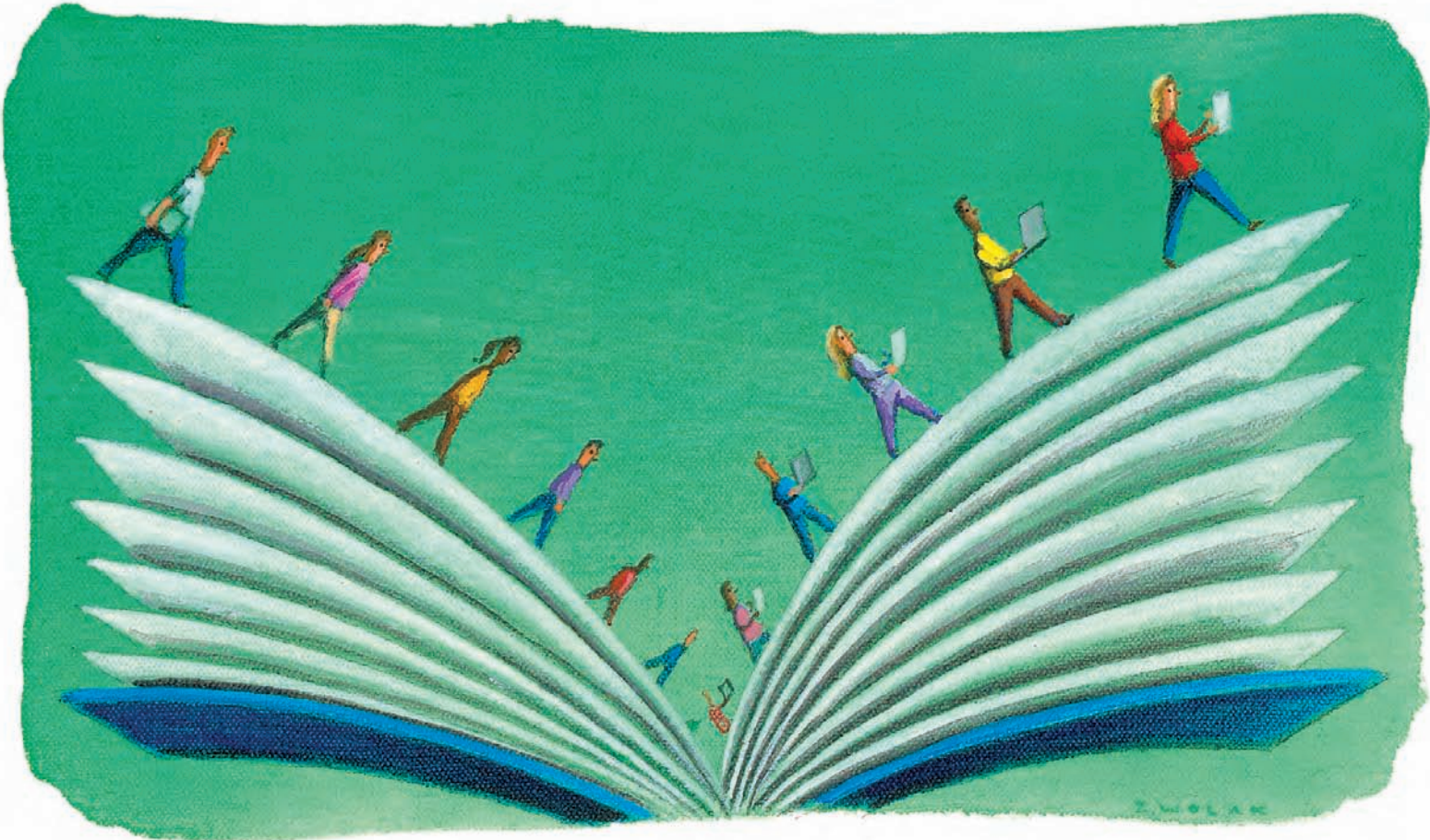


Meaningful Work

How the History Research Paper Prepares Students for College and Life



BY WILL FITZHUGH

“Without history, there is no way to learn from mistakes or remember the good times through the bad. History is more than a teacher to me; it’s an understanding of why I am who I am. It’s a part of my life on which I can never turn back.... In a sense, history is me, and I am the history of the future. History does not mean series of events; history means stories and pictures; history means people, and yet, history means much more. History means the people of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. History means me.”

