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ABSTRACT

In order to have freshman composition students review and strengthen their research and documentation skills, they are asked to write 700 to 1,000-word papers synthesizing from sources such as anthologies, journals, government documents, films, biographies, almanacs, and interviews. Three assignments require the students to gather information about an event, person, place, or thing of the past and then discover how that information is relevant to the present. This sort of research paper assignment prevents a remodeling of high school papers and motivates students to write because they can choose a topic relevant to their interests. (Detailed descriptions of the three assignments are provided.) (SRT)

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Summary

Putting the Past into the Present Through Research Papers
Presentor: Ed Demerly, Henry Ford Community College

I presented three assignments for freshman research papers -- all which put the student's past into his present by requiring him to explore a time just before his memory or as long ago as his grandparents' generation and to discover how that information is relevant to the world he knows. The assignments are meant to review and strengthen the student's skills in research and documentation through the writing of a one thousand word paper. He's expected to use a variety of sources and to synthesize information with a purpose other than to simply report findings. In one assignment, the student is asked to research a local, state, national, or world event which occurred with a short period of time fifteen or more years ago to discover public response to it. Examples might include Woodstock, the racial riots in Watts, a local World Series win, or the Manson murders. In another assignment, he's asked to research the life of a well known, often quoted person and to identify a quotation attributed to that person. Then he should demonstrate by examples how that quote easily represents the accumulated life experiences, attitudes, and prominent qualities of that person. In a third assignment, the student is asked to select a particular facet of life which was noteworthy in the years surrounding his birth and that remains relevant today. Using data from both periods, he's expected to develop a comparison-contrast paper to identify detected changes. Possible topics include fashion, high schools, civil rights, advertising and divorce. I feel these topics have, for many students, made research and the writing of the documented paper at least bearable and at most exciting and illuminating.

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Putting the Past into the Present Through Research Papers

Ringo Starr became a grandpa last year. So did my brother. Sometimes it seems like we're living Back To The Future, doesn't it? And isn't the past always and inevitably part of the present?

We recently, for example, celebrated for the first time a national holiday marking the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr.

Rambo reminded us that the horror of Vietnam is not so distant. Psychedelic colors, now called neons, were the fashion last summer.

We hear "We Shall Overcome" sung in protest of South Africa's racial policies.

The Guiding Light still shines.

Even Richard Nixon returned last year—as the negotiator of the baseball umpire's strike.

Bob Dylan, in his typically fine voice, took up perhaps more than his share of the "Live Aid" concert, prompting my teenagers to ask, "What's so big about that guy?"

Ann Landers is still advising and Alfred Hitchcock is back.

The Cardinals reappeared in the World Series—and lost, as they did to the Tigers in 1968.

And we just got through with Super Bowl ~~XX~~—20 of those things since 1966!

Robert Kennedy's son, Joe, and daughter Kathleen are running for Congress.

George Wallace is again governor of Alabama.

J. D. Salinger's son, Mark, debuted recently on Broadway and in the current film, Power. Wouldn't Holden Caulfield call it prostitution?

Instead of landing on the moon, scientists are discovering new moons around Uranus.

Are we going Back To The Future, or is the present simply déjà vu?

Our students live the present. Sometimes they're as far ahead as this weekend's parties. Their past extends way back to their senior year of high school or to their last boyfriends or their first jobs. Oh, they do have links with the past: an occasional history course, T.V. documentaries, biographical films, Mom and/or Dad, "Leave It To Beaver," questions on "Jeopardy," and Kasey Kasen's occasional run down of the top ten of yesteryear.

As college students, curious by nature, they must sometimes wonder how students used to get through trig classes without calculators or how popcorn was made before microwave ovens arrived.

Some may try to imagine how the world reacted to the first moon landing or why in the early 70's, Jane Fonda was a dirty word to patriotic Americans or how we could enjoy football on black and white T.V. without watching every play six times on instant replay in slow motion. Surely our students do question dramatic changes which have occurred in their lifetimes and are curious about the many present reminders of the near past. They might even imagine themselves in a Back To The Future syndrome where Pepsi Free is a free Pepsi. This curiosity, I feel, can create interest in and content for freshman research papers.

Let me, then, briefly identify the scope of the research paper assigned in the first semester of freshman composition where I teach. It's a 700-1000 work paper meant to review and strengthen the student's skills in research and documentation. He's asked to explore a variety of sources: anthologies, journals, government documents, films, biographies, almanacs, interviews, and the like.

He's expected to synthesize information with a purpose other than to simply report findings. That purpose, for example, might be shown through argument, cause-effect, or comparison-contrast. He should demonstrate control over and coherent organization of significant subject matter.

Given this requirement, my aim is twofold. First, I try to avoid remodeled high school papers that are basically collected data on careers, AIDS, or the American judicial system. And second by using topics with a degree of built-in motivation and relevance to students' interests, I try to make research and writing of the documented paper at least a bearable experience and at most, an exciting and illuminating one.

