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The Final Research Paper: Practical Steps for Students as They Generate Ideas, Conduct Research, and Produce Publishable Work

by Heather J. Sharkey

“When you submit your final research paper at the end of the semester,” I tell students in my seminars, “I’ll give you a grade, but you won’t be finished unless you want to be. You can continue to work on your project independently, apply for a research grant to extend what you’ve already done, or submit a revised version for publication.” With this, I hold up copies of journals (Penn campus journals for undergraduates, professional journals for graduate students) that feature revised versions of essays that students submitted in previous semesters. Students look surprised to hear these words. By the end of the semester, however, many are expressing enthusiasm about the prospect of not only producing knowledge, but possibly disseminating it, too.

I start to talk students through the research-and-writing process from the first week of the semester, stressing similar points for freshmen as for PhD students. My goal is to impart skills and to help them feel the sense of exhilaration that comes from pursuing a substantial and engaging investigation—ideally one that raises as many questions as it answers.

In the third week of class I assign a recent book—something cutting-edge, accessible, and sure to stimulate classroom debate—and ask students to review it in about 700 words. I show examples of book reviews in professional journals that are of comparable length. This assignment is a test run for the final research paper: it gives students practice in distilling ideas and developing clarity in writing. The word limit forces them to be pithy. I cite the remark (often misattributed to Mark Twain) that the French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal (1623-62), once made to a friend: “I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time.” The message here is that essays benefit from drafting followed by revision and pruning.

Halfway through the semester, I distribute guidelines for choosing a final paper topic and initiating research. There are three starting rules. First, “Choose a topic that you will enjoy pursuing.” Life is too short to waste on boring stuff. Second, understand that any topic is valid—even, say, the cultural history of toenail decoration—as long as the research is rigorous. Third, determine feasibility. “You may have what seems like a great idea,” my guidelines advise, “but can you find suitable sources? Be prepared to revise or change your topic in light of practical source-related constraints.” With this, I toss out ideas and encourage students to brainstorm. Then comes their turn to develop a topic and submit a research proposal consisting of a one-page abstract (describing the topic and advancing a preliminary argument), and a one-page bibliography.

The next step is troubleshooting. One week after students submit proposals, I give feedback to help them avoid three common pitfalls. The first pitfall is choosing a topic that is too big or vague to sustain innovative research within a limited timeframe and page-length (e.g., “The Six-Day Arab-Israeli War of 1967”). The task is then to winnow the topic down to something manageable and interesting, while perhaps devising a provocative preliminary title (e.g., “The United Nations Relief and Works Agency [UNRWA]: An Organization of Palestinian Advocacy?”). The second, more common, pitfall is that students fail to advance an argument or have trouble articulating one. The third is that students are unable to muster enthusiasm for a topic, either because it sounds important but fails to fire their imagination (in which case they should seek a new topic), or because they need help to talk through ideas. Short (15- or 20-minute) face-to-face meetings, during office hours, are critical at this juncture.

Then the serious research begins. Emphasizing to students that their final grade on the research papers will evaluate not only the quality of their writing and analysis, but also the caliber of their sources, I try to help them hone their library skills. In class, we discuss how to frame more effective searches in Penn’s main library catalogue (Franklin), how to navigate important databases (e.g., WorldCat, EBSCO Magafile), and how to seek out and use sources creatively (e.g., conducting interviews for oral history; using films; perhaps consulting archives.) We discuss modes of proper citation in footnotes and bibliographies. Sometimes we meet for a collective training session with librarians; sometimes students schedule one-on-one meetings with one of Penn’s subject-specialist librarians.

Many students find the prospect of writing a research paper intimidating, and express the fear that they will not have enough to say. Here I bring out Evivaert Zerubavel’s The Clockwork Muse (1999) and Paul J. Sylvia’s How to Write a Lot (2007). Both works encourage writers to establish a routine, doing a bit each day (no binge-writing!), and to eliminate distractions (e.g., by turning off telephone and internet). I add some advice of my own: Keep an “idea file” while reading, and try the strategy of stream-of-consciousness “free-writing” if writing stalls. Give the paper a main title, and plot out sub-titled sections. From there, write one section at a time (since thinking about the whole paper can be scary). A typical research paper, I tell them, contains five sections: the first introduces; the second provides necessary background information; the third and fourth develop the content and argumentation; and the fifth concludes.

Two weeks before classes end, students submit draft introductions. These must present the topic, advance an argument, and provide a roadmap explaining what the paper will cover. Within a week, I send each student feedback and schedule meetings with those who are struggling. I encourage students to push forward with writing and to revise as they proceed.

We devote the last two weeks of class to oral presentations. Each student has ten to fifteen minutes to present his or her research project, and five to field questions or to solicit suggestions. These are informal (no Power Point!), I want students to look their peers in the eye and speak as colleagues. These oral presentations build esprit de corps in the classroom and provide a group learning experience. Crucially, too, they help students to talk through their ideas as their papers near completion.

Students who put considerable effort into their papers are always eager to receive feedback. Therefore, after reading each paper, and once grades are submitted, I send each a message noting the parts that I found most compelling, and suggesting ways to develop or clarify further. I encourage authors of the strongest papers to submit their work to particular journals or conference venues, or to apply for grants or fellowships. Since writing a research paper becomes, for many students, an act of self-discovery, in which they identify interests or talents that they never knew they had, I often find myself at this stage also suggesting classes, graduate programs, or even careers that they might want to consider in the future.

Guiding students in this way requires considerable time and effort, but the results are worth it. Students emerge from the semester energized, fulfilled, and wanting to do more, and their zest for learning is infectious.

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