

REVIEW ESSAY

NAVIGATING SWAMPY TERRITORY, OR *THE RESEARCH PAPER* *REVISITED*

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Perspective

I have been teaching writing from research for over forty years, through (at least) three different versions of MLA citation styles. I can recall when we actually used “footnotes,” located at the foot of the page, with those pesky Latin abbreviations, *ibid*, *op cit*, etc. Later came “endnotes,” still with Latin, and eventually (with the MLA digging in its heels I imagine), the shift to parenthetical citation with an alphabetized list of sources.

Swamped

For all of that time, “the research paper” has been—well let’s say, “problematic.” Locating topics that students could handle was a problem, whether students chose the topics or not. So was knowledge of the library and of relevant indexes. And formatting. And plagiarism (both accidental and intentional). And notetaking. And grading. In a conference presentation, Bruce Ballenger said he had examined several hundred articles on research-based writing published over a sixty-year period, and done a content-analysis of their opening paragraphs. He concluded that the

research paper is like the undesirable uncle who must nevertheless be invited to the wedding.

Not surprisingly, there have been calls for abolition of “the research paper.” The earliest that I’m aware of was by a frustrated high school teacher in 1965 (Taylor). In 1982 no less a scholar than Richard Larson, editor of *CCC*, called for banishing the project from college writing classes because it was a “non-form” of writing. Abolition not seeming a viable answer, there have also been frequent suggestions for unusual approaches that might make the task more “palatable” (Rileigh) and perhaps increase the odds on success.

When I took English 102, in the Ice Age, for example, one required text was a casebook of articles on linguistics. I’m sure the powers who selected the text thought that reading about linguistics all term would be salutary in its own right; students would necessarily learn something about language. Students were to write research projects solely from the casebook, which would prevent the campus library from being inundated in the winter term by several thousand first-years hunting for information. Moreover, teachers could check the accuracy of citations and quotations almost instantly. Casebooks for “research” were popular in the sixties and early seventies, including collections about literature (e.g., *Catcher in the Rye* or *Death of a Salesman*) and others on themes such as the Salem witch trials or advertising. I’m still happy that my instructor refused to have my section draw topics from the casebook. Even though I chose a poor topic and wrote a boring and shallow paper, I still found the experience more valuable than trying to write a fake paper about linguistics.

Trying to find an approach that would motivate students, in 1978 Keith Kraus wrote an entire book to advocate having students research a famous murder. In 1988, Ken Macrorie, already famous for *Telling Writing* and *Uptaught*, suggested in *The I-Search Paper* that students should write a narrative account of their quest to locate information on a personal topic, such as purchasing a camera. In 1994, Mark Gellis suggested they study a famous historical speech.

Teaching undergrads how to write a research-based paper is like leading them through a swamp full of quicksand, alligators, and cottonmouths. It's a terrain with multiple paths to success, some more effective than others, but plenty of hazards along the way. The goal is to give students enough guidance that they avoid the pitfalls and emerge on the far side by a relatively direct route, even if they discover it for themselves. I admit that a proportion of my students have gotten off track and been lost completely. Others have wandered around and eventually extricated themselves but didn't end up where I had hoped.

So it's no surprise that pedagogical adventurers keep searching for a sure-fire route.

Negotiating the Swamp Anew

Concern over the swamp has not lessened in recent years. In 2001, Wendy Bishop and Pavel Zemliansky (then her doctoral student) published a collection of essays about research papers, a collection ostensibly intended for students, complete with suggested discussion questions—fifteen chapters plus about fifty pages of “hint sheets”—which would be handouts, in a class taught without the book.

Now (meaning 2004), the same editors have assembled *Research Writing Revisited: A Sourcebook for Teachers*, one of the last projects Wendy worked on before her death. It includes a brief essay of hers, plus seventeen others. Despite having more chapters, the newer volume is a bit shorter (231 pages versus 261). But the gimmick that is presumably intended to help “sell” the volume, in both senses of the word, is that the chapters have related materials available on a website maintained by Boynton/Cook. (More about the website below.)

