

TEACHING THE RESEARCH REPORT IN THE INTERMEDIATE GRADES

PAULINE B. GOUGH

The research report belongs in the writing curriculum, starting in the upper elementary grades. There are several reasons why this is so.

First, the research report is one of the most effective vehicles for teaching the use of transitional sentences, the key to logical, well-organized expository writing. The research report also serves as a vehicle for teaching library skills, content-area reading skills, note-taking skills, standard criteria for judging informational resources, the construction of paragraphs, the composing of thesis sentences, and revision and proof-reading.

I will focus here on organizational and instructional approaches that I have found useful in teaching the research report as one segment of a fifth-grade writing curriculum. My students were assigned to choose their own topics within two broad social studies units, World Cultures and World War II — the second report providing an opportunity for me to reteach and for students to practice again the skills I have listed above. For each report, I required a minimum of three pages, plus a bibliography of at least three resources, one of them a children's trade book. Many youngsters, of course, exceeded these requirements. Here, then, are some classroom-tested tips on how to proceed.

Pauline B. Gough is Managing Editor of *Phi Delta Kappan* and a former fifth-grade teacher at University Elementary School, Bloomington, Indiana.

Library skills. This is the time to teach or review the use of the card catalog and the library shelving system. Your school librarian, if notified well in advance, may be willing to take on these tasks. If most members of our class are old hands at using the library, the teaching of library skills will be informal and individualized.

While talking about the library, I should mention one maxim: Never assign research reports — particularly if children are going to choose topics within a circumscribed area — without first conferring with your school librarian. If ever you've needed an adequate collection of resources covering a wide range of reading levels, now is the time. In fact, if you're thinking of teaching the research report next year, now is the time to talk to your librarian about ordering appropriate materials to bolster the collection. When you actually start teaching the unit, you may find it helpful to put pertinent trade books on reserve, with an option of overnight check-out for youngsters in your class. This keeps the materials accessible for large-group research periods in the library and keeps individual youngsters from monopolizing resources.

A classroom collection from the public library can augment school library resources. A field trip to the public library — where librarians are usually willing to give book talks on resources pertaining to the assigned topic and are often happy to accept students' applications for library cards — is a wise investment of time.

Reading skills. Teach directly the use of a table of contents, an index, chapter headings and subheadings, and the location of standard bibliographic information (i.e., copyright date, publisher, city of publication). Provide youngsters with a model bibliography, showing entries for an encyclopedia, a trade book, a magazine article, and other kinds of resources you expect them to use. Be sure to explain why bibliographies are essential to research reports; children do not readily engage in mindless tasks. Explain, too, why it is important to collect bibliographic information when using a resource: to prevent the bother of backtracking later.

Note-taking skills. Use group exercises to teach this skill directly. For example, duplicate sections from an encyclopedia and ask children, working in groups, to take notes on the important ideas. To avoid plagiarism, students should be instructed to take notes in words or phrases. Terse notes

force youngsters to construct original sentences when the time for writing arrives.

In lieu of the usual index cards for note-taking, ask youngsters in the upper elementary grades to record notes in standard-sized spiral notebooks, each page labeled and reserved for notes on a given topic. Notebooks are harder to misplace than index cards. Clustering notes by topic is imperative, however, to simplify the task of organizing a first draft. For a report on the culture of a given country, for example, a student might arrange his notebook pages according to the country's location, climate, arts and crafts, agriculture, family structure, education, natural resources, industry, religion, special holidays, and language. A general bibliography would appear in the final pages of the notebook.

While students are engaged in research for their papers, class periods spent in the school library are helpful. Circulate in order to spot children who find note-taking difficult and give them extra instruction; you will often discover that their problems stem from trying to use books that are beyond their reading comprehension levels. But all children are a little uncertain when they first try new activities, and the one-to-one demands on your time may be more than you can handle. The wise teacher enlists help during the research stage from retired teachers, college students, upper-class students who choose to serve as classroom aides, peers (if more than one student is working on the same topic), and parents.

Evaluative criteria for information sources. Students will often raise the question, "Is this information current?" Now is a good time to stress the importance of checking the copyright date of a resource — particularly if the topic under study is in a constant state of change. When youngsters notice that information from various resources differs, it's time to talk about authors' credentials. Does the book tell you the author's background? The information he or she used in writing the book? The specialists who read the manuscript before it was published? Can you judge, from such information, which resource is probably the most reliable? When students discover that information from one encyclopedia is pretty much like that from another, it's time to compare the value of encyclopedias and children's trade books as research resources. The teaching of evaluative criteria arises naturally and need not be planned for in advance.

Paragraph construction. By the upper elementary grades, this will almost certainly be review. But teach directly once again the concept of developing one topic per paragraph. And don't neglect to stress indentation as the signal for a new paragraph.

