

BAD IDEAS ABOUT WRITING

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RESEARCH STARTS WITH ANSWERS

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The research paper has become a rite of passage where students choose a topic (or are assigned one) about which they present a claim, and then look for ways to confirm it with evidence located through some ambiguous thing or process called *research*. One of the primary problems with the research paper is that it teaches students that to *do research* is to look things up—to use the library or the Internet. Skills for locating information are essential to being a successful researcher, as is familiarity with the library and the rich variety of sources available, but it represents only a small part of the research process.

So, what does it really mean to *do research*? Research is a three-stage process: (1) seeking information that is new to the researcher, (2) interpreting, evaluating, and organizing that information, and (3) reporting that information to others to affect some action. Richard Larson emphasizes that the nature of research is active. The researcher—whether student, academic, or professional—takes an active role in *seeking*. Seeking is not limited to locating what exists, but also extends to creating new data or information in service of answering a question or solving a problem.

Perhaps some of the confusion over the role of research in writing, and the writing process, comes from the structure of classical argument that is often included as part of the organizational pattern for the research paper. When argument is taught, it's frequently connected to the historical practices of Greek and Roman rhetoric. Rhetoric, the study of the ways to use language to persuade a listener, was one of the core subjects of formalized education in Greek and Roman times and was seen as a necessary component of democratic citizenship. The study of rhetoric focused on argument as an oral practice of making clear claims in an effort to persuade. Speakers would present their positions, respond to

challenges to their positions, listen to speakers presenting opposing positions, challenge those positions, and adjust their own claims and approaches. Argument was the primary means of conducting governing and legal activities, so participants were expected to be knowledgeable in both the conventions of arguing and in possession of acceptable, logical evidence to support their claims. The process was messy, time-consuming, and in some cases, not the most efficient way to conduct business or legal proceedings. It was viewed as a dynamic interaction that involved speakers going back and forth, and sometimes round and round, in an effort to come to a conclusion. Classical argument, in its basic principles, was meant to be a continual process rather than strictly a completed product.

Oral argument was a cornerstone of university curricula through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and into the 18th century. Written forms of argumentation did not take precedence in university settings until the 1800s, and coinciding with increasing specialization found both within and outside of the university. The research paper replaced oral exams and public speaking as a measure of intellect; and it was initially successful at fostering and promoting the creation of knowledge in local communities. The use of the research paper proliferated until it became the primary genre students write—a genre less about creating knowledge and more about compiling it.

Subsequently, the research paper became a tool for teaching students how to use the library, find the right words, and skillfully search through the words of others. Such a task eliminates the writer's voice from the conversation—as they are not required to participate in the discussion of the subject at hand, but simply to report what others have said about it. Because they are not active participants in the conversation, when students are taught by their textbooks and teachers to make a claim supported by reasons at an early stage of developing their argument, they have no real stake in the claim they make, nor any real grounds for making such a claim. Their choices are often arbitrary and rote, based in what they believe they know, in what they are comfortable with, or in what they believe will lead to many easy-to-find, readily accessible sources. They see no purpose for their claim other than completing the assignment. Nonetheless, this claim becomes the thesis statement of the paper and is to be the foundation of the work that follows.

Teaching students the purpose of doing research is supporting an idea or belief one already holds is not teaching students about

research. In fact, the name *research paper* is, in itself, misleading, as it implies that research is a practice only used in a particular genre or instance, rather than as a fundamental element of nearly all forms of academic, workplace, or personal writing. Researching isn't meant to be a narrow task of looking up information, but of creating and discovering new information in response to problems. Describing research in these limited terms does not prepare students to participate in actual research in their courses of study and in their professional fields.

A more useful approach to teaching students about research, and how to do research, begins with re-thinking how we define research and research skills. If research is the process by which a researcher seeks new information, makes sense of that information, and then reports that information to someone else, then research ought to begin with a question, not an answer. Students need to be taught not to look for answers, but to look for problems that need solving and for questions that need to be answered.

Rather than limiting the conception of research to a search for certain facts or pieces of evidence or to a trip to the library, it needs to include the processes of primary research—research collected directly by the researcher using tools he or she has designed to find the information needed to answer a particular question. I am not suggesting that secondary research—the locating of previously published materials—be eliminated, but that it not be presented as the paramount form of research, as is often done in the research paper. Secondary research is a key part of the research process and usually precedes any primary research. Once a researcher has a question, it's logical to see if and how others might have answered the same question. To be successful, students, and any researchers, must have a working knowledge of the question they are investigating. However, that information serves as a starting point for researchers, who then ask further questions to spur and design their own primary research.

Primary research provides students with opportunities to engage with people around them, to work collaboratively, to think critically about the best way to accomplish the task of getting the information they need to answer their questions, to learn how to manage and organize data, and to learn to interpret data. Because students need to work with people around them to develop ideas and locate problems to research and solve, primary research encourages students to see the ways in which research might help or benefit the people around them in their local communities.

Additionally, working on primary research as a component of a class engages students with one another as they share their struggles, progress, and successes. They have the opportunity to learn both from their own experiences and each other. Students engaged in primary research also have to design their own tools (surveys, interview questions, experiments, etc.) to accomplish their particular goals. They can test versions and make modifications, adapting to changes in their research question, or problems that arise during the process. The need for such adaptability breaks students of the conception that there is *a* way to get the answers that they need, preparing them to be adaptable in situations beyond the classroom.

Once the definition of research shifts from information locating and idea confirmation to information generating and problem solving, the ways students write about research needs to change. The genre of the academic research report requires students to present the findings of their research in a clear, logical fashion, while also documenting their processes and opening their work to be critically examined by others. The research report also typically necessitates a literature review—a collection of published and cited research related to the topic at hand—that provides the impetus for the student’s project and to show how the project extends what has already been done and provides new insight or knowledge. Thus, the research report gives students practice at both primary and secondary research, while allowing them to pursue genuine research questions.

Having students design and pursue genuine research projects that generate rather than simply locate information teaches them that research is about innovation—about doing what hasn’t been done. It also demonstrates to them that research is a useful tool not only for learning, but also for action. Information gained from research can be used to impact their schools, homes, workplaces, and communities. Then, much as the ancient Greeks viewed classical argument as an essential part of citizenship, participating in genuine research and research writing becomes a key part of engaged and productive citizenship in the 21st century.

Further Reading

For further information about the historical understandings and practices of rhetoric, see Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*. Additionally, Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge) and David Russell’s

Writing in the Academic Disciplines 1870–1990: A Curricular History (Southern Illinois University Press) discuss the shift from oral to literate culture and how the introduction of writing affected the ways people thought about and communicated about the world around them.

For more on the prevalence and use of the research paper, see James Ford and Dennis Perry’s “Research Paper Instruction in Undergraduate Writing Programs: National Survey” (*College English*). Richard Larson’s “The ‘Research Paper’ in the Writing Course: A Form of Non-Writing” (*College English*), Robert Connors’s *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (U of Pittsburgh Press), and Audrey Roth’s *The Research Paper: Process, Form, and Content*. (Cengage Learning) look at the pedagogy of the research paper, while Robert Davis and Mark Shadle’s “‘Building a Mystery’: Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking” (*College Composition and Communication*) offer some mixed/multi-genre alternatives to the traditional research paper.

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