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AUTHOR Sanctis, Dona De
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ABSTRACT

A course in advanced English as a second language that focused on the writing of formal research papers revealed that even students who had chosen personally interesting topics and were able to organize facts and present them well still had difficulty. They had problems beginning and ending their papers, they approached their topics warily, and they either used very abrupt conclusions or lingered too long. Some suggestions for a better approach are the following: pay more attention to students' specific questions about the paper's length and contents, using a recipe-like assignment; reduce the pressure of the syllabus to allow more time for thinking, research, and organization of a smaller number of papers; provide more practice of research techniques that produce readable, useful research papers; have students choose research topics early in the course and refine them as the course progresses; eliminate oral reports on papers in progress; have some students distribute their papers for group revision each week; examine, in class, the writing contained in some of the sources; have students practice note-taking; use more praise; eliminate all required reading assignments; and limit the papers' bibliographies to five sources. (MSE)

# The Problem with "Formal" Research Papers

Dona De Sanctis

Of all the writing assignments foreign college students receive, none seems to intimidate them more than their first research paper. These are students who have only recently learned about the conventions of Western scholarship in their college texts. Now, somewhat uneasily, they realize they will soon be expected to use these conventions in preparing a formal research paper.

But the Chinese say even a mountain can be removed a spoonful at a time, and guided by this slightly sadistic bit of wisdom from the East, I decided to present the formal research paper as merely a series of simple tasks, during a recent EFL advanced writing course. One of our two weekly meetings became a "research paper workshop," where, for two hours every Thursday we discussed topics and did exercises to improve our understanding of research writing.

Assignments included choosing and narrowing the topic, outlining, notetaking, and the nuts and bolts of research: library techniques, documentation, and sober warnings about plagiarism and unsupported opinion.

All the students presented oral reports on their papers-in-progress, which the rest of the class judged, making suggestions for further improvement. The first draft, due four weeks before the end of the class, was read by me and returned to each student with detailed suggestions for additional

research or necessary rewriting.

The finished product surprised me. Most of my students handed in research papers that were inferior to the themes they had spent far less time writing during the semester. As I read these term papers, written with such painful attention to scholarship's rites and rituals, I realized my students had been paralyzed by the enormity of their task. And in their confusion, they had seized upon the more superficial aspects of scholarship (foot notes, quotations, and name-and-source dropping) to give their research authority and their thoughts legitimacy. My students, who had written amusing and insightful essays on American mores, who had filled pages of their dialogue journals with vivid descriptions of their daily lives, now assumed the impersonal mask of scholarship to write their first "formal" research paper. The results must have been as painful for them to write as they were for me to read.

During our first workshops, I had encouraged my students to choose term paper topics they were genuinely interested in learning about. Their choices included: the role of sports in American college curricula; US-Japanese trade friction; Thailand's king; China's one-child policy; Hong Kong's future and, of course, euthanasia. These topics leave much room for controversy, but my students' presentation

of "the facts" and the conclusions they drew from them were timid and conservative. Good research writing, like all good writing, startles its readers and awakens their curiosity. But my students were careful not to allow their research to be tainted by discord.

The problem became apparent almost immediately as I read their opening paragraphs. Most of these young men and women warily approached their topics. For a paper on the disturbing moral aspects of euthanasia, one student began with the prosaic:

> Euthanasia, the act of mercy killing, has aroused people's attention toward the matter of life and death. The most important question of prolonging life involves who should decide when a person should die. The decision-making process is a two-person bargaining situation in which neither the patient nor the doctor is in complete control.

Yet, buried near the end of her second page is a striking assessment of the physician's dilemma:

> The question of mercy killing is so difficult and complex that no matter who makes the final decision, a conflict usually follows. For doctors, euthanasia violates the Hippocratic Oath in which physicians promise to relieve suffering, but also to protect life. When a patient is in the most painful stage of a fatal disease, prolonging his life violates the promise to relieve pain. But relieving his pain by killing the patient, violates the doctor's promise to protect life.