Will Fitzhugh is the founder and editor of the Concord Review, a quarterly journal of history research papers by high school students, available at www.tcr.org. Previously, he taught history for 10 years at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School in Concord, Massachusetts. His education writing has appeared in EducationNews.org, the Washington Post’s The Answer Sheet, and the New York Times’ Room for Debate.

A junior from a public high school wrote these words as part of her grand-prize-winning essay in a national civics competition. The competition asked students to write about what history meant to them in 500 to 700 words. What it did not ask students to do was read any history books or journal articles or primary sources on which to base their writing, nor did it ask students to give references for the works they used. The competition did not ask students to develop a thesis statement or a narrative, support it with research, or write numerous drafts—all hallmarks of good writing. And so, the prize-winning essay excerpted above is really no prize. The student who wrote it read nothing to prepare for her short “essay” and so wrote nothing substantive.

Our students’ academic writing will rise, or fall, to the level of our expectations. Competitions like this one have low expectations. In so doing, they convey the idea that academic, expository writing based on research is neither valued nor necessary to a good education.

Writing competitions like this do not require so little of stu-

dents in a vacuum; they base their standards on those set by our schools. All too often, students are required to read far more fiction than nonfiction, and to write no more than five paragraphs about themselves, their families, or their neighborhoods. As a result, reading and writing have become diluted parts of the curriculum from elementary through high school. This is especially true in history, a discipline that requires close reading of sources (even an occasional actual history book) and carefully researched writing that seeks to understand, inform, and persuade.

For the lack of serious academic writing by our students, teachers are not to blame. A study I commissioned in 2002 found that 95 percent of U.S. public high school history teachers consider it important for students to write research papers in history and the social sciences. But the focus on standardized tests and superficial writing skills has left educators with little time to teach students how to write serious research papers and even less time to correct and grade them. As a result, this same study found that 81 percent of history teachers never assign a 20-page paper, and 62 percent never assign a 12-page paper, even to high school seniors.

Yet college professors continue to assign research papers. And they complain when the majority of students turn in mediocre (or abysmal) work. When college professors were asked in a 2006 survey conducted for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about students' preparation for college-level writing, reading, and research, only 6, 10, and 4 percent (respectively) said students were very well prepared. For many colleges and universities, this lack of preparation has shifted their focus from higher education to remediation. According to *Diploma to Nowhere*, a report published by Strong American Schools in 2008, more than one million of our high school graduates take remedial courses at our colleges each year. Periodically, the U.S. Department of Education tracks the percentage of students nationwide who are required to take remedial writing courses at two- and four-year colleges. According to recent estimates, between 7 and 14 percent of students take such classes. In fact, postsecondary institutions aren't the only ones offering them. A report published in 2005 by the National Commission on Writing found that state governments spend nearly a quarter of a billion dollars each year on remedial writing instruction for their employees.

By not preparing students for academic reading and writing, we set them up for failure in college and in the workplace. When we only ask that they read textbooks and write journal entries, we are not educating them. We are cheating them. We deny them the opportunity to see that reading is the path to knowledge, and that writing is the way to make knowledge one's own. The history research paper can help restore the importance of academic reading and writing in our schools, and in turn, refocus the purpose of education.

In 1987, I founded the *Concord Review*, the only quarterly journal that publishes history research papers by high school students from across the country and around the world. The papers, which average 5,500 words with endnotes and bibliographies, focus on a variety of topics and times, such as the hijab in Islam, the Bar Kokhba revolt, the Alaska pipeline, Irish nationalism, and Chinese immigration. I receive nearly 400 submissions for each issue, and I have the pleasure of selecting the best to publish. So far, essays in the *Concord Review* have come from 44

states and 38 foreign countries.

When I graduated from Harvard in 1962 with a degree in English literature, I had no idea that one day I would edit a unique journal. I'm a former corporate manager who worked for Polaroid, Pan Am, and North American Aviation. After 11 years in industry, I became a history teacher at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School in Concord, Massachusetts. While on sabbatical in my 10th year, I started the *Concord Review* with \$100,000 of an inheritance and the principal of my teacher retirement account. The exemplary work of some of my own students suggested that there were many others in the English-speaking world who were doing academic papers their peers might learn from. I wanted secondary students to see that they might be capable of serious historical scholarship.