Thesis sentence. This concept is most readily taught to middle-graders if you describe it as a generalization — an argument — that can be supported by the facts that a child has collected. Use plenty of concrete examples. Is “Norway is known as the land of the midnight sun” a good thesis sentence? Why not? (It's a fact, not a generalization.) What about “Mexico is a land of contrasts?” As students turn in their first drafts, encourage the class to evaluate their thesis sentences and, when appropriate, to propose better ones.

Transition sentences. Research reports ordinarily lend themselves to one of two kinds of organization: chronological or topical. The latter is the most difficult to accomplish successfully, but it also enables children to concentrate on writing smooth transitions.

Group work on writing transitional sentences is helpful. For example, duplicate two paragraphs with the transition missing. (Encyclopedias are good sources for such materials.) Have small groups work together to write smooth transitional sentences. Share the results, discussing methods that work, such as:

- starting the second paragraph with a question (“How do we know so much about dinosaurs? Scientists have . . .”);
- using a single word to tie ideas together (*another sport in Italy . . . in addition . . . therefore . . . moreover . . . also*);
- repeating a key word or idea from the previous paragraph (“This warm *climate* allows the farmers to grow many crops . . .”);
- establishing a contrast (“Although the people *work* very hard, they also enjoy many holidays.”).

There is no one right way to create a smooth transition or, for that matter, to solve any other writing problem. But writing should flow, paragraph to paragraph. This skill is difficult to teach because you are really teaching children to think logically. Some children will learn quickly and will consciously use transitions in their expository writing. Others will use them clumsily and sporadically. A few will not even reach the initial point of clumsiness on their first drafts.

Revision. In the past three years, as managing editor of an education journal, I have read an abundance of first drafts that would-be authors have submitted to our office. And I have come to realize that this is a problem we educators have visited on ourselves. We forget that writing is a process — and that an essential part of that process is *re-writing*. We elementary teachers are the guiltiest of the lot. What do we do? We give students a topic on which to write. We tell them to finish their compositions in 15 minutes — or 45, depending on the grade level — and to place their papers on our desks. Then we read those papers and append grades — with or without comments, depending on class size and personal commitment — and, all too often, that's it.

Teachers of writing should function instead as editors, marking spots in a student's first draft where communication fails, where transitions are missing, where reorganization seems necessary, where redundancy can be pruned, where syntax is awkward, where word choice can be improved. Then we must schedule time to talk about these points with each student before he or she begins a second draft. Revision is not superficial concern with mechanics; it is a *clarification of the thinking* that underlies each child's decisions to use certain words, certain sentence structures, a certain overall pattern of organization. Teaching writing effectively takes time. The revision stage is where real writing begins. We do students in the upper elementary grades a disservice when we fail to focus on this essential part of the writing process.

Proof-reading skills. Help children to understand that mechanical errors cause readers to make negative judgments about an author's intelligence or character. Correct spelling and punctuation also make a writer's ideas more readily accessible to a reader. Encourage children to read their own second drafts for errors. Encourage groups of students to read one another's writing for spelling and punctuation problems. After these problems have been corrected, talk over with individual authors the mechanical errors that remain. You may find that Johnny needs a quick review of possessives or that Janie needs more instruction on the use of quotation marks. Skills are most effectively taught in the context of children's own writing. But don't ask for — or expect — perfection in the upper elementary grades.

In addition to the skills I have just discussed, there are other justifications for teaching the research report in the intermediate grades. Because this genre of writing takes independent effort over a considerable period of time, it encourages self-direction. Because students choose their own topics and use an array of resources at varying levels of difficulty, the research report is an effective way to individualize instruction. The research report also fits neatly into the science or social studies curriculum, freeing language arts periods for other kinds of writing aimed at other kinds of audiences.

It should go without saying that children need reasons for writing research reports (or anything else) in order to motivate them to do their best. Pleasing a teacher or earning a good grade is seldom sufficient. Children also need audiences wider than a single teacher. There are many ways to motivate students to care about their writing. At our school, for example, each child displayed his or her research report about another culture at a World Bazaar — an event attended by parents and the entire school, from kindergarteners and custodians to the principal. We also displayed the completed reports in the Language Arts/Science Fair, held each spring. Exhibiting reports at an open-house for parents, in the school library, or on a bulletin board in a central hallway serves equally well to provide a wide audience and to convince children of the value of their writing.

Some teachers of writing scoff at the idea that the research report *has* value — at least, in the writing curriculum. This kind of assignment promotes plagiarism and a “carpentry” approach to writing, such teachers maintain. Far better, they contend, to let youngsters do research by interviewing people, by watching films or filmstrips, by other less formal means. After all, isn’t all writing a “research” report? Such teachers ignore the value of developing in children an ability to synthesize ideas from a variety of printed sources. They ignore, too, the fact that such synthesis can call forth genuine authorship. It is the teacher’s task to see that it does.