The term “sourcebook” in the subtitle is a bit misleading. A sourcebook usually describes a collection of reprinted articles meant to represent a cross-section of key viewpoints (such as Corbett, Myers, and Tate, *A Sourcebook for Teaching Writing*; James McDonald's *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Teaching Writing: A Sourcebook*; or Richard Graves's *A Sourcebook on Rhetoric*). But *Research Writing*

Revisited assembles original chapters, and it's pretty deliberately aimed at altering our perspective about teaching research, making it more flexible, more creative, less academic, more fun. In a brief introduction, Zemliansky explains,

We had two ideas in mind: that research is important for all kinds of writing and that the traditional research paper assignment that has been a staple in many writing curricula for over eighty years does not reflect either the importance of research for all writers or the true nature of research as rhetorical inquiry. (vii)

One might quibble over whether *all* writing actually needs research, especially later in the volume when Paul Heilker, Sarah Allen, and Emily Sewall write, "*all writing is research writing*. . . . A *grocery list* is a research paper" (50, italics in original). Despite such hyperbole, it is true that writing involves some sort of research more often than we often think. Bishop even makes an interesting case that in writing poetry, students can benefit from having to do observational "research" (by looking closely at pecans) or internet research (on camellias).

I certainly agree that research papers should reflect "rhetorical inquiry." Unfortunately, the claims of the contributors sometimes prove problematic, beginning with the mantra in Zemliansky's introductory passage, the first of several instances in which "the traditional research paper" is reified into a straw project "that exists only as a school-based genre" (Goggin and Roen 20), a genre for which students receive no guidance and in which the emphasis is a sterile concern with proper mechanics. Juxtaposed against this benighted formalistic non-approach, in which—unguided—students are virtually guaranteed to lose their way, the anthologized chapters show us creative, imaginative ways to superior outcomes and superior educational experiences for teacher and student alike.

If we will follow these new paths through the swamp, the chapters suggest, we can avoid the alligator pits and will-o-the-

wisps to navigate smoothly the otherwise treacherous waters by more interesting routes than in the past.

Maps Through the Swamp

The editors have attempted, as usual, to group the chapters into more or less unified sections. As is common, some chapters scarcely fit their sections, and some actually present well-worn paths. Moreover, the Universal Axiom for Anthologies applies with a vengeance: the eighteen chapters are more-than-usually uneven.

Looking at the section headings reveals the slant:

- I. Research as Empowerment (two chapters)
- II. Research as Art and Self-Expression (three chapters)
- III. Research Across Genres, Disciplines, and Settings (five chapters)
- IV. Research as Collaboration and Service to the Community (four chapters)
- V. Research as Process (four chapters)

Jointly the essays manifest two dimensions of the current *ethos* of composition pedagogy and theory: a return (?) to the value of personal, even quirky, writing, and a merger of collaborative authorship with ethnographic method and community service, not quite what I have called a critical cultural studies (CCS) viewpoint, but close (Fulkerson). Such an *ethos* virtually requires a critique of “traditional” approaches to contrast with the authors’ own superior pathway.

I have no wish to defend a mindless assign/ignore/collect/grade research-based writing. (Who would?) But I doubt many college writing teachers engage in such a practice, especially since our much vaunted “process revolution.” (I can’t say the same for professors in other disciplines, but they would not be part of the audience for this collection.) My own “traditional” approach includes having students choose, propose, and justify several topics; do a quick-skim, brief source list; practice summary

writing; read several successful student papers; do in-class journal reporting on their progress; produce an extended bibliography, already in proper form; locate some area of controversy or at least a personal slant on the topic; write the piece, using headings and visuals; try out alternate titles; get my response; and revise as needed. I am aware that I could include other steps (i.e., an annotated bibliography, a personal essay minus the secondary research, co-authorship, and peer review). I know that other writing teachers present the task differently, and I certainly don't find my approach to be universally successful or believe it is the one true way. But I don't apologize that I treat research writing as the production of primarily argumentative, academic discourse, and I maintain that for many students the experience is valuable as preparation for work they will need to do in other undergraduate courses or in graduate school in English, and *mutatis mutandis*, even in their careers. I don't even object to the idea that I am doing a service—for my students. So I confess that I resent disparaging remarks that create a “straw pedagogy” of “the traditional” research paper experience.