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When I first began teaching in 1977, I assigned five- to seven-page papers in my 10th-grade classes. Often, a couple of students would find a topic so fascinating that they would read and write more than I had asked them to; they would turn in longer papers that were based on serious study and were well written. One 28-page paper that I still remember focused on the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. I figured there were students elsewhere who could also produce papers of that caliber and who would jump at the chance to have them considered for publication. I also hoped that by publishing the very best papers by high school students, I could motivate their peers to do similar work. Indeed, more than a few students over the years have told me that reading the essays in the *Concord Review* inspired them to try writing research papers themselves.

Students who wish to be published in the *Concord Review* often submit papers they have written for the few classes that still require them. For instance, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme, a rigorous curriculum for the junior and senior years of high school, requires that students write a 4,000-word research paper. Students choose a question to investigate for the paper, known as the "extended essay," that relates to one of the six academic areas they study in the IB curriculum: language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, experimental sciences, mathematics and computer science, and the arts. The IB program provides explicit steps, such as constructing an argument, referencing sources, and setting deadlines that students must take to complete the essay, the purpose of which is to help them "develop the skills of independent research that will be expected at university," according to the program's website. In addition to teachers in the IB program, some Advanced Placement (AP) teachers still assign research papers, even though the College Board, which runs AP, does not require them.

While I have published many such IB and AP essays, I often publish papers that students have spent several months, even an entire year, working on outside of class, usually with the guidance of a teacher. I have found that the more students learn about something, the more likely they are to want to write about it—and to strive to do it well.

While I admire these self-starters, I don't believe we should leave high standards for academic writing up to the students who set them for themselves. But this is what we have done in many of our public schools, where overburdened teachers do not have the time to guide students in writing history research papers. Having talked to hundreds of teachers over the years, I can attest that while many teachers may not have the time to devote to such papers, they do have the interest.

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Last summer, I gave a three-day workshop on student history research papers for middle and high school English and social studies teachers in Collier County, Florida. I showed these teachers how to assess four high school students' research papers using the procedures of the National Writing Board, a service I created to provide high school students with independent assessments of their history research papers. The board employs a few high school teachers we have trained to assess each research paper for the author's understanding of the topic, use of sources, evidence, and language. After reviewing each paper, the board provides each student with a four-page report of the paper's strengths and weaknesses. Students often ask us to send this report to college admissions officers if the students believe the assessment will strengthen their college applications.

The Florida teachers and I discussed the advantages students have in college—strong research and writing skills, deep knowledge of a historical topic—if they have researched and written a serious paper in high school. Still, the teachers could not fully commit to assigning their students a 20-page history research paper, the typical length of the ones I publish in the *Concord Review*. Each teacher had six classes of about 30 students, and one teacher was asked to teach seven classes that year, with more than 30 students in each class. If teachers with six classes were to ask

for 20-page research papers, they would have to guide 180 students in researching 180 individual topics. Who knows how many thousands of pages of rough drafts they would have to read, correct, and comment on? At the end of term, each teacher would have to assess 3,600 pages of final papers. The one teacher with more than 210 students would have at least 4,200 pages of final papers to grade.

It frustrates me that these willing teachers, who want to prepare their students for higher education by assigning them research papers, may not be able to do so. I share this story to illustrate that our educational priorities and practices must change. I applaud these public school teachers who invited me to Florida and the ones elsewhere who work with students on history research papers outside of class. Their predicament explains the dearth of public school students published in the *Concord Review*. Of the 11 papers published in each issue, usually two to four are written by students in public schools. The rest come from students in private schools. This was not always the case. In the first 10 years of the *Concord Review*, more than a third of the papers I published came from public school students. I have published and continue to publish several excellent papers by students from public

schools where teachers through the years have been able to encourage academic research and writing. These schools include Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville, Maryland; Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, New York; and Hunter College High School in New York City, for instance. But all too often, private school teachers seem to have more opportunities to engage students in this kind of work. As a result, publishing few public school students is one of the criticisms I continually face, but I can publish only the papers students send me.