In an interesting and thorough study of recent US-Japanese trade friction, caused by US imports of Japanese cars, another student began with a two-page analysis of Japanese and American industrial and agricultural needs, Japanese economic growth since World War II, some common causes of US inflation, the trade deficit in 1971, and the oil crisis of 1974. Persuaded at last of his real topic's legitimacy, he begins a well-researched discussion of his topic on page three with:

> In 1980, numerous Japanese passenger cars, an estimated 1.82 million of them, were exported to the United States. American consumers shifted from buying large American cars to the smaller Japanese imports. And the US automobile industry faced a serious decline in sales.

Clearly these students are able to organize their facts and present them with commanding presence. Why were they afraid to do this? But if getting off to a good start presented my students with difficult decisions, taking graceful leave of their readers proved to be even more of a struggle. They solved this problem by resorting to one of two strategies.

One group chose the quick clean break. Their conclusions were so abrupt that it seemed as if the pen had been ripped from their grasp by an angry censor. The paper on Hong Kong's political situation concludes:

> Hong Kong's future depends on Deong, the vice chief of the Chinese Communist Party. He is the most powerful man in the country and has encouraged an "open door" policy toward the West. But this policy may be changed when he dies.

Another paper, on the role of Thailand's king as a symbol of unity, introduces two new and interesting facts into the concluding paragraph, but these remain undeveloped since the writer has already put on her hat and coat and is racing for the door.

> Without the king, Thailand might have turned to communism because of the gap between the rich and the poor, but he does a great deal of work to fill it up.

Even the cautious author of the study on US-Japanese trade friction, who took nearly three pages to introduce his topic, finds the well of his eloquence dry by the end of his discussion:

> However, the US auto industry has recovered because of rising economic growth and falling inflation rates. But Japanese passenger car exports to the USA could be between 1.9 and 2.3 million in 1985, whether the voluntary restraints will be extended or not.

The strategy elected by my second group of students was more elaborate. Their solution to the elusive conclusion seemed to serve a double purpose: Bid the reader a leisurely farewell, and add to the length of their papers by repeating nearly word-for-word the main points they had made in the preceding pages.

"Begin at the beginning, go on until you come to the end, and then stop." was the white king's advice to Alice in Wonderland. I began to wonder if the help I gave my students during all those many research workshops had been even as useful as that. If I were able to teach those students again, I would organize the course in a completely different manner.

To begin, I would pay more attention to the kind of questions they asked me about the research assignment. These concerned amounts. "How many pages does it have to be?" "Does the bibliography count as a page?" "How many books do we have to read?" (They all avoided articles.) "What is a good average number of foot notes?" Twenty-twenty hindsight tells me my students understood "formal" research in terms of a formula or even a recipe. Stir in a cup of facts, a tablespoon of quotations, and a sprinkling of foot notes. Bake and frost with "therefores."

But even more serious an obstacle to their understanding of "formal" research was caused not by their naiveté, but by the way the writing course was designed. My students were expected to read two texts: one on rhetoric and the second on research writing; write and revise nine themes which were graded; research, write, and rewrite an eight-page term paper; and take mid-term and final examinations (each a lengthy essay written in class). The pressure on

these foreign students to perform such tasks in English for their first credit-bearing writing course was considerable, and, I think, even unfair. These students did not have enough time to think about their topics, to research them efficiently, and to reorganize their findings into well-written research papers.

