

# THE RESEARCH PAPER AS STYLISTIC EXERCISE

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There is a major theoretical and pedagogical consequence of recognizing that style is central to composition; namely, all the writing done by student writers in composition courses must be re-conceptualized as some form of stylistic exercise. By “stylistic exercise,” I mean an activity that allows a student to explore the myriad of rhetorical options that style offers. This exploration is typically accomplished through exposure to a new writing genre, with the accompanying expectation that students will acquire increased skill and fluency within that genre, as well as genres that they have yet to encounter.

One of the oldest common stylistic exercises in American colleges and high schools is the so-called “research paper,” which has been widely assigned in some form since the 1920s. Direct descendants of the assignment continue to appear on American college syllabi nationwide, despite numerous criticisms over the last seventy years over its form and even the need for such an assignment. Most versions of this creature do not exist outside the composition classroom, for example, in direct conflict with their professed purpose of teaching students how to do “research.” The length requirements, too, can be arbitrary and counter-productive. The difficulty the assignment presents for students is considerable, perhaps even unfair.

But I am not writing here to bury the research paper. Rather, I think the assignment—or, rather, the *idea* of the assignment as much as any particular execution—is an ideal candidate for demonstrating the pervasiveness of the claims of this collection.

At every step of its nearly hundred-year career as a secondary and college-level pedagogical tool, the “research paper” has taught a certain kind of writing that is difficult and laborious enough to persuade countless students to have someone else write it for them. It tends to represent one style—the “right” or “correct” style for performing “research.” And in that form, it has guided many a student to better writing.

But there is another way to conceptualize it, and that is as a door to a multitude of other demanding styles. This approach, of course, requires that the research paper exist not only in the mind of the student, but in the mind

of the instructor, as an exploration of style, even as it seemingly hews to one specific path.

To explain what I mean by this claim—namely, that the research paper can be profitably viewed as a stylistic exercise that leads to increased control over many styles, rather than just an artificial “research” style—I offer three origin stories for the research paper in American education. These three stories agree with each other more than they disagree, but the portraits are sufficiently different to give them voice individually as accounts of the assignment’s instructional genesis. Together, these three stories form a historical pathway toward a style-based way of reconceptualizing the assignment.

## ORIGINS

One origin story is told in Robert Connors’s *Composition-Rhetoric*, revised from an earlier appearance in his 1987 “Personal Writing Assignments” article. Connors holds the genre arose in composition around 1920 out of three needs: 1) instructors wanting to “transcend the personal writing” paradigm that was prevalent, 2) the desire for a corrective response to the increasing availability of secondary and tertiary source materials, namely a packaged, gentrified solution to increasing concerns over intellectual property, and 3) a hunger for more formalized, efficient instruction. Furthermore, Connors concludes that the assignment teaches “the research attitude,” synonymous with “the modern attitude,” where the rhetor is a “medium, not an originator”—the student collectively merges with the secondary research rather than create new knowledge (1997, pp. 321-323).

In this first tale, the research paper is an ironic and flawed entity that meets institutional needs rather than student ones; any student benefits are secondary precipitate. The assignment was not wielded without good intent, or completely ineffectual, but it failed on an epistemic front and as part of the larger current-traditional pedagogy.

A second origin story is told in David Russell’s *Writing the Academic Disciplines*. Russell holds that the genre is a mixture of the research ideal of German universities and the British oral thesis tradition (2002, pp. 78-79). “Course theses” appeared, beyond the usual shorter themes, in the 1860s, evolved into “graduating theses” by the 1880s, and eventually became class-specific papers simultaneously with the introduction of German-style seminars. This rapidly forming tradition, originally intended to model scholarly activity to students and improve writing skills, migrated to lower-level courses and secondary schools, losing much of its scholarly idealism on the way. In the

1910s, the assignment “begins to harden into its familiar form” as an empty exercise in formality (Russell, 2002, pp. 83-88). Suffused through Russell’s account is the social function of the assignment. To scholarly idealists, it was an apprenticeship lesson for bright students in conjunction with a seminar. To more “egalitarian” forces, it functioned as a doorway to college success for all students, even in secondary settings, which quickly led to “research papers” being taught in junior high schools (Russell, 2002, p. 86).