I'd like to share with you three assignments I use which put the students' past into his present, which ask him to explore a time just before his memory or perhaps as long ago as his grandparents' generation, and to discover how that information is relevant to the world he knows. I call these assignments:

"What Happened on that Day?"

"True to His Words" and

"Things Have Changed a Little"

For the assignment, "What Happened on that Day?" students are asked to research a local, state, national, or world event which occurred within a short period of time fifteen or more years ago to discover public response to it. In deciding on a topic, students are encouraged to explore events which occurred in years that are somehow relevant to them—the year their parents married or the year Grandpa moved the family to Chicago or the year Dad got his BA from the University of Michigan.

Encyclopedia yearbooks, almanacs, and year-end editions of magazines and newspapers are particularly useful in the initial stage of research. The range of possibilities is varied:

(use overhead)

a criminal act	{	the Manson murders
		Jimmy Hoffa's disappearance
		Mi Lai Massacre
		Patty Hearst's kidnapping
an international crisis	{	Gary Power's U-2 flight over Russia
		Bay of Pigs invasion
		the Cuban Missile crisis
a medical breakthrough		open heart surgery (first heart transplant)
broken sports records		Mark Spitz or Nadia Comnenici
an entertainment event	{	Woodstock
		Beatles arrival in the USA
		debut of the musical <u>Hair</u>

a sports event	{ state championship for a local team local World Series win
a moral scandal	{ Chappaquidick Wilbur Mills and Fanny Fox in Washington's reflecting pool Mohammad Ali's draft refusal
a social item	Kennedy/Onnasis wedding
death of a well known person	{ Marilyn Monroe Martin Luther King Jr.
public unrest	{ Watts riots march from Salem to Montgomery Chicago's Democratic convention of <u>1972</u>
end of war	
declaration of war	
election victory or loss	
natural disaster	
space exploration	
invention	
publication of a book	

After gathering information about the specific event, students are asked to find out how four "public" figures and one relative or acquaintance who were living at the time responded to the event. Were these individuals involved in the event? Did they have personal interests at stake? How did the event touch their lives?

What were their verbal responses at the time? Did they react emotionally? In essence, what were their reactions? How were they affected by the news!

In their choice of "public" figures, students are to strive for vanity. They might consider:

politicians	religious leaders
writers	doctors
educators	leaders of special interest groups
entertainers	businessman
scientists	military leaders
athletes	

To gather information from acquaintances and relatives, students should carefully prepare openended interview questions which will encourage the individuals to recall the event and their responses to it at length and which will result in the information being sought. They may decide to interview several people (or conduct a small group interview), then use the responses of the most interesting individuals.

After examining the various responses, they are to organize a unified essay with a clearly stated thesis. Perhaps students will discover that all five individuals reacted in the same way. If so, a comparison-contrast paper may be appropriate. If several distinct reactions are obvious, a modified classification paper might be suitable. A wide variety of basic reactions should be considered. These may include:

pity	fear	anger	disillusionment
determination	excitement	humor	escape
sorrow	caution	shock	indifference

Using this assignment, one student's paper on the Detroit race riots of 1967 included the responses of President Johnson, Governor Romney, a Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals judge, a former Detroit Police Commissioner, a former heart patient who was locked inside Henry Ford Hospital for three days, and an insurance salesman who worked with blacks and profitted from the resale of looted merchandise.

Their responses ranged from shock and surprise to vacillation and disgust, from terror to apathy and even excitement. Her sources included personal interviews, news video tapes, newspapers, magazines, and books dealing with violence in America.

Another student, researching America's first successful manned space flight, discovered a somewhat unified response—anxiety, followed by pride, joy, and determination. He included reactions of an instructor in aeronautical engineering, Allan Shepard's wife, President Kennedy, and an employee at a factory which produces parts for the aerospace industry.

In the assignment I call "True To His Words," the student is asked to research the life of a well known, often-quoted person. My suggested list, which they may amend, includes:

Ralph Nader	Winston Churchill
Margaret Mead	Martin Luther King Jr.
Ernest Hemingway	John Kennedy
Theodore Roosevelt	Mahatma Gandhi
William Buckley	Susan B. Anthony
Ronald Reagan	William Faulkner

Anwar Sadat	Harry Truman
Lee Iacoca	Jane Fonda
Howard Cosell	Richard Nixon
James Baldwin	Norman Mailer
Henry Ford	Albert Einstein
Golden Mier	Sigmund Freud
Billy Graham	Alfred Hitler

In their research, they are asked to locate a quotation attributed to this person and to explain through sources and demonstrate by examples how this quote easily represents the accumulated life experiences, attitudes, and prominent qualities of this person. In effect, explain how it seems only obvious that this person would make that statement. What is there about the quote that typifies many aspects about this individual? Why would the statement not easily be attributed to any of a thousand other people?

Students are cautioned about simply compiling information about the person. Instead, the thesis should state a major characteristic or personality trait shown both through the quotation and in the life of the individual. Some sample student papers included these quotes supported by anecdotes and facts:

1. Franklin Roosevelt's statement:

"There is nothing I love as much as a good fight."

