

"Composition as Discovery." Notes on
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COMPOSITION AS DISCOVERY

For a relief from a term paper season of cribbed and undigested scholastic jargon, composition instructors might well adopt a refreshing task of requiring students to write original, objective research about primary, non-literary subjects. Applied research, not "pure" research, is the goal. Such papers encourage the students to come up with subjects whose originality they can defend; force the students to discover ways of objectifying their experience; and give them vital practical experience at organizing formidable detail.

While it is well and good to get freshmen into the niceties of literary explication, particularly in short, controlled daily exercises, certainly the professionalism demanded of lengthy literary analysis is hardly to be expected from freshmen, many of whom are not going to be English majors anyway, but all of whom have a right not to be turned off to the pleasures of reading or research by being required to do projects most of their teachers would be hard-pressed to enjoy even in a graduate seminar. By contrast, a research project in primary, non-literary areas encourages a student to pursue subjects accessible and relevant to him while still demanding that he get outside his isolated, personal point of view.

The most important part of the non-literary, primary research is the elaborate monitoring process, in which a student defends his choice of subject and his research design. This monitoring is done by the class (either as a whole or in committees) collaborating with the teacher as moderator and chief goad. Students are first introduced to a discussion of essential research techniques and problems. All are aware that each must defend his project against all sensible objections. Questions are typically incisive: "What are you saying that has not already been said?" "Why is it worth saying?" "How will asking these questions of this group generalize your subject the way you want it to do?" "How do you justify your principles of selection?" "Couldn't you get clearer results by . . .?" "Are the questions too leading or too open-ended?"

Here is a list of sample titles to projects that have proved successful in my experience:

1. A Study of Employment Progress in Jobs for Blacks in Orangeburg from 1962 to 1972.
2. Slang in the Dining Hall (as recorded and quantified).
3. A Survey of Students' Ideas on Ways to Improve Local Race Relations.
4. A Descriptive Comparison of a Holiness Church with a Methodist Church.
5. Student and Teacher Evaluations of Three Recent Campus Buildings Designed by Administrators.
6. A Survey of Students Transferring from Our College to One Next Door to Determine Reasons.

Good subjects are as available as are students.

The non-literary project counters a current sophistry in our profession, viz., that because language and literature are our specialties, we can best teach writing by requiring freshmen to write only about language and literature. Thereby we often force students into narrow molds and deprive them of a sense of discovery. Contrast the freshman mathematics major sorting out various scholarly keys to the imagery in Heart of Darkness with my biology major hiding her tape recorders in men's and women's dormitories as a part of a contrast study of male and female in-ventive in a black college.

One of the more gratifying aftereffects of the non-literary research papers has been the frequency with which students have gone to the library to see how their work stacks up with that of the professionals.

No tutor at Oxford expects his charges to spend major portions of time in secondary sources. Students there are encouraged first to think for themselves. Our students deserve no less in a freshman composition course.

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