In this second tale, the research paper is an emancipating entity that did not always succeed in its promise, decaying rapidly as it drifted down to the secondary level. The portrait is more positive than the one offered by Connors, but it, too, is a story of failure.

The third origin story is mine, and a bit longer. It is a story of a central institutional debate about student teaching that recurs every decade or so in journal or book form, with the sides taking on new avatars and new sites of battle, and with the concept of the research paper serving as one of the favorite battlegrounds. The military metaphor is not accidental, as World War II seems to have had a significant hand in its development.

Narrowing down the time periods of its presence is crucial to understanding that development. The research paper was “established custom” (Angus, 1948, p. 191) in 1948, with a division between the “high school term paper” and the college “research paper” present in 1943 (Arms, 1943, p. 24) that goes back at least to 1936, with the secondary version preparing for the latter version (Bader, 1936, p. 667). Taylor’s 1929 *A National Survey of Conditions in Freshman English* (Brereton, 1995, pp. 545-562), reviewed in *The English Journal* in 1930 by Stith Thompson, does not give any details on assignments; Thompson, though, refers to it in passing as “the project” at his institution, where it concerns “the proper handling of bibliography, notes, and planning in the large” (Thompson, 1930, p. 555).

However, Ralph Henry’s 1928 survey of twenty-seven American colleges reveals, in response to a question about the length of assignments, that themes were still the dominant assignment, with an average of one per week assigned, with “longer themes assigned ‘occasionally’”:

These longer themes are from 1,500 to 2,500 words in length and fall due “once a month,” “three per semester,” or in a larger number of institutions, “one each semester.” ... In general the program agreed upon by the large majority is as follows: a theme of about 300-500 words (three or four pages) each week, with one long paper of 1,500-2,500 words due each semester. (Dr. Shiperd reports an average assignment of

1.7 themes per week, an average length of 4+ pages, and an average of two longer themes per semester. (1928, p. 306)

The “longer theme” of 1928 would then be, by the modern 300-word page, a 5-8 page paper. “Long theme” seems to be the preferred term in this period; high school students speak poorly of such a “long theme” in a 1913 survey (Hatfield, 1913, p. 318). It is unclear, however, when it became a freshman college requirement across the board, as opposed to something reserved for junior or senior level classes, as it seems to be in an elective class in 1902 (Hart, 1902, p. 370) and in a 10,000 word form in 1916 (Harris, 1916, p. 502). It is also unclear when it became “long”—the high school “long theme” of 1915 is only 750 words (Rankin, 1915, p. 196). In 1922, Fred Newton Scott complained (at length) about pointing out errors in themes in the *English Journal* (Scott, 1922, p. 463), but made no mention of long themes.

While the early 1920s seems a reasonable time frame for it to be a widespread requirement from college freshmen, the assignment does not become a focus of recorded debate until the 1940s. Angell Matthewson’s 1941 “Long Compositions Based on Research” and Annette Cummings’ 1950 “An Open Letter to Teachers of English,” could be considered at first to be odd choices to represent poles of conflict; one is a high school teacher just before WWII; the other is a junior college teacher after the war, nine years later. But their opinions are antithetical products of the earlier forces described by Connors and Russell, as well as the world war that happened between the two essays.

Matthewson, in 1941, held that senior high school students of the time needed to write at least one long paper (1,500 to 3,000 words) involving research. His reasoning was that longer rather than shorter assignments tended to challenge and motivate students to do more, and prepared them better for college work, which would involve similar assignments.

