

Comp Quickreads

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Research as a Process

Correlating Writing and Information Literacy Outcomes

(from the WPA Outcomes Statement and the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards)

Research Process

Writing

- focus on a purpose
- use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating

Information Literacy

- defines and articulates the need for information
- reevaluates nature and extent of information need

Search Strategies

Writing

- respond to the needs of different audiences
- understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate resources

Information Literacy

- identifies a variety of types and formats of potential sources of information
- selects the most appropriate investigative methods or information retrieval systems for accessing information
- constructs and implements effectively designed search strategies
- retrieves information online or in person using a variety of methods
- refines the search strategy if necessary

Documentation

Writing

- practice appropriate means of documenting work

Information Literacy

- extracts, records, and manages the information and its sources
- acknowledges the use of information sources in communicating the product or performance

Texts such as *They Say/I Say* begin with the assumption that to enter a discourse community, to learn to write and speak as a participant, one must learn what David Bartholomae calls “the commonplaces, the texts, the gestures and jargon of the group.” That entry, though, is usually a slow and gradual process. Susan MacDonald suggests four points on a continuum to describe the path students must navigate to enter the academic discourse community:

1. nonacademic writing
2. generalized academic writing concerned with stating claims, offering evidence, respecting the opinion of others, and learning to write with authority
3. novice approximations of particular disciplinary ways of using and creating knowledge
4. expert, insider academic writing

First-year writing courses tend to focus on the first two points of the continuum. Students are often asked to write in a range of genres that include many instances of what MacDonald calls “generalized academic writing” and the argumentative “moves” made explicit by Graff and Birkenstein focus almost exclusively on this type of writing.

But as MacDonald’s continuum makes explicit, key to entering the academic discourse community is the need to learn the research conventions of scholars and to recognize how these conventions might be discipline-specific. To some, these differences across disciplines are so great as to call into question the ubiquitous general education research paper. Richard Larson went so far as to refer to the “so-called ‘research paper’” as a “non-form” with “no conceptual or substantive identity.” If the research assignment focuses too narrowly on finding and reporting information, on

regurgitating data into templates, then Larson’s objection is valid.

Research assignments in first-year writing courses are certainly susceptible to the pressures of teaching the “format” of the generic research paper even when no such format exists, or rather even when a dizzying number and array of formats exist. The generic research assignment also confirms common misperceptions about research and writing; that they are simple tasks of gathering, organizing, and transferring to paper information that is already known. Instead, research is best taught as part of a course designed to introduce students to the discourse communities that form around specific topics. And research assignments need to emphasize the qualities that underlie research in all disciplines: intellectual curiosity and personal engagement.

Furthermore, research like writing is best seen as a process. Research abilities, like writing abilities, are neither separate nor linear. As the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) notes of its recommended information literacy standards, “many of the competencies are likely to be performed recursively, in that the reflective and evaluative aspects included within each standard will require the student to return to an earlier point in the process, revise the information-seeking approach, and repeat the same steps.” To teachers of writing this description will sound very familiar.

As with their ideas about writing, students often arrive in college with a very narrow sense of research. Their success at the university and as life-long learners will depend on their coming to see knowledge as both shared and created, and research and writing as epistemic and recursive, as ways not only of making sense of the world but of making the world.