Some Paths Through—or Around—the Swamp

It would be impossible (and pointless) to describe each of the paths proposed in the volume, but let me now survey some—the ones that seem either most intriguing, most likely to succeed, or most problematic.

In “Rhetorically Writing and Reading Researched Arguments,” the second chapter of Section I, Maureen Goggin and Duane Roen, in the problem/solution move that typifies many chapters, propose that, in lieu of “the ubiquitous research essay” (20), a student should write a paper “historicizing an event, activity, or phenomenon . . . related in some way to the sociocultural community that interests him or her most” (22), such as a campus organization the student wishes to join. The student must do both primary (ethnographic) research (which means interviewing members of the group) and secondary (mainly archival) research about the group's background. The product is to be chronological

narrative (not an argument although certainly written with a perspective). I am personally somewhat skeptical about whether first-year students are capable of performing useful “sociocultural analysis,” although a teacher could, I suppose, devote much of the course to explaining basic anthropological research as well as historiography.

On the website, the chapter is supported with the exact assignment plus an eleven-page set of heuristic guidelines for it (the paper is to be only three to five pages). What is missing that I would really like to see, however, is a set of illustrative student papers.

Unlike many chapters in the anthology, Goggin and Roen’s uses extensive research (over forty citations). What they propose would not achieve the central goals that I have for a research project (such as becoming familiar with a range of indexes and print sources and learning to cope with conflicting arguments), but since it is only a short paper and they refer to it as one unit of a course, it could be integrated into most courses, even those in which the “ubiquitous” (and longer) paper is required.

The authors of the three chapters in Part II, “Research as Art and Self-Expression,” are, predictably, interested in students’ use of “research” (interpreted broadly) to write personal and “creative” pieces of the sort that might appear in contemporary periodicals. After Wendy Bishop describes her advanced nonfiction course in “lifewriting,” Tom Reigstad revisits and updates Macrorie’s famous “I-Search” paper, showing ways to use it in advanced literature and graduate courses. Reigstad is the only contributor to the volume who indicates familiarity with earlier discourse about research writing. He was turned on by reading Macrorie in a graduate course and then meeting him as a presenter when Reigstad was a new professor. Basically, Reigstad has had a quarter of a century to explore and refine the path he started on.

I-Search papers are frequently fun to read: the research narrative often has an inherent emplotment, and thus a sense of

suspense and climax. Moreover, this article contains quoted portions of some impressive examples of student work.

Also in Part II, Paul Heilker and two graduate students, Sarah Allen and Emily Sewall, write a piece subtitled “The Personal Essay as Research Paper.” It presents a very direct path: first they have the student write a genuine personal narrative, drawing only on experience. As a second stage, the student does minimal textual research about some feature of the personal experience. The information found can then either be added onto the end of the narrative, or distributed throughout it, with explicit divisions, producing a “segmented” essay, collage, or “counterpoint essay” (54). On the website are two sample papers, one of each type. One, on kissing, integrates the author’s story of a new boyfriend with information about kissing, both historical and physiological, and intersperses quotations from the Bible and a series of poets. It’s a charming piece, one that might appear in a popular magazine with a young, female readership. If adding some quotations from other sources can strengthen an autobiographical narrative, I certainly applaud the move. I am not sure, however, whether being “charming” is exactly the most important feature we ought to be looking for in a research-based project. (And the authors do not indicate that they are referring to a “creative writing” course.)

Although Part II, on personal and creative research projects, is pretty well unified, the same cannot be said of the remaining three sections. The paths presented in them go every which way.