Not long afterward, the educational world shifted with the war. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, an editorial in the January 1942 *English Journal* opined it was the job of teachers of English to build war morale and support social service among students (Hatfield & De Boer, 1942, pp. 67-68). The NCTE quickly followed in February with a statement on “The Role of the English Teacher in Wartime,” championing American values and ideals while rejecting the xenophobia and excessive patriotism that had appeared during the Great War. It includes the following injunction:

- e) As teachers of English, we can develop those skills essential to participation in democratic life (1) through classroom practice in grouping thinking and decision, (2) through

teaching the techniques of public and panel discussion, and (3) through emphasis upon the need for precision and honesty in the use of language in reading and reporting and in the expression of ideas in speech and writing. (NCTE, 1942, p. 88)

These idealistic wartime NCTE standards hang over the thoughtful review of faculty and student views of the college “term paper” in the *Journal of Higher Education* in June of the same year. The assignment is taught unevenly at the lower level and often overburdens students across courses, but when carefully supervised and possibly saved for junior and senior level classes, it is a “worthwhile” assignment (Rivlin, 1942, p. 342). It would seem, then, that the research paper met patriotic muster in the 1940s; Angus’ aforementioned description of it as “established custom” becomes even more ironclad.<sup>1</sup>

“An Open Letter to Teachers of English,” however, appears in 1950, five years after the war is over, from a junior college in Michigan, after the G.I. Bill of 1944; over a third of junior college students are veterans. Cummings holds that research papers in undergraduate classes are a hypocritical waste of time. Most students, she states, cannot handle logical thinking, and therefore the research paper is lost on them; the assignment is an artifact of colleges gunning for more graduate students, and high schools gunning for more college enrollees. She would prefer assignments based on “experience and observation” for teaching logic (1950, p. 39).

Cummings’ critique is notable in that she critiques the assignment as an assignment, rather than how it is taught. Earlier criticism focuses on pedagogical cautions such as plagiarism and padding (Woods, 1933, pp. 87-89) or a lack of “scientific” standards (Ahl, 1931, p. 17). The assignment itself is spared and its value, when taught well, is championed. Arms, in 1943, for example, is typical; he has major issues with topic selection, but thinks the assignment is “the real center of freshmen English in that, like little else in much college work, it gives an opportunity to set up a problem and find a solution” (Arms, 1943, p. 25).

The concept of the research paper becomes, thus, a focus point for professional opinions of the transforming student body and the nature of ideal “college work.” If, as Matthewson, you believe students tend to rise to a structured challenge presented by an enthusiastic and organized instructor, and it meets the moral and political demands of the age, it’s the best stylistic exercise since sliced bread. If, however, as Cummings, you believe that many, if not most, students in your classroom are not suited for logical thinking by intelligence or temperament, the research paper tends to only be an exercise in futility for both student and instructor.

Notably, despite the distance between their opinions, both Matthewson and Cummings largely pass over the content of the assignment. Cummings is worried about command of “logic,” and Matthewson is worried about “argument”—both of which must be displayed within the genre. These are critical concerns about any writing. But looking back to the assignment’s early origins and accounts of its teaching, the assignment is all about meeting genre expectations—documented secondary sources, library protocols, formatting, scientific method, appropriate topic selection (probably the most pressing concern of instructors up until Cummings)—argumentation and logic are necessary, of course, for these tasks, but not as emphasized.

The remainder of my tale of the assignment is cyclic. The assignment changed under the influence of abolitionist thought, but it did not go away. In 1961, 83% of all colleges required a research paper in the freshman composition program (Manning, 1961). In 1982, when Richard Larson attacked the very concept of the assignment in *College English*, it was 84% (Ford & Perry, 1982, p. 827). Larson’s attack is different from that of Cummings; he too sees the assignment as hypocritical, but not because it is beyond the students. Rather, the concept of the assignment—as much as he is willing to allow its existence<sup>2</sup>—tends to produce a kind of “non-writing” that cannot but fail to teach research. Furthermore, the job of teaching the writing styles of other disciplines should not fall to English (Ford & Perry, 1982, p. 816). Concerns about writing across the curriculum aside, Larson’s is still a critique kin to those seen before the 1940s, which concerned themselves with the value of the assignment to teaching research.

