

# Preparing Students for the Research Paper

Paul D. Tanner  
Nagoya City University

## Reference Data:

Tanner, P. (2005). Preparing Students for the Research Paper. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Writing a research paper is arguably the most difficult and challenging project that university students undertake. It often strikes students (and sometimes instructors) with fear and trepidation. A research paper is the culmination of the academic work of a student and it involves the expert handling of a variety of separate skills. How can an instructor systematically teach the necessary skills and yet allow for the independence and habits of reflection that students must learn? This paper describes ten important points that should aid the instructor in guiding students through the challenges of a research paper. The ideas are based on the author's experience, and highlight points a writing teacher may overlook when teaching the research paper.

**M**arcus Aurelius describes *research* as “the ability to investigate systematically and truly all that comes under your observation in life” (Brussel, 1988, p. 490). How does one go about teaching this skill? The process of writing a research paper is not purely a linear one, in which the student moves through a succession of orderly steps from thesis to outline to research to writing. Completing a research paper generally includes a number of missteps and wrong turns as well as “happy accidents” (Camp, 1990, p. 460). Although there is a profusion of research paper textbooks available, there is no template for how to successfully teach or how to write a research paper.

Experience has helped this author develop a strategy for teaching the research paper. In twenty years of periodically instructing the research paper this author has gleaned some insights and has discarded what has proved to be unworkable. Discussing with students and colleagues, reading in the field, and conducting student exit interviews and surveys have aided in shaping how this author teaches the research paper.

The process of writing helps students to learn in a number of distinct ways. One, writing reinforces structures and vocabulary students have been learning. Two, when students write they have an opportunity to be adventurous and take risks with the language. Three, when students write, they necessarily become very involved in the language. This reinforces learning. In addition, writers often discover something new to write or a new way of expressing their idea (Raimes, 1993). Finally, writing also forces a writer to think.

Writing a research paper provides students with the opportunity to write a large-scale paper utilizing critical thinking skills. These skills can be transferred to other endeavors: students must select, evaluate, and analyze facts, organize and consolidate them into an overall framework to create a “new angle of vision” (Markman *et al* 1994, p. 1). Defining a question, organizing, interpreting information and answering the question are abilities that figure in almost any kind of professional or personal success (Gaston and Smith, 1988). Even if students never write another research paper, they have developed some concrete learning skills, become an expert on a topic, and have achieved the satisfaction of completing a challenging task.

This paper does not attempt to address all the steps necessary to teach a research paper. The purpose is to remind the instructor of some important, but sometimes overlooked or understressed ideas. Reviewing these points can help prevent an instructor from becoming paralyzed by the challenging task of organizing instruction concerning the research paper.

## Ten Key Points to Remember

### **1. Develop fundamental writing skills first.**

Rhetorical styles such as compare and contrast, persuasive, process description, and summaries should be mastered before taking on the research paper. Teaching these styles in isolation should help students to recognize where these styles and appropriate grammatical structures should fit into the research paper. In a year-long course, this author spends the first semester on the fundamentals of essay writing.

Students become familiar with brainstorming techniques through timed writing (see Tanner, 1997), complete weekly assignments of about 500 words, and rewrite some of the more complex essays.

### **2. Explain clearly what academic writing is and how it differs from other genres and rhetorical styles.**

Newfields (2003) explains seven differences between academic writing and other genres. Academic writing shows a clear distinction between fact and fiction. It has a sense of balance, and contrasting views should be presented. Academic writing contains a respect for diverse views and avoids extreme praise and disparaging or emotional criticism. Academic writing is precisely organized, is logical and consistent, and has a tight focus. Finally, academic writing contains corroborating support, since the views of more than one author must be represented. Knowing this in advance will help students clarify their writing and purpose. Research papers are examples of academic writing. This is a discipline that forces the writer to think, investigate, and re-think ideas and write them in a highly disciplined manner.

### **3. Stress the need for formal, unemotional language (and absence of contractions and references to you and usually I).**

Students often write casually and emotionally, making personal judgments without clarification. They need to write formally and give evidence for their judgments and conclusions. Words such as *wonderful*, *incredible*, *awful*, and *disgusting* have strong emotional tones (Taylor and

Kluge, 1997), and may promote unsupported statements. The instructor should prepare specific examples to illustrate appropriate word use. *For example* and *for instance* are more appropriate than *etc.* or *and so on*. Other examples include *furthermore* or *in addition* rather than *besides*, and *advantage* rather than *good point* (Taylor and Kluge).

