

Workshop: The Successful Research Paper Assignment

1. Encourage engagement and thoughtfulness

a. “Write a research paper on _____.”

- i. Does not promote inquiry-based research
- ii. Does not help students understand *why* researchers find and use sources

b. Consider alternative “research paper” assignments

- i. Diary or letters by a particular person or from a particular situation/event
- ii. Dialogue between two prominent people or two people representing different theories
- iii. Anthology with an introduction
- iv. Brochure or pamphlet

c. The Research Project guideline sheet

- i. Describe learning objectives: content knowledge, research skills, writing skills
- ii. Clearly state expectations and grading criteria
- iii. Provide due dates for the (related) assignments or parts (see #2)

2. Create an appropriate sequence of steps

a. Several short assignments to improve students’ research skills

- i. Brainstorm session to generate potential research questions
- ii. Annotated bibliography, summaries, or abstracts
- iii. Data-supplied essay¹
- iv. Short arguments (1-2 pages) using outside sources for support

b. Break the research project into parts

- i. Guided Researcher’s Log/Journal to track development of ideas and decisions made (kept throughout the process)
- ii. Summary and evaluation of two articles (after a library orientation)
- iii. Prospectus, Progress Report, Letter to the Instructor, or Outline (after research question is finalized)
- iv. Reflective essay (if not using a log/journal) (2-3 weeks before final draft)
- v. Title and abstract (1 week before draft)
- vi. Draft (1-2 weeks before final draft)
- vii. Final draft

¹ From Bean, J. C. (1996). *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

3. Decrease the possibility of plagiarism

- a. Provide a definition of plagiarism. For example: Plagiarism is the use, whether intentional or unintentional, of someone else's words, ideas, or images without correctly acknowledging the source of the words, ideas, or images. Plagiarism is serious academic misconduct and could result in failure of a course or expulsion from the university. See also page 574 of the *2004-05 Catalog*.
- b. Require that students take a plagiarism quiz. There are many online quizzes, e.g.:
 - <http://school.discovery.com/quizzes14/lindalibrary/plag.html>
 - <http://library.camden.rutgers.edu/robeson/cddev/quiz.html>
 - <http://www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism/Test.htm>
- c. State that plagiarism results in an "F" grade (either for the assignment or for the course) on the course syllabus or assignment sheet
- d. Provide a discipline-specific library orientation. A list of Hamilton librarians by subject area can be found at
 - http://www.hawaii.edu/emailref/selectors/selectors_by_subject.html
- e. Teach how to read critically; teach how professionals in your field summarize, paraphrase, and use quotations
- f. Use an alternative research paper assignment
- g. Require different parts of the project to be turned in throughout the semester (see #2b)
- h. Require a photocopy of the first page of each source used
- i. Require reading notes, outlines, and preliminary drafts along with the final draft

Include Learning Objectives

Students appreciate instructors who explain what will be gained from completing the assignment. Include content knowledge, research skills, and writing skills objectives in a brief statement on the assignment guideline sheet.

After completing the research project assignment, you will be able to

- discuss in detail the major issues that frame your chosen research area;
- use the internet to locate research articles in the library's electronic databases;
- critically analyze research articles;
- integrate other researcher's ideas into your own argument (without plagiarizing);
- effectively and appropriately organize ideas in written report;
- present a credible argument in a written report.

Use Action Verbs to Convey Expectations

On an assignment sheet, use action verbs to precisely convey what students will need to do to successfully complete the assignment.

Action verbs

define	explain	manipulate	sort	tell
describe	generalize	relate	subdivide	appraise
identify	give examples	show	blend	assess
label	infer	solve	build	arbitrate
list	interpret	use	change	award
match	paraphrase	analyze	combine	choose
memorize	predict	compare	compile	conclude
point to	review	contrast	compose	criticize
recall	summarize	diagram	conceive	defend
select	translate	differentiate	create	evaluate
state	apply	dissect	design	grade
alter	adopt	distinguish	formulate	judge
account for	collect	identify	generate	prioritize
annotate	construct	illustrate	hypothesize	recommend
calculate	demonstrate	infer	plan	referee
change	discover	outline	predict	reject
compile	illustrate	point out	produce	select
convert	interview	select	reorder	support
group	make use of	separate	revise	

Brainstorm session

This activity conveys to students that developing a research question takes time and effort, that others can help the researcher improve upon his/her ideas, and that a researcher's initial questions can serve as a catalyst to even better questions.

Your final project for this class is a research paper that will analyze an important current issue in education and provide a recommendation for action.

- 1) Take five minutes to brainstorm as many potential research questions about current issues as possible. Don't stop writing – get as many questions on paper as possible.
- 2) After you've finished, review the list and select two questions that are particularly interesting to you.
- 3) For each question, write 1-3 sentences that explain why this issue is important to you.
- 4) Share one or both questions with a partner/small group. Ask your classmate(s) two questions: "Is this a feasible research question for this assignment?" and "What would you like to learn about [insert the current issue here]."
- 5) After completing the activity, revise your research question (if needed). Write 1-2 paragraphs in which you reflect on what you learned through this activity.

