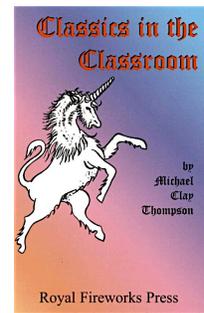


About Research Papers

From *Classics in the Classroom*

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Though I do not believe in written book reports on outside reading, I do believe in formal (MLA), typed research papers. This subject rapidly becomes a book in itself, but I can sketch in a few of the details of my program.

I think assigning only one research paper in a year is a waste of time. Its primary result is alienation without mastery. Research paper writing is too difficult a skill to teach in only one practice. I do at least three papers, and usually four, in my classes. I use the language of grammar to discuss the writing with the kids. This helps to prove to them that they need to understand grammar (which is another form of higher-level thinking), because they quickly realize that there is no non-grammar way to explain many of the errors they have made.

I believe that students do not need to go to college in fear of formal papers. It is simply not that difficult to teach, if you are willing to grade several sets of research papers. And thereby hangs a tale: Once, on the first day of class in a senior honors English class at a college preparatory school, I told my students that they would have to write four typed research papers and that they would be strictly graded. One of the students shook his head and uttered a low whistle, looked down at his desk, and whispered audibly, “Thank God!” In my astonishment, I suddenly realized that these seniors were afraid, not of me, but of college—of going to college unprepared.

Curiously, teachers sometimes express irritation with students who write bad research papers. Who did these teachers expect to have for students? Students should not be blamed for writing bad research papers. Of course they will write incompetent, flawed papers. That is what they are supposed to do. They are learners. They need a good opportunity to get the beginner’s papers out of their systems and to learn in a patient and caring atmosphere how to write and research correctly. This does not mean that we should not tell students the truth about what is wrong; we certainly must.

This responsibility we have to grade papers thoroughly and professionally (and supportively) was made clear to me in an unforgettable way. One of the best students I ever taught took a course from a history teacher who assigned his students to write twenty-page typed papers. The student, a sophomore, worked hard on her assignment—she was a dedicated student who cared about learning. On the day the papers were due, she came from her history class to my room crying. I asked her what was wrong. Nothing. I asked again. “I worked for six weeks on that research paper,” she cried, “and he graded the entire class set of papers in one hour—in front of us! He would just pick up a paper, flip the pages, and write a grade on it! It’s not fair!” The unread paper received a B.

In grading research papers, I first read a paper carefully, writing freely on it, trying to mention both the good and the bad. Then I type out a detailed comment, in the form of a letter, explaining to the student why the wrong things are wrong, and why the good things are good. This takes time, but I save time by writing on a word processor, and I also have stored in computer memory a hundred or so careful explanations of certain things: what a run-on sentence is, what a comma splice is, and so forth. The final printout for each student can be several pages long, and I staple it to the front of the paper.

When I finish grading a stack of papers, I then tabulate the errors for all papers to find out what the most common errors were in the class as a whole, so that I can give a review lecture on the worst problems. The kids

find it interesting to learn that in a class of eighteen, there were, say, twenty-two misplaced modifiers; when we go back over that concept, they take notes with a new intensity.

I do not use a point system in which I attach x points to y error. I expect every paper to be written at least at the grade level of the class. If a tenth grader's paper is filled with eighth grade errors, it will not pass. I don't want to play point games with the kids who refuse to take their English seriously. To achieve a passing grade, the paper must be competent in its elementary school English, period. In the tenth grade, I want to concentrate on tenth grade problems, not seventh grade problems. This seems to me the least I can expect, if the exercise is not to be a sham. This can sometimes be a rude shock to students who have gotten good grades on crudely written (and crudely graded!) papers in the past, or who have simply ignored, with impunity, their teachers' injunctions to proofread their papers. Well, if you will tolerate it, you will have to tolerate it.

After I hand back one set of papers, and the students see that I'm not kidding, they put far more effort into their editing and proofreading. You have to hold the line, with a smile. If, in addition to good English, a paper also has a good essay structure, with a single thesis, a real introduction, an organized body developing the thesis, and a conclusion that pulls the paper together, then I begin to consider a grade of C or B. To qualify for an A, a paper must have an accomplishment in the realm of ideas. A paper in good English, written in correct MLA style, with an excellent essay structure, a cogent display of research, and an acceptably scholarly topic might receive a grade of 93 to 95. I reserve the last five points as rewards for really wonderful papers; from 95 on, the points are tough to get. In this respect, my paper grading process is something like a martial arts black belt: there is as much difference between first and second degree black belt as between first degree black belt and all of the preceding belts combined.

