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A Recipe for Reluctant Researchers: Blending Personal Narrative with Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic From Electronic Sources

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Instructors find the challenge of getting developmental or reluctant writers to *write*, complicated by, if not a result of, difficulty in getting them to *read*. Nevertheless, by the time students reach college, they are expected to have reading skills needed for a modicum of research writing. College instructors tend to assign college-sized reading assignments on academic topics and expect academic research skills to produce college-sized papers. With developmental readers and writers we risk disappointment, matched by student frustration.

One potential remedy is based on several assumptions anchored in conventional wisdom. These principles may appear disparate at first, but the research writing strategies described later may demonstrate their congruency:

1. The best thinking and writing are done on topics in which students have personal investment.
2. Smaller, bite-sized chunks of high-interest text are less daunting to a reluctant reader than are scholarly articles launched with lengthy reviews of literature, complicated with technical methodology, mystifying findings, and opaque interpretations.
3. Many students, comfortable with keyboarding and browsing, prefer perusing electronic sources of information to traditional forms.
4. Developing readers may be less skilled and confident at unraveling text that weaves subjective argument than at contemplating clear reporting of more objective “facts.”

5. If there is a distinction between qualitative and quantitative intellectual styles, some reluctant readers of the latter group find wordy discourse more bewildering than the comfort of some concrete numbers.
6. One legitimate goal of education is to encourage *original* critical analysis of experience or data over *derivative* interpretation.
7. You have to start somewhere.

If you concur with five of the previous seven principles, you have passed the sympathetic reader quiz and may proceed!

This writing strategy assumes a few other notions as well: (a) that the developmental writing course is designed to provide practice in summarizing and synthesizing readings—practice that precedes but develops critical thinking and research skills needed in later courses; (b) that, therefore, the methods described here are introductory rather than the *modus operandi* of responsible researchers; and (c) that students can access the Internet and some electronic databases of information commonly provided by an institutional library.

Arriving at Experience-Based Topics

As stated in the first principle, students do their best writing on topics of direct relevance to them. A first-day assignment that serves multiple purposes is a personal inventory. It allows students to articulate a few things that are important to them and the instructor to get to know new students. The handout in [Appendix A](#) comes to a student with only the bold portions entered; the student fills in the middle column (perhaps as an outline for a diagnostic autobiographical writing); and the third column can be brainstormed with the instructor, a trusted friend, or peer group. The point is to move outward from internal concerns to recognition that (a) many people face similar issues, (b) others write about them, (c) we can learn more about issues by doing a little painless research, and (d) we may even contribute to a meaningful discussion of them. This version has some hypothetical student responses and speculation about related issues filled in. If a student chooses (or is directed) to return to it, such a one-page document can become a reference for research topics the entire semester.

Exploring a Related Research Issue

The second principle is locating text with manageable readability but high interest. With a little guidance, a student can easily turn topics from the third column of the personal interest inventory into subject descriptors or search terms for a brief news or feature article, the reading assignment for a simple summary. The simple summary has become a standard initial assignment in many college writing classes probably because, after taking the skill for granted for so long, instructors have finally recognized the primacy of basic reading comprehension to critical analysis. It also affords opportunity to teach distinctions between paraphrase, direct quotation, and accidental plagiarism, as well as the role and methods of attribution.

With a caution against using search engines to browse the entire World Wide Web (WWW or Web), for obvious reasons, students can be pointed in one of two more reliable directions. The first is an approved list of recognized electronic news sites. Among my favorites for this purpose are *USA Today* and *CNN*, primarily for their reader-friendliness and added resources. Other good online sources are the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *ABC* and *CBS News*, *Time*, *Business Week*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Reuters Top News Stories*, and even *Weird News*. Most regional newspapers and news stations also have a web presence. The list I provide developmental writing students can be found at <http://people.morehead-st.edu/fs/k.mincey/eng99.htm>, but search services, such as Google's News & Resources, <http://www.google.com/news>, offer more comprehensive lists of news links.