Part III begins with “More Than Just Writing About Me? Linking Self and Other in the Ethnographic Essay,” in which Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, two well-known ethnographers of composition, advocate ethnographic studies that somehow “link self and other” to produce a piece of “creative nonfiction” (60). To illustrate the success of their route through the research paper quagmire, they first reproduce a piece of purely awful personal meandering from the first week of class, all in capital letters, about the author’s vanity. The author is clearly caught in quicksand. Of course, five weeks later, after a series of carefully “scaffolded” (64) experiences, the same student has been

rescued and produces a much more focused piece, a vivid study of the snowboarding community as represented by his roommate, a paper of fifteen pages “packed with details, dialogue, description, and analysis” (64). The remainder of their essay includes a variety of further stories of students who write about “others” yet produce papers that, nevertheless, link to themselves, as well as four “strategies that help student writers pay close attention to details of the ‘other’ without losing the sense of self” (64-65). The eventual product is a portfolio, complete with Table of Contents and Introduction to the work included. At nearly twenty pages this chapter is the longest in the book. Self-contained, it makes no use of the website (missing an easy opportunity to share one or two full papers), but it is extensively documented. Given that theirs is an elective course in “creative nonfiction” (60), Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater’s approach seems admirably successful in achieving their goal of “smooth writing, wrought well . . . one of our contemporary culture’s great reading pleasures [like] works published in *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, and *The Atlantic*” (60).

The following chapter, by Mark Shadle and Robert Davis, experienced professors at Eastern Oregon University, shows few parallels to Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater’s work, but has a similar “creative” goal. It presents perhaps the strangest pathway of all, beginning with the title, “A Piñata of Theory and Autobiography: Research Writing Breaks Open Academe.” No surprise that the chapter is supported with seriously quirky materials on the website, including a 27-page multi-voiced course handout, containing an assignment for a three-column “personal inventory” and a list of about a hundred previous topics. All the projects in Shadle and Davis’s classes lead to a class performance, and new students each semester are introduced to what they will be doing when former students visit and present their performance pieces.

Shadle and Davis describe what they want students to produce as “multiwriting,” which includes “multiple genres, disciplines, media, and cultures” (80). And they include a two-column chart in which they contrast “Steps in Traditional Research” with “Steps

in Multiwriting Research” (82-83), much to the latter’s favor of course. The “traditional research” column is the most direct representation of that straw pedagogy I mentioned.

The metaphor of the piñata comes from one student’s project, which went from a consideration of her kitchen, to research on piñatas across cultures. She then presented the project as a piñata. With Incan music in the background, other students broke it open, taking possession of fragments of text that were inside, then reading the fragments aloud while standing in a circle (88). “The traditional research-writing process has burst like a piñata to reveal, through multiwriting, the previously hidden candies of autobiography and theory” (83). So why wasn’t this chapter included under “Research as Art and Self-Expression”?

The contrast between “pinata theory” and the following chapters couldn’t be greater. In “Working Together: Teaching Collaborative Research to Professional Writing Students,” Joyce Neff explains how she teaches a collaborative business proposal in an advanced class at Old Dominion. There is nothing very unusual about the approach, which is quite similar to the one Linda Flower discussed years ago in her famous article about writer-based prose. As one might expect from a teacher of professional writing, the chapter is cleanly written and tightly organized. On the website, it is accompanied by a 68-page model project, proposing that Old Dominion should offer an online professional writing program. Nothing unusual about it, but without the website readers would never have been able to see such a lengthy product.

The following chapter concerns teaching beginning students to write about literature, first by asking them to read a Frost poem or a Hawthorne short story on their own, and write a response. It sets up the traditional “straw paper” to oppose and then argues for using short papers based only on reading the primary text at first, before going to five-page papers using secondary research and preceded by annotated bibliographies and group work. A perfectly clear and sane “this-is-how-I-do-it” article, citing no

prior discussions of using research papers in literature classrooms, as if the topic had never come up before.

Rounding out this portmanteau section, an article on collage and hypertext returns to the less traditional approaches.

Part IV presents four articles, all connecting research to service learning. The strongest, “Agents of Change,” describes a required multi-section sophomore course taught at Texas Christian University under the direction of the co-authors, Catherine Gabor and Carrie Leverenz. Students work in groups to conduct survey research about a problem on campus or in the community. The outcome is a ten-page co-authored paper addressed to a specific audience plus an oral presentation to the class.