I often wonder what insightful history papers students like Laura Arandes could have written had their teachers had time to challenge them with reading non-fiction books, analyzing dozens of primary sources, and writing history research papers. Arandes graduated from a public high school in Los Angeles where she never wrote more than five paragraphs. About a decade ago, when she arrived as a freshman at Harvard, she was shocked at how poorly prepared she was.

"I thought a required freshman writing course was meant to introduce us to college paper-writing.... In reality, the course was a refresher for most of the other students in the class," she wrote in a letter to me. "At a high-level academic institution, too many of the students come from private schools that have realized that it would be an academic failure on their parts to send their students to college without experience with longer papers, ... exposure to non-fiction literature, and knowledge of bibliographic techniques.

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“It took me two years to gain a working knowledge of paper-writing ... where I was constructing arguments and using evidence to support them.... So here I am, about to graduate, with a GPA much lower than it should be and no real way to explain to graduate schools and recruiting companies that I spent my first semesters just scraping by.”

Arandes, who graduated from Harvard in 2005, was unprepared for college-level writing because serious academic reading, research, and writing had been neglected in her K-12 curriculum, as it is in so many schools. In elementary schools, teachers rightfully focus on teaching students how to read. However, as E. D. Hirsch, Jr., an emeritus humanities professor whose research on comprehension inspired him to establish the Core Knowledge

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Foundation, and Daniel T. Willingham, a professor of psychology who focuses on applying cognitive science to K-12 classrooms, have written, teachers have erroneously been told to focus on reading comprehension strategies, such as finding the main idea and identifying the author’s audience.* Such an approach is time-consuming and shifts the emphasis away from texts that build students’ knowledge and vocabulary. As a result, students tend to spend more time practicing strategies with trivial fiction than acquiring the knowledge (found in serious fiction and nonfiction) that drives comprehension. In middle and high school, students are expected to independently read nonfiction science and social studies texts, but far too many of them struggle because they haven’t acquired the necessary foundation in elementary school.

As for writing, many elementary teachers do teach students to write, but this writing tends to focus only on students writing about themselves or writing short stories. Because students don’t spend enough time in the early grades reading nonfiction in sci-

ence and history, they lack the knowledge—of both content and the nature of nonfiction writing—necessary to undertake research papers in middle and high school. Teachers who do assign research papers must begin with the basics of academic writing.

To really teach students how to write, educators must give them examples of good writing found in nonfiction books and require students to read them, not skim them, cover to cover. Reading nonfiction contributes powerfully to the knowledge that students need in order to read more difficult material—the kind they will surely face in college. But more importantly, the work of writing a research paper will lead students to read more and become more knowledgeable in the process. As any good writer knows, the best writing emerges from a rich store of knowledge that the author is trying to pass on. Without that knowledge and the motivation to share it, all the literacy strategies in the world will not make much difference.

I suggest that our schools start assigning a page per year: each first-grader would be required to write a one-page paper on a subject other than himself or herself, with at least one source. At least one page and one source would be added each year to the required academic writing, so that fifth-graders,

for example, would have to write a five-page paper with five sources, ninth-graders would have to write a nine-page paper with nine sources, and so on, until each and every high school senior could be asked to prepare a 12-page history research paper with 12 sources.

Such a plan would gradually prepare students for future academic writing and could also reduce the need for remedial instruction in writing (and perhaps in remedial reading as well) when students enroll in college. If school districts adopted such a plan, it wouldn’t take high school teachers nearly as much time as it does now to teach students to

write history research papers; students could draw on the knowledge they gained in previous grades to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, formulate an argument or a narrative based on those sources, develop a bibliography, and write and revise numerous drafts.

As long as we leave it to chance whether students encounter teachers who somehow manage to carve out time to guide students through the research and writing process, students like Laura Arandes will continue to “scrape by” in college writing. “Modern public high schools have an obligation not to simply pump out graduates at the end of the year, but also to prepare them for the intellectual rigors of college,” Arandes wrote in her letter to me. As she learned, there is no better preparation for college than having students write history research papers.

So I urge teachers to do their best to assign them. I look forward to reading them. □



*For more on why reading comprehension depends largely on knowledge, see the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2006/index.cfm.