One exercise this author uses to contrast emotional with unemotional language is have students read Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” It is a brilliant, but very emotional appeal for racial equality. Students write a summary of the letter, or re-write the letter without using any emotional language. (see appendix)

#### 4. Allow students to choose their topic.

Allowing students to choose a topic that interests them will hopefully keep them motivated for the long period of time they have to work with one subject. Along with this, the teacher should stress that students are or will become experts in their chosen topic. This is useful for building confidence and helping students give stronger opinions and arguments. However, the instructor needs to ensure that students don’t choose vague, overly simple, or clichéd topics. In addition, students need to offer an original contribution to the field. Even if a student is merely summarizing the various views in a specific field, the organization and the student’s conclusion make it unique.

#### 5. Deal with plagiarism before the writing.

Often students don’t understand what plagiarism is. They should be taught that it is “stealing a ride on someone else’s train of thought,” as Russell Curran so aptly put it (Brussel,

1988, p. 490). In addition, the instructor should stress that students must be able to summarize in their own words and understand what *paraphrase* means. To illustrate the idea of telling a story in their own words, this author orally read a short story, such as Guy deMaupassant’s *The Necklace*, instructing the students to take notes. Upon completion, they can ask questions, or discuss the story with their classmates. Their assignment is to tell the story in their own words.

Purdue University’s On-Line Writing Lab (OWL) has an excellent section on plagiarism, including clear explanations of when to document sources and when it is not necessary. Also included is a section on ways of “making sure you are safe.” Plagiarism is often overlooked or underplayed in Japanese language papers. There are some contradictions in research paper writing that teachers and students should be aware of: students should show they have done research, yet write something new and original. They must use experts and authorities, but must improve upon or disagree with experts and authorities. Students should give credit where credit is due, yet make their own significant contribution. (Avoiding Plagiarism, n.d.). Ensuring that students understand what plagiarism is, and knowing how to prevent it *before* beginning the research paper may prevent some heartbreak at a later stage.

#### 6. Students should not start writing without at least five valid sources.

This serves two purposes: first, students have to find out if there is sufficient information available for them to write on the topic. Secondly, students can’t formulate an argument or opinion without background reading in their area of interest.

Instructors should not require immediate writing at this searching stage. Using additional sources will show that the writer has done enough research to find a variety of viewpoints on his or her chosen topic. William Zinsser recommends that a writer “Always start with too much material. Then give your readers just enough” (Zinsser, 1994, p. 165).

### **7. Ultimate responsibility falls on the students.**

Students need to understand that their writing “belongs” to them, and they are responsible for deciding what to say and how to say it. Both Bolker (1998) and Reid (1994, 1995) stress this point. Students need to “authentically engage in choice making and problem solving” in order to become independent writers capable of making effective choices in their future writing (Reid, 1994, p. 289). Student responsibility includes editing and rereading their writing as a *reader*, not the writer of the text. Reid warns of students shifting the onus to the teacher: “Experience has taught me that the more time I spend with student drafts, the less time students spend on them; that is, once students see how interested I am in making suggestions to improve their drafts, they do their best to transfer all responsibility to me” (Reid, 1995, p. 165). Heeding this advice can save the instructor unnecessary work and aid the students in thinking for themselves and acting autonomously.

### **8. Don't get bogged down in minutia.**

Writing a research paper requires a significant amount of attention to small details. In particular, citing sources within the text and writing a reference page require meticulous

following of a prescribed format. An instructor should not spend too much time explaining, for example, every possible variation of how to cite a source. This instructor has found that outlining the basic concepts of citing sources and writing a reference section early in the course works best. *The MLA Handbook* or *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) are excellent references for the details of a research paper, but are not suitable for teaching the process of how to write a research paper. Instructors should not try to teach these tomes. Alternatively, many reference guides are available on-line and are easy to access and use. One useful site is the *Guide to Grammar and Writing*, which includes guides for many citation styles, including MLA, APA, Chicago, and CBE.