The authors have surveyed the teachers of the course about fears and problems, and are quite aware of difficulties, both the predictable and the surprising. Inappropriate topic proposals (such as wanting to survey members of the Ku Klux Klan) have to be avoided. And occasionally anti-administration research can get out of hand, as illustrated by a project that led to a student boycott of the campus food service to protest low wages (the paper is on the website). The primary illustration concerns a group of students who studied handicap accessibility on the TCU campus, and made a videotape of one group member attempting to negotiate the campus using a wheelchair. Gabor and Leverenz acknowledge that at some campuses the “material conditions” would make it difficult to have such projects done as requirements for all students, but they “contend that primary research is so beneficial to composition pedagogy that it is worth trying even if material conditions are less than ideal” (131). I admire the result this project at least sometimes achieves, a local policy proposal directed to a real audience. I typically assign such a proposal, in fact, but without the extensive research component. Instead, I ask students to do work from personal experiences combined with interviews of the people responsible for the policy. The TCU assignment seems sensible to me, but I don’t see the unique benefits to students of learning to do survey research (“By teaching students to do primary research, we help them see the power of

writing as social action” [139]), and I’m suspicious of the ability of teaching assistants to direct the construction of valid and reliable survey instruments.

The last section of the book is the most disparate of all, containing a weak chapter on “Responding to Research Writing,” which cites only five sources itself from the plethora of relevant discussions, with no source more recent than 1996. The piece largely echoes advice given time and again, ever since the articles of Nancy Sommers and of Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch from the early 80s. The final section also includes an article about teaching students to “edit” their prose, which presents purely conventional advice: “I offer the following tips” (197).

The final chapter, subtitled “Balancing Assessment Politics with Writing Pedagogy,” doesn’t belong in the book since it doesn’t connect to teaching research papers. It narrates a failed attempt to institute a portfolio assessment system at George Mason University.

But nestled among the detritus in this section is a really thoughtful and creative piece by Chris Anson, “Citation as Speech Act: Exploring the Pragmatics of Reference,” which I would describe as a personal phenomenological study of the “rhetoric” of the use of citations. This is a theoretical article in which Anson analyzes the various purposes served by citations in research writing, examining sample texts from several fields using a “speech act” perspective. As he notes, some citations are evidentials (to support an author’s claim), but others are preparation to set up the background discourse to which the author will contribute. Still others are *terministic*, i.e., to make use of another author’s key concept (such as “thick description”). And sometimes citations (especially multiple ones) are used to enhance author credibility.

But the original contribution of Anson’s essay is that as he wrote, he also kept a separate set of journal-like entries examining five spots where he might have chosen to include a citation himself, and discussing why he chose to do so or not. These decision points are marked in the essay with superscript numerals;

then the reflective journal discussions are inserted in italic type as metacommentary. Although the article may not be helpful to my teaching of research-based papers, I recommend that every graduate student in English read it. It provides a terrific shortcut to key knowledge that is more usually acquired only tacitly if at all and with frequent painful missteps. This is a really smart piece.

The Companion Website: Help in Following New Paths?

The idea of a website with related materials to each chapter seems a good one to me, but it isn't carried out terribly well. Surely it saves some production expenses for the company, but at the cost of occasional disruptions in the reading. Often, when you expect an example of some sort to demonstrate a teaching approach, you get instead, "see the companion website." Most of the materials on the website are either assignment handouts, course syllabuses, or sample papers. Seeing sample papers gives a reader a better idea of exactly what a chapter is proposing; and if you wanted to adopt a similar approach, the papers could be reproduced for students as models of the expected genre. Most of the companion papers are themselves brief and (by my standards at least) weakly researched. Similarly, in some cases elaborate sample assignments could be "borrowed," although to make sense of many of the other materials, a reader would need to consult the website with the book in hand, open to the page that refers directly to one of the posted handouts.

There are few less-intriguing or less-informative discourses to read than someone else's daily syllabus, based on their own course texts. The genre is highly context specific, intended for a group of specific students, taking a specific course, from a teacher who is available to explain whatever is unclear. And virtually all syllabuses use code letters for the relevant textbooks and merely give page numbers of material to be read, or sometimes a writer's last name from an anthology. Even many course handouts are meaningless to a reader unfamiliar with their context of use.