Data-supplied essay

Students may know how to locate data and research articles, but they may lack skills in interpreting and discussing the data. In the examples below, the instructor provides raw data. (Alternatively, the instructor may provide several short written passages from which students draw conclusions.)

Examples from Bean¹:

Nursing: "Examine the attached unsorted data about Mary Smith, a stroke patient who is soon to be transferred from an acute-care facility to a convalescent center. Based on these data, write a discharge summary for Mary Smith. Your audience is the nursing supervisor of the convalescent facility, and your purpose is to help the convalescent center provide the patient with optimal continuity of care."

Economics: "To what extent do the attached economic data support the hypothesis 'Social service spending is inversely related to economic growth?' First, create a scattergram as a visual test of the hypothesis. Then formulate a verbal argument analyzing whether the data do or do not support the hypothesis."

Prompts to guide students' thinking

These prompts and activities can be used in many different ways:

- ◆ a prompt for a Researcher's Log/Journal entry
- ◆ part of a Prospectus, Progress Report, Letter to the Instructor, or Reflective Essay assignment
- ◆ stimulate student thinking about articles they read or their own thinking.

¹ Bean, J. C. (1996). *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, page 126.

QUESTION EXPLORATION

- Take a blank piece of paper. Put a curiosity-based question in the middle of the page. Brainstorm related questions and write them down on the page, forming clusters or webs around the center question.

Review the web: Is one of the questions better than the question you started with?

Using the list of questions you generated, can you identify questions are directly related to or subordinate to your main question? (These directly-related questions may be sub-topics that are discussed in your research report.)

- What is your current research question? Why is answering this question important to you? Who else might be interested in your answer? Why? (1 page, typed)
- Choose one question that interests you. Spend no less than ten minutes freewriting on what you know about the topic. Don't worry about whether what you write is correct or not. Push yourself to get down on paper all that you know, or think that you know, about the question. If you get stuck, write about how the question relates to your own experiences. Or write about why the question is important to you. Why do you want to find the answers to this question? You might be surprised at what you already know or think.

“NUTSHELL” STATEMENTS

- For my research project, I will try to learn _____ [insert your question here].
Answering the question is important to me because _____.
The answer to my question is important to some other people because _____.
In order to come up with the best answer to my question, I'm considering three strategies:
a. _____. b. _____. c. _____.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

- Write answers to these questions (1-2 pages)
 1. Where are you? (What have you accomplished so far?)
 2. What do you already know about the possible answers to your research question?
 3. What do you think will be your greatest challenge in answering your question?
 4. What do you most look forward to in doing your research?

PROGRESS REPORT

- In 2-3 pages, address these items:
 1. introduce the research question that you developed
 2. describe why you are interested in answering the question
 3. show how it is feasible for you to answer the question given the amount of time and resources available
 4. explain how your research question takes a fresh point of view or special angle (not merely repeats what others have already said)
 5. explain why the question is important and of interest to others
 6. describe what you have done or plan to do to come up with an answer to your question.

METHOD

- How might you best answer your question? (For example, survey current professionals or conduct a library search.) Why do you think this is the best way? What other methods did you consider? Why did you reject those methods?
 - State your research question and summarize “in a nutshell” (in one sentence) the method that you will use to use to answer your question.
 - Describe the method you will use to answer your question. Use enough detail so that a reader will clearly understand what you plan to do. (To help them write full descriptions, some students think of themselves telling a short story about what they plan to do.)
 - A. What is your first task or set of tasks? Why is this first? Why is it important?
 - B. What will you do next (and next, and next)? Why? What new questions or problems might this raise?
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ENCOURAGE ACTIVE READING

- After students read a book, article, etc., ask them to answer questions like these:
 1. How does this resource add to your knowledge? What did you learn?
 2. To what extent is the resource based on research vs. opinion? If it is opinion, to what extent is it "expert" opinion? (How do you know?)
 3. How does it change your understanding of your research question and project? Any surprises?
 4. How does it confirm what you already know? What was expected?
 5. What connections can you make to your own life (your experiences, beliefs, attitudes)?
 6. How does this resource fit with your research question?
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SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Questions to help students explore the significance of their project:

- Is it a small part of a bigger puzzle? Could your research project provide one piece of an important puzzle?
- Will answering your question lead to better understanding of a phenomenon or situation?
- Will your research project increase the knowledge about an object or text?
- Will your answers help explain characteristics of a group of people, a behavior, or situation?
- Will your answers provide possible solutions to a problem?
- Will your answers influence the development of public policy?
- Will your research project identify elements that can improve people’s lives (their health, job productivity, personal relationships, etc.)?