If students enter their search terms at such sites, they can browse the hits until they find a news or feature article brief enough to be readable but substantial enough to allow a simple summary to demonstrate summarization skills. If students have trouble locating an interesting article on a topic from the personal inventory, they can be "cut loose" to browse the approved news sites and their feature sections for topics of high interest and relevance to their own lives, an enjoyable task, as noted in the third principle. The style of most news writing is clear, concise, and comprehensible enough that reluctant readers can concentrate on the skills of summarizing without the distraction of laborious decoding, the fourth principle.

The second method of locating a brief article may not be as accessible as the first, but many institutional libraries provide faculty and students access to

electronic databases of full-text articles. Our students can use, among many other databases, Lexis-Nexus, FirstSearch, and EBSCOhost, which index many databases within. The state also provides, through the Kentucky Virtual Library, a variety of full-text article databases. Databases afford a little more quality control, but, in their absence, the web-based news sites are fine, with some discretion applied. Either eliminates the instructors' concern about lack of quality control in browsing the entire Web.

After selecting, printing, reading, marking text, and taking notes from the article, the student may proceed to generate a simple summary according to the instructor's guidelines to satisfy the preliminary assignment. The next step may be to turn the simple summary into a summary-response paper. Students may transform the first assignment into a personalized piece that blends the summary with their own experience, observations, or opinions applied. A dialogue between the outside source and the student writer begins, the latter contributing unique voice and perspective while refining basic research skills: avoiding plagiarism by distinguishing quoting from paraphrasing and by employing proper attribution signals.

A similar process can generate a simple synthesis assignment as well, using two or more brief outside sources. Likewise, a follow-up synthesis-response invites student writers into the conversation, testing their own experience and perspectives against the published writers'. One variation may be to ask students to find one objective news source and one opinion piece on the same topic to introduce some critical reading skills. In this case, it is probably best to suggest that students find the op-ed piece first by visiting that section of an electronic news source and then searching previous issues of the same news source for a related news story that may have sparked the commentary. LibrarySpot.com, <http://www.libraryspot.com/oped.htm>, provides a list of op-ed pages, as well. Another variation that allows some critical analysis in the response employs two opposing opinion pieces or new/feature articles that present differing perspectives. While the main purpose of a simple synthesis is just to establish a clear, unbiased connection between the two sources objectively summarized, the synthesis-response may move in a number of possible subjective directions.

Taking It Up a Notch: Spicing with “Facts”

Given enough practice with summary and synthesis, blended with writer response, students may gain some mastery in handling sources responsibly (accurate representation of the source’s ideas, paraphrasing, quoting, attribution, maybe even techniques for works cited) while developing confidence in their own voice and evidential skill.

A next goal can be the development of a “pretend” research paper, a product that looks something like a research project without the extensive legwork. A synthesis-response essay can be salted with several pieces of quantitative data to become a research paper that, while shortchanging an ideal process, can be a confidence booster to a developing or reluctant writer.

Several sources that package and provide easily accessed, “quick and dirty” quantitative data to make a paper appear extensively researched include the following. The Online Computer Library Center’s (OCLC.org) FirstSearch, which contains a database called FactSearch, is my favorite. FactSearch does not offer full-text articles, but it yields paragraph-sized chunks of abstracted text containing statistical data drawn from articles published in reputable journals and news sources. The student enjoys the benefit of sound statistical information from reliable sources without having to sift through lengthy prose (fifth principle). As with any database, bibliographical information is available to locate the entire article, if the researcher desires, facilitated by list of libraries that subscribe to the publication.

For example, entering the search term *road rage* in FactSearch yields nine records from publications such as *Detroit News*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *U.S. News & World Report* (Figure 1).