Although it would have taken a good deal of extra work, many of the website materials would have become much more valuable if they had been accompanied with explanatory prefaces and/or insertions to adapt the materials to their new rhetorical situation.

Also on the site is an article by editor Zemliansky in which he describes the “traditional” research paper at some length, beginning with a useful quotation from McCrimmon’s famous *Writing with a Purpose* (1950):

In general, undergraduate research papers are of two kinds: *reports and theses*. . . . The writer of a report wishes to find out the facts on his subject and present them in a clear, orderly, and detailed account. The writer of a thesis research paper is studying the facts to draw a conclusion from them; this conclusion becomes the thesis of his essay; and he selects and organizes his material to develop his thesis. (240 in original)

That deadly “traditional” approach may involve having students write encyclopedic re-presentations of materials already available, without any sense of an author behind the regurgitation, although it may also be presented as an argument “proving” a claim of some sort. Given the long tradition of criticism of research-based writing, it isn’t hard to gain a reader’s acceptance of this “straw” version of the “traditional” paper. And Zemliansky’s ethos on this topic is exceptional because his dissertation concerns the history of the college research paper. I was pretty much willing to buy his critique until he remarked that student writers shouldn’t just be “given a research topic, sent off to the library to collect information, and then expected to bring the finished paper to class.” Well, duh!

Zemliansky’s suggested route is to have each student join an online community and gather primary data about what goes on there (our disciplinary infatuation with ethnography pops up in several articles in this collection); then students are to integrate some theoretical perspectives gathered from two readings in the

class anthology, which is entirely devoted to electronic communication. So the approach draws on *two* of our current shibboleths: primary research and cyberspace. Zemliansky acknowledges that this approach can go wrong as well as right, with two examples of each. Frankly, I wish his piece had been included early in the text itself since its critique of the “traditional” paper provides much of the *raison d’etre* for the collection. As I believe most readers would, I got to his essay only after having read the print collection.

(Also a mystery: on the website is a complete Powerpoint presentation from the 2003 NCTE, which proposes having students write the genre of the FAQ for their research.)

Who Are the Potential Tour Guides?

It’s difficult to determine the audience for this collection. If you are disgusted with *your* “traditional” approach to teaching research-based writing but haven’t been able to come up with a reasonable alternative, you might either borrow directly from one of the maps in the collection or use it as a guide to discover a parallel approach. If you are teaching a graduate seminar, you would need to proceed this book with a carefully guided trek along the better mapped traditional paths. Even with that addition, this collection is uneven for a good graduate text.

Why Bother with the Swamp Anyway?

I am no doubt the dinosaur in the misty swamp, but I find it ironic that a good many of the authors in this collection seem not to have done their (secondary) research. When I consult Comppile, Rich Haswell’s terrific online bibliography on composition between 1939 and 1999, I find about 230 sources (mostly articles plus several books and a few dissertations) with the phrase “research paper” in their titles. Many suggest unusual approaches to the project, some of them directly relevant to articles in this collection. And consulting the MLA bibliography since 2000 increases the list. But few of the pieces in *Research*

Writing Revisited include citations indicating the authors realize these issues have been treated before, nor do any authors emphasize that students' search for relevant published materials should itself be thorough. Paul Bryant once likened our profession to a flock of geese, for whom it is a brand-new world every morning. Nowadays, we have strong enough bibliographical control of our published materials that there is no justification for being unaware of prior relevant sources

In less than a week, I begin a new semester, fully aware of how far last semester's courses were from the ideal, but with the cyclic hope and faith that this term I will get it right. I'll be teaching research-based writing in at least my first-year course and probably in *Advanced Writing: Nonfiction* also. Certainly, I won't just release my students to roam the library or the internet and hope they come out successful. I'll try to guide them through a careful sequence of activities. I know that some will get lost along the way. But nothing in this collection of "new" pieces has tempted me to try a different route.

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