The solution is either to eliminate the research paper or redesign the course so that students learn and practice thoroughly those research techniques that produce readable, useful research papers. In other words, all the writing would concern the research paper. Themes would not be eliminated. But the class would no longer write on the same topic. Each of the nine themes my students wrote for me illustrated a rhetorical technique. "My Room," "Life in the United States and in my own land," etc. was chosen to teach them comparison and contrast, description, causal analysis, etc. Under my new plan, each student would adapt the rhetorical exercise to the dimensions of his or her own research. So the young woman who wrote on Thailand's king as a symbol of unity could write a brief essay comparing the present king to Thailand's past rulers. The young man interested in US-Japanese trade friction could describe (and compare) the working conditions of American auto workers and their Japanese counterparts. The student who researched euthanasia could define clinical death or terminal illness. The point is that all the writing done for these individual essays on rhetorical devices would be related to the larger picture of the research topic. Ultimately and ideally, these "essays" would be inserted into the term paper itself -- paragraphs and pages of them.

Research topics would have to be chosen early in the semester -- within the first two weeks of class. Permission to change topics would not be granted after that period, but the focus would gradually change and narrow as the research progressed. For example, the topic "Women in Art" would be refined to "Women in 20th century art" to "Three Contemporary Lebanese Women in Art." And students would learn, as they research, perhaps the most important lesson of effective informative writing: Clarity of focus.

I would completely eliminate oral reports on the papers-in-progress. These sessions contributed little to the class's understanding of research writing and less to the individual student's grasp of his own work. Other than providing students with a limited opportunity to do some public speaking in English, these discussions served no purpose. (They usually degenerated into a private discussion between me and the student involved, with the rest of the class as a bored, but polite audience.)

Instead, each week I would ask a certain number of students (no more than three) to type and xerox their essays for class distribution. The class discussion would involve writing and rewriting these sentences and paragraphs. At the same time, the class would be learning about topic sentences, main ideas, foot notes, quotations, and all the trappings of both scholarship and clear writing.

Another assignment would be to have several students xerox copies of one of their sources -- only two or three paragraphs. These copies would be distributed to the class and we would examine the strong and weak points of the writing as well as of the research. The goal of this exercise is to show graphically to students "all that's printed is not gold." It will, ideally, make them more critical readers who are less likely to accept and be satisfied with everything they read. This, after all, is one of our goals as educators of the young.

These two exercises would allow the class to discuss and to see actual examples of good and bad writing -- by their classmates and by scholars in the various fields. All the elements of strong writing would come under discussion: Diction, style, punctuaion, vocabulary, imagery, etc.

In addition to these exercises I would also have students practice taking notes. Most of them simply copied pages and paragraphs from their sources -- a discovery I made when I reviewed their note cards. Few if any had original ideas on their note cards or any notes that resembled a dialogue between the reader and the writer of the source at hand. I would xerox a piece of research writing: a brief article, a newspaper story, or a magazine feature. They would all take notes and then we would discuss the results. This exercise should be done several times and might even be used as a test during the semester.

Finally, I would use dialogue journals much more than I did. I would devote fifteen minutes every day to spontaneous writing. Since I /would be spending much less time correcting themes, I would have more time to read the journals, make longer comments, and get to know my students better.

I would use much more praise and avoid dissecting their less-than-successful phrases. No more scathing comments in the margins about fuzzy thinking and dangling participles . Instead I will praise the good and merely underline the questionable. Students know when they fall short of their instructor's expectations.

I would eliminate all required texts and reading assignments. They will receive enough practice reading English as they do their research. And, anyway, no one learns to write well by reading about writing. I would limit bibliography to five sources and require that two of them be articles from respected publications. I would also expect that the students would have to read many more than five sources before they find the few that are really valuable. And I would be sure to let my students know that this, alas, is a sad fact of scholarship.

I believe if the term paper is approached in this manner that students will enjoy doing their research and will learn more not only about their chosen topics, but about the methods and procedures of reliable scholarly research as well. I wish someone had taught this course to me before I wrote those many dull term papers that punctuated my own college career.

BIODATA

Dona De Sanctis is a lapsed college instructor, who recently decided she could no longer afford to teach. Before receiving her doctorate in Comparative Literature and Italian, she taught English in Italy and Italian in the United States. She now teaches opera history and theory as a hobby.