The teacher should be prepared to deal with individual student problems as they occur. A sample paper or copies of previous students' papers can help answer unforeseen questions in addition to providing inspiration and motivation. This author prints a collection of some of each year's research papers. A student must qualify by writing a satisfactory paper and submitting it on time.

### **9. Clarify the meaning and basic style of citations and the reference page.**

These concepts are essential to the research paper and are difficult intellections for the unfamiliar. An instructor should teach the *concepts*, not every rule and exception. A research paper uses material from many sources, and a student needs to explain where that material came from, as it is used in the paper (citations) and more completely at the end of the paper in the reference section.

To develop further understanding of the reference section, this author gives students a sample reference page full of errors. The papers are corrected in class, and for homework, students type a corrected version. Students should realize that there is a format to follow for every type of source available. They should also understand how to use their reference works to look up the proper format, and the instructor should remember the aforementioned point number eight.

### **10. Rewriting and being flexible are crucial to the research paper.**

Writing is a process and not a product. Students need to understand this. William G. Perry Jr. clarifies the difference between the first draft and the final paper: “First you make a mess, then you clean it up” (quoted in Bolker 1998, p. 34). Students should understand that they will alter their ideas, shift focus, and not use all the words they have written. Students should think of their first draft or original outline as a sketch rather than a painting. Zinsser believes that rewriting is the essence of writing well and warns against developing an “emotional equity” to the first draft so that “we can’t believe it wasn’t born perfect” (Zinsser, p. 187). A writer must find new angles, add or drop research and reconsider the structure of the paper. This is to be expected and students should be prepared for it. Before frustration sets in, it may be worth alerting students to the fact that Hemingway rewrote the last sentence of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times (Bolker, p. 122).

## **Conclusion**

Completing a research paper provides a tremendous sense of accomplishment and achievement, both for students and the instructor, in addition to a collective sigh of relief. Quite possibly this endeavor represents the pinnacle of a student’s academic career. Paulo Friere (1972) states that “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry” (p. 58). Substituting “the research paper” for “knowledge” makes for a good summary of what successfully writing a research paper entails.

## **References**

- American Psychological Association. (2003). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association, fifth edition*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bolker, J. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Brussel, E. (1988). *Webster’s new world dictionary of quotable definitions*, second edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Camp, W. (1990). *Camp’s unfamiliar quotations from 2000 BC to the present*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Friere, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.



- Gaston, T.E. and Smith, B.H. (1988). *The research paper: A common-sense approach*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Gibaldi, J. (1999). *MLA handbook for writers of research papers, fifth edition*. New York: the Modern Language Association of America.
- Guide to Grammar and Writing*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 17, 2004 from <http://webster.comnet.edu/grammar/>
- Markman, R.H., Markman, P.T., and Waddell, M.L. (1994). *10 Steps to writing the reseach paper*: Hauppauge, New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.
- Newfields, T. (2003). Helping Asian students acquire academic writing skills. *Journal of Nanzan Junior College*, 30, 99-120.
- Panman, S. and Panman R. (1998). *The active reader for writers*. New Paltz, New York: Active Learning Corporation. Letter from a Birmingham jail by Martin Luther King, Jr., pp 227-228.
- Purdue University Online Writing Lab. (n.d.). *Avoiding plagiarism*. Retrieved December 29, 2003 from [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r\\_plagiar.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_plagiar.html)
- Raimes, A. (1983). *Techniques in teaching writing*. Oxford University Press.
- Reid, J. (1994). Responding to ESL student texts: the myths of appropriation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28 (2), 273-292.
- Reid, J. (1995) Comments on Joy Reid's "Responding to ESL students' texts: the myths of appropriation": the author responds. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29 (1), 163-166.
- Rines, D. (1995). Seven deadly sins of student research. *Academia: Literature and Language*, 59, 229-246
- Tanner, P. (1997). Timed writing in writing class. *Nanzan LT Briefs* 10, 14.
- Taylor, M. and Kluge, D. (1997). *Writing Research Papers*. Nagoya, Japan: self-published.
- Zinsser, W. (1994). *On writing well*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.

### Appendix: Letter from a Birmingham Jail (King, quoted in Panman, 1998).

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and Godgiven rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policeman curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue is twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of

inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger,” your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and your wife and mother are never given the respected title of “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”— then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.