Do children in large families feel unloved?") With this list of questions, the students are finally ready to go to the library. Their research now has focus. They do not just read aimlessly "on the topic."

Step seven, doing the library research, still involves bibliography cards and note cards, using the card catalog and the *Readers' Guide*, etc. But now the students are more likely to succeed—and to spend less time on their research papers than formerly.

Step eight is the transformation of the opinion paper into a research paper. Here I teach introduction of source material and proper documentation. If the student has adequately revised the opinion paper, writing the research paper consists primarily of inserting note card material in the appropriate places, with suitable introductory phrases and standard footnotes. If a student changes his or her opinion on the topic after doing research, it is a simple matter to revise the thesis and those parts of the argument about which the writer has come to another opinion. The basic structure of the paper remains intact. The thesis may change, but the student never has to scrap the opinion paper entirely and start over. Any problems that arise because of changed opinions can be handled through conferences with individual students.

The system is not perfect, but it is a significant improvement over traditional approaches. I have encountered only three problems since I started teaching the research paper this way.

First, some students are reluctant to disclose information about themselves. They want to write only on safe, neutral topics, so that they can remain strictly anonymous. These students want to write reports only. My answer to their objections is that, as college students, they must learn to take a stand and support it. I explain the

importance of argumentative writing in their intellectual development. To allay their fears that I am seeking intimate confessions from them, I remind them that *they* are always in control of the writing process and that *they* always choose how much information to divulge. Student resistance to writing a “personal experience” paper usually subsides after the first opinion paper.

The second problem is that a few students in each class seem unable to grasp the notion of reasons leading to a conclusion. Each writing assignment forces the student to arrive at a conclusion on an issue (i.e., answer the assigned question) and then give reasons to support the conclusion. But some of my students seem to know only one way to write a multi-paragraph essay, by simply analysis (division into parts). So even though I insist that they write the thesis and outline in such a way that each Roman numeral heading can be attached to the thesis with the word “because,” I still have gotten some papers that offer as a thesis something like, “Success in marriage requires patience, love, and a good income.” I am baffled. I simply do not yet know what to do with students who cannot comprehend causal analysis.

The third problem is a tendency for students to ignore research information that does not support the thesis of the opinion paper. Some students have been unwilling to change their theses to fit the evidence they uncover. As a result, this quarter I am requiring that each research paper have a short section on opposing arguments. I have also stressed more heavily the necessity of freedom from bias in research papers. I hope that this will solve the problem.

The three problems inherent in my system are not burdensome, considering that all the old problems have been minimized or eliminated. Using my new approach, I find less student apathy toward the topics of the research papers. Note cards contain more meaningful information, the result, I suspect, of better reading habits. Each paper takes a stand. The papers are better organized and show good balance between commentary and source material. The course emphasizes logical thought and the integration of source material with commentary, and not the mechanics of outlines and documentation. Students spend their time in the library more productively and throw away fewer note cards. And I have not detected even one instance of plagiarism while using this approach. The system seems to make plagiarism irrelevant and practically impossible, especially if the opinion papers are written in class.

A better freshman research paper can result from having the student first write an opinion paper based on personal experience. The opinion paper then guides the student’s library research. This system permits the instructor to help the student avoid common flaws in research papers and reduces or eliminates plagiarism.