This characteristic was shown by the way he handled opposition to his New Deal, by his determination not to be drawn into World War II (and then his determination to win) and with his illness during his fourth term.

2. Albert Einstein's words used to demonstrate his humility:

"Before God, we are all equally foolish."

This quality was supported by reference to a request of Einstein by Princeton's Director of the Institute for Advanced Study that he submit a salary request. Later the director commented that Einstein had asked for an impossible sum; it was far too small."

And after acceptance of his theory of relativity in 1919, Einstein while living in France, "Now that my theory of relativity has been proven true, Germany will claim me as a German and France will declare that I'm a citizen of the World. Had my theory proved false, France would have declared that I'm a Jew."

3. One student used Gandhi's words, alluded to by Pope John Paul in India last week:

"Civilization...consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary restriction of wants."

This viewpoint was supported by references to Gandhi's fasting to protest injustice, and to demonstrate the quality of self-control in the civilized man, the student referred to Gandhi's celibacy when Gandhi sometimes slept with naked women without being sexually excited.

In my assignment called "Things Have Changed a Little", the student is asked to select a particular facet of life which was noteworthy in the years surrounding his birth and that remains relevant today. Using data from both time periods, he's then expected to develop a comparison-contrast paper.

He's encouraged to first explore the possibilities for interesting topics in an effort to either avoid worn out subject matter, or to find an original approach to it. He might consider his career interests, hobbies, and poignant childhood memories. I ask them to read the New York Times and one of the

Detroit papers printed on the day of their birth and to browse magazines for that time period which focus on their interests. They are to notice more than just the headlines. Letters to ^{the} editor, cartoons, advertising, and pictures as well as the content of articles and editorials may offer topics.

Students might start with broad subjects such as these:

parental roles	{	discipline money management household chores religious instruction
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computers	{	uses public attitudes complexity costs
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advertising	{	products children gimmicks
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pastimes	{	women fads costs
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television	{	news comedies detective shows women's roles
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	degrees
Science	public attitudes
	costs
	courses of study
High school	crime
	grades and standardized test scores
	jewelry
Fashion	hairstyles
	teens—women/men
	taxes
Political issues	civil rights
	foreign trade
	pollution—and other ecological concerns

These topics need more control in order to adequately be discussed in a 1000 word paper. Students have used such controlling ideas as:

Ann Landers' advice

sophistication in sports broadcasting

selection of college majors

attitudes toward contraception and abortion

variety, cost, gender, acceptance of cosmetics

women's roles in comic strips

Detroit Redwings Hockey

{ safety gear
public support
win-lose records
recruiting
coaching

One student decided to research changes in drug abuse over the past twenty years only to discover that the term "drug abuse" was not even used in the Readers' Guide in the year of his birth. Narcotics addiction was as close as he could come.

Some of the changes identified in various papers include:

1. A comparison of the Gemini 10 space capsule to the Columbia space shuttle. In the 1960's, the Gemini crew ate gelatin coated cubes and freeze dried foods and worried about crumbs floating into the instrument panels. Columbia's astronauts sit at a table and eat shrimp cocktails and hot meals. Gemini astronauts were limited to 15 cubic meters of cabin space and had to remain in their space suits while Columbia's crew has five times that space—room to exercise by running upside down. The Gemini 10 flight left \$30 million worth of equipment in space where as with the Columbia, only the external fuel tank and rocket boosters are expendable.
 2. Another paper discussed the changes in the treatment of diabetes in the past twenty years, showing transition from total reliance on insulin injection and diet to recent success with implanted insulin pumps, artificial pancreases and pancrease transplants from fetuses.
 3. One paper indentified changes in the designs of automobiles over this time period. In the sixties, cars used names like Comet, Sattelite, Edsel and Corvair. Today's models have names like T-1000 Transam and Merkur XR4T. Steel and chrome have been largely replaced by plastics and then, zinc-coated metals. Traditional frames have become self-supporting uni-bodies. The gas guzzling V-8's have nearly disappeared in favor of turbo-charged, fuel-injected 4's and 6's. Rather than introducing major changes with models every September, manufactureres make small changes continually.
 4. Another student compared the public's response to the military and anti-communist stance of President Johnson toward Vietnam and President Reagan's handling of the cold war, terrorists, the Grenada invasion, and the peace force in Lebanon. She recognized both similarities and differences.
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I've used each of these assignments twice. For the purpose of introducing research and documentation in a short paper which aims to synthesize information, I'm pleased with the results, and most students, too, seem reasonably enthusiastic. Deciding on a topic and then controlling it are difficulties for some. Organization and documentation of material is, of course, an expected problem for many. And in every class, there's the student who, despite explanations, examples, and specific direction during conferences, seeks an easy way out by simply compiling information on communes or Harry Truman or the birth control pill. That's the student who then complains about his grade by saying it's unfair because he'd put in over 100 hours on that paper and even paid a typist \$30.00!

Most students, however, have few problems locating useful, varied sources, and they seem clearly to be satisfied with their finished products. I'm not sure we can reach them all on a first try, but these three assignments have reached many for me.