These three stories suggest something very interesting about our discipline—namely, one of its central, traditional assignments is a murky, multi-definitional entity that isn’t even universally agreed upon as pedagogically useful, even though four-fifths of programs use it in some form. The question, then, is not so much about the assignment, but what model of writing is preferred; are we to teach argument and logic, with the rest trappings, or are we to focus on genre demands and research methods, in which case argument and logic will come? Is there another way? The format of the traditional research paper offers a clue; namely, it forms a genre that is plastic and generic enough to be molded into other styles.

## **BENEFITS OF THE “GENERIC” STYLE**

The generic research paper simultaneously displays all the weaknesses of a rhetoric reduced to ornament, and all the strengths of a rhetoric grounded in

genre. It can be an empty and frustrating exercise in formalism, and it can be an empowering stepping-stone that leads to linguistic flexibility, which in turn allows the absorption and mastery of a multitude of other genres. It is the latter way of thinking—the stepping-stone model—that I want to describe here, but that will require dissecting the prevailing versions discussed thus far. One problem rests in the word “research,” and the other in the word “paper.”

In composition studies, “research” is generally talked about either as a skill (something you do) or as a genre (how a skill is used in a particular locale). We can talk about writing skill in general, a sort of under-writing that changes for the occasion, or writing skill in the context of a certain field or occasion, say psychology. The generic research paper is neither quite an English literature analysis, nor a publishable psychology journal article; its method of inquiry is not precisely the same as either and would be rejected by peers in both, at least until it bent to the will of genre. In its final form, with a research method, topic selection, and citational demands, without particular disciplinary ties, it is a sectioned, preliminary, sketchy shadow of a “real” writing genre that is socially connected. This is the point from which Larson started his critique, and where I depart.

I depart from Larson because there are benefits to socially isolated writing. The WAC job that the paper often takes on, rightly or not, demands a generic approach, even if that generic feel coming from picking a topic or theme for the entire course and deriving writing principles from that topic. Either way, an isolated paper is a safe space in which to experiment with stylistic conventions, at least if it is taught in the light of revision. More time can be spent working on generic argumentative moves. An audience beyond the instructor could be provided, as I can do in professional writing courses, to add the social aspect, but this puts a lie to the authority of the instructor, as well as the fact that there is a social aspect to the paper already—the university as a whole, and their fellow students.

The word “paper,” implying a fixed and formal product, also has problems; this is why I favor “project,” like Thompson did in 1930. For students to see the research paper as a stylistic exercise, it must be equated with revision. Projects are ongoing works-in-progress; papers are physical entities. If students can screw up citations without fear and see them as the parenthetical helpers for the reader that they are, then they are in the stylistic mindset. If they see citations as hurdles they must clear before arguing, then they are in a research mindset. The former is vastly preferable for teaching writing.

The project (leave “research” and “paper” behind for now) must be eased up to carefully rather than demanded all at once; breaking into individual sections or drafts reinforces its constructed, temporary nature. Above all, though, it

must be constantly portrayed as preliminary practice, rather than a certificate of achievement that says the writer now knows how to conduct “research.” Doctoral degrees perform that role well enough. A spirit of inquiry, though, can be instilled without going that far. There is no right way to write the project, any more than there is a right way to write a memo; an “A” on a project should not mean mastery of research. It must should, rather, a mastery of a style, a way of arguing.

All college freshmen need is the simple confidence that when they encounter new writing genres—and they will—that they have a basic stylistic template to draw from through experience with a project of inquiry that has given them a model for how knowledge is constructed. Thinking about the research paper in terms of stylistic play drains persuasive power from its sideshow horror elements of length and complexity and focuses, rather, on how language affects change. It is when they move to the sophomore level without a stylistic template for large documents, however, that ethical issues appear.