One more point about grading: kids are sensitive. Their feelings are easily hurt. It is critically important to avoid all varieties of wounding statements: sarcasm, irony, ridicule, scolding, and so forth, in research paper comments. All comments must be done in an objective, professional, technical-but-supportive tone. When I hand the papers back, the kids look at me with that OH NO look, and I stand at the front of the room, papers in hand, and focus their emotions. I say something calming and caring like, "As you see, I have your papers today. Look at me. Remember what I told you at the beginning of the year: you are beginners, and you have made the mistakes that beginners make. That is all right. There is nothing else you could do. Remember that my criticisms are not of you as a person. I am really proud of the work you have done, and I appreciate it, whether your paper has errors or not. I have told you the blunt truth about the problems in your paper, and I am counting on you to learn and grow and change. Are you ready to do that? (pause) Here are your papers." I go through this every time I give papers back; I let the students know I like them.

I believe that the research paper gives students a chance to develop profound involvement with classic literature in a way that no other class experience allows. Students can read the literature, research the author, research the critical views, try to resolve differing interpretations, and so forth. It becomes a formidable intellectual encounter that culminates in the creative organizing and articulating process, that generates new insights of its own. Often, students are proud of what they have realized. They learn to be their own teachers.

Furthermore, the research paper offers the teacher a way to force students to comprehend and articulate abstract ideas. In fact, I give my students a handout that helps to teach them that the research paper can be a vehicle for outstanding intellectual creativity. Organized from the least desirable at the bottom, to the most desirable at the top, here it is:

Advanced Thinking in Research

1. Creation of Ideas

A. Production of an elaborate entirely new and original critical or interpretive idea, theory, or model. A highly elaborated original idea regarding the subject researched, with possible brief presentation of other preexisting ideas as a framework for presentation of the new idea. An elaborate, detailed case made for the validity of the original idea, based on factual, logical, and or expert evidence also discovered in research. Example: The undiscovered theme in the plays of Bernard Shaw.

B. Comparison of researched ideas with self-created interpretation of ideas. An elaborate comparison of competing researched ideas, supporting neither, resolving in favor of a more valid original critical or interpretive idea, theory, or model, with a case made for the validity of the original idea. Example: The inadequacy of three theoretical models of social mobility, with a new model suggested.

2. Evaluation of Ideas

A. Evaluation of compared competing ideas. Close comparison of two or more competing ideas discovered in research, with a case made supporting some, one, or none of the ideas, on the basis of factual, logical, and or expert evidence also discovered in research. Example: Why the particle theory of gravity is a better model than the wave theory of gravity.

B. Evaluation of an idea discovered in research. Close examination of an idea discovered in research, with a case made for or against the idea, on the basis of factual, logical, and or expert evidence also discovered in research. Example: A refutation of J.M. Whistler's attacks on the originality of Oscar Wilde's theories of art.

3. Reporting of Ideas

A. Comparison of competing researched ideas. A close comparison of two or more competing ideas, with no outside case made for or against any of the ideas. Example: Randall Jarrell's vs. D.H. Lawrence's thoughts on the poetry of Walt Whitman.

B. Thesis report of researched idea. A presentation of a critical or scholarly idea, with no attempt to evaluate the validity of the idea, to compare it with other competing theories, or to challenge the idea with evidence or ideas of one's own. Example: Randall Jarrell's interpretation of the poetry of Robert Frost.

4. Reporting of Facts—Not Allowed

Though there is a scholarly place for high-quality factual reports, I do not allow students to do them as research papers in my class. I feel that students need to learn to discuss *ideas*, and that the research paper is a good opportunity for them to practice articulating literary and intellectual ideas.

A. Theme biographical fact report. A report of factual information clearly and intelligently organized around a central theme. No production of original ideas. This variety is not acceptable in a research paper for my class, since I wish you to focus your discussion on ideas, rather than facts. Example: Charles Dickens's relationship with his family.

B. Encyclopedia-style themeless chronological biographical fact report. Inappropriate for advanced scholarship. Example: The life of Charles Dickens, from birth to death.

Only the themes in category 4 are not acceptable for research papers in my class—students must discuss literature, not authors. The nature of the theme a student selects will depend heavily on what emerges in the research. It is impossible for a student to decide in advance to do a theme from category one, simply because the student regards that category as more advanced.