Author(s): Stephen, Andrew. Title: America: Bigger and Better Here: Road Rage. Source: New Statesman (2 Apr 1999): p.24 Abstract: “There are 187 million drivers in the US and 250,000 have been killed in road accidents since 1990—with road rage cases, according to the American AA [Automobile Association], having risen by 51 per cent since then. The Department of Transportation estimates that aggressive driving...now causes two-thirds of traffic accidents. British drivers, however, violent, do not carry weapons; but large numbers of Americans... do. In 37 per cent of the road rage cases enumerated by the AAA, guns were used. In 28 per cent, some other weapon—such as a baseball bat—was deployed, and in 35 percent of the cases the vehicles themselves were driven as weapons.” (p. 24)
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Figure 1. Sample FactSearch record

These records, rarely exceeding one page, can be printed or e-mailed, and, in a very few minutes, a researcher has enough data to serve several purposes: (a) perhaps to modify an less-informed initial perspective, (b) to stimulate further brainstorming and push the parameters of the paper in new directions, and (c) to empower writers with impressive outside evidence to complement their own analysis for a thesis of personal significance. The added advantage is that the data, in this form, is presented without much spin or interpretation, allowing the student to do original critical thinking about its import (sixth principle).

One other word about FactSearch before moving to the next source for “facts.” With the last group of students to whom I introduced FactSearch, I distributed a list of demonstration search terms for those who have trouble coming up with their own during such training sessions. I gave them a few minutes to choose from a list, including those in [Appendix B](#), and to find and report aloud to classmates the most startling statistics they found.

For several minutes, the classroom resounded with, “Wow! Listen to this” and “I didn’t know this, did you?” Although I couldn’t speculate about his path, one young man impressed us with the number of tacos consumed in Mexico per year and how many times, laid end to end, they would circle the earth.

Another recommended resource that may be available through your library is [Facts.com](#) (an evolution of the old *Facts on File*). It is a rich source of a variety of information and springboards for research, even for more advanced levels. While you may not be able to access all of its treasures on the web, you can visit its home page, simply [Facts.com](#), to find out more and request a free trial.

If you don’t have access to these subscription databases, however, another free, web-based method of finding quantitative evidence is to visit [LibrarySpot.com](#)’s statistics link which offers general sites (i.e., FedStats, Census Bureau, Facts For You, American FactFinder, Social Statistics, Statistical Resources on the Web, etc.), topical links (i.e., census children, demographics, economic, education, ethnicities, environment, health, justice, state and local, population, religions, world, and women) and various governmental department statistics.

These fragments of quantitative data spice up a paper in several ways. They can provide startling statistics in an opening attention hook. They can

establish quantitative significance of a problem or phenomenon in an introduction or body paragraph. They can clinch a line of analysis or reinforce a personal observation by lending the credibility of statistical generalization. Finally, they demonstrate that a writer has done some homework.

Using Numbers for Critical Thinking Assignments

Some instructors may still be teaching the traditional critical thinking units, including inductive and deductive reasoning, the Toulmin model, and formal and informal fallacies (with their obscure Latin or quaint metaphorical names) to students of argumentative writing. While such abstractions may overwhelm many first-year college writers, let alone developmental writers, practice in critical analysis need not be abandoned for the reluctant reader and writer. Again, we might consider the potential of concrete, comprehensible numbers for critical thinking about junk statistics.

I recommend the Statistical Assessment Service at <http://www.stats.org>. Notice the *org* suffix (Stats.com will please the sports enthusiasts, but that's a different ballpark). Stats.org is a media watchdog for the improper or distorted use of quantitative data. Its wealth of links and articles expose the pervasiveness of junk statistics and are a real eye-opener for the gullible, noncritical consumer of public discourse purveyed by spurious numbers.

Other related sites are JunkScience.com, another media watchdog, and Bad Science, <http://www.ems.psu.edu/~fraser/BadScience.html>. While it would be a hastily generalized claim about all developmental students, some, whose intelligence contradicts a lackluster academic record, seem to have built up their own street-smart skepticism that tends to be somewhat iconoclastic if not anti-intellectual. Such students delight in discovering that unsuspecting readers