## LENGTH AND ETHICS

A March 2011 op-ed in the New York Times called “Teaching to the Text Message,” by Andy Selsberg, an adjunct professor at John Jay College, begins with the following three sentences:

I’ve been teaching college freshmen to write the five-paragraph essay and its bully of a cousin, the research paper, for years. But these forms invite font-size manipulation, plagiarism and clichés. We need to set our sights not lower, but shorter. (2011)

The rest of the piece, which is about 470 words, is a case for assigning smaller writing assignments to college freshmen—some two lines long, some the length of YouTube video comments or Amazon book reviews, topping off at the length of a cover letter or a networking email. Selsberg does not advocate eliminating longer writing projects from English courses, but he would prefer to set them aside for the second semester or later. Doing what he calls “rewarding concision first,” he suggests, “will encourage students to be economical and inventive with language,” as this is more, “in tune with most students’ daily chatter, as well as the world’s conversation.”

I do not like bullies, but I do not think the research paper is a bully. On the contrary, I think the research paper, or, rather, the stylistic project I have described thus far, is a close friend—a sometimes boorish, anal-retentive, nerdy,



and verbose close friend, but a friend nevertheless, and sometimes a quickly neglected friend when new ideas for teaching writing come along.

Namely, it is a friend that serves a special and central ethical function in the teaching of writing at the college level. For if, as scholars and teachers, we believe that well-constructed arguments require evidence, and not just evidence, but warranted evidence—if we believe that the intellectual work of others must not only be referenced to make informed arguments, but cited for easy reference—and if we believe that stylistic conventions of academic discourse must be respected (if not followed lockstep) in order to facilitate communication and learning, then it follows, necessarily, that when we teach college students how to write, we must teach and demonstrate to them the best practices for presenting complex arguments that we have available. In this way, the “learning research” goal merges with the “better writing” goal for the assignment.

This necessitates an assigned paper of sufficient length that has the metaphorical and literal breathing room to develop complex, warranted arguments that require parenthetical citation, and exhibit the stylistic forms common to what we ourselves recognize as learned discourse. Break it up into smaller assignments first if you would, but eventually, it must be performed in total to satisfy the ethical charge that I have just outlined.

My concern with Selsberg’s position, even as I sympathize with it and see how it responds obliquely to the research paper tradition, is that our mission as university and college instructors cannot be primarily to teach students how to replicate and value soundbite discourse, web discourse, twitter discourse—pick whatever new medium you prefer, including ones yet to emerge. We must understand these emerging forms, yes. Be fluent with their conventions, certainly. Critique and analyze them, definitely. But we should not fall prey to fetishizing new mediums, no matter how current or hip or tantalizingly brief they are. We have an ethical charge to expose students to the existence of complex and nuanced argumentation that requires extended forms to develop ideas. Furthermore, we have a charge to show them how to construct these structures. We can value concision while knowing quite well that argumentation cannot always be reduced to, say, 470 words, or 140 characters.

The research paper is difficult work for both students and instructors. It is so difficult to grade that many professors eschew it for smaller assignments. It is so difficult to write that students see even modest page requirements as torture. The research paper is one of the reasons that the composition course is sometimes dryly called the course taken by students who do not want to take it and taught by teachers who do not want to teach it. The assignment is ultimately frightening for many students because it confronts one of our greatest fears as social humans, which is that we have nothing to worth to say of any *length*

on a topic. This is a fear so frightening that students will try to circumvent it through plagiarism and padding without close supervision. Getting past that fear is worth it, though, and this point cannot be stressed enough. Once a student has the genre in hand, they have something far better than the skill that Selsberg favors, “to express one key detail succinctly and eloquently”—and that something is the form of good questions, which returns to the praise of Arms in 1943: the assignment, when taught well, shows how to state a problem and seek a solution, in that order.

Eloquence and succinctness are wonderful qualities. But they will not enable a student to provide a nuanced answer that requires more than a few sentences to explain. In order to write an extended argument, one must read a great deal, understand what one has read, reflect on that reading through analysis, and then reconsider all that has been done. All academics know this task can’t be done “succinctly,” let alone quickly, if quality is desired. Even the books written by academics for general lay audiences, rather than for other academics, are still books—they don’t become 470-word articles through a skillful application of eloquence and succinctness. Succinctness demands a harsh price in the form of context and complexity, and eloquence can be a distracting lacquer.

I am not arguing against the value of style here—on the contrary. Style and content are the same thing. The form of the discourse empowers its content, which is why it is extremely hard to say anything very meaningful in a five-paragraph essay, a form that is almost entirely consumed by its maddening redundancy. Constraints like those of the sonnet can empower writers, of course, but the research paper has its empowering constraints, too. An insistence on a thesis, on a specific question of interest, on warranted evidence for claims, on supporting citations, on accurate (not necessarily succinct) summary and synthesis—all these add power. Once a student knows how these work—a state only possible by fitting them together themselves—they become old friends. Cranky, nerdy friends, but friends nonetheless—and ethical friends, too.

I do not want to make a straw man out of Selsberg because as I mentioned before, he does not want to get rid of research papers. But I have seen college curriculums that have done so in the name of meeting students where they are—a noble and practical idea—and yet the very point of meeting students where they are is to get them closer to where the instructor is, not to pull them up about halfway and then let them go. If an undergraduate student cannot write a developed, thesis-driven argument of ten pages or more by the time they graduate, the university that granted their degree has done them a disservice in a myriad of ways. I could also argue the same if they cannot do so by the beginning of their sophomore year.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is no reason the assignment has to be called a “research paper” to serve a sound pedagogical purpose. I have assigned plenty of rhetorical analysis papers, textual analysis papers, analytical reports, reader-response papers, proposals, exploratory papers, compare-contrast papers, feasibility reports, linguistic analyses, articles, you name it—but I cannot recall ever telling an undergraduate or graduate class that they needed to write a “research paper,” save casually or absentmindedly. All of that writing that I have assigned requires some kind of specialized method of inquiry, so I have always thought most of these assignments as “research papers” to some extent, part of my ongoing pedagogical crusade for the civil right of being able to think about and express one’s positions in written form. I do not think most of my colleagues call it by its 1950s name, either—the buzzphrases I’ve heard lately at recent conferences are “extended argument” or “extended thought”—either way, the length is both metaphorical and tangible.

As someone who primarily teaches junior-level and senior-level professional writing more so than composition, there is a similar assignment in my classes—the proposal. It requires research, though not research that can be done entirely in library or online—it requires making phone calls, interviewing people, going to places to find physical records. Its written product is also quite different. And yet the students who do well on such an assignment are the ones who understand from the beginning that it is all a stylistic dance; certain sections of the proposal do certain maneuvers, which in turn support other sections—they must look a certain way in order to persuade visually, and content presented must leap a certain bar to establish authority. It is a game we are playing in which learning how to play is the goal. The actual proposal is a mere byproduct of the style-driven process. Likewise, “the research paper,” printed and stapled for review, should not be the final arbiter of learning “research” or “writing” in a course; it can at best reflect dimly on what has occurred within the student’s mind as a result of stylistic play.

I have taken a historical approach here, as Tom Pace did in the previous chapter, rather than that of a shorter and more sermonic piece for two reasons. First, the research paper is an old assignment, and an old topic; to praise or blame, at this point, is as much of a tradition as the assignment itself, and stories are easier to follow from the beginning. Second, it seemed a shame to praise the old research-imprinting mission of the research paper and reframe it as stylistic exercise in 470 words, when I could enact the “long paper” myself, and thus demonstrate the form and value of the extended argument.

## NOTES

1. There is a non-epistemic slant to the university mission in these years; Edward Hamilton's idea of the function of higher education in 1944 as "training youths to find, formulate, test, and evaluate ideas" or, rather, "to read intelligently and critically, to think, and to express ideas properly, logically, and forcefully" (p. 164) tends to skip right past invention.
2. See Doubleday's response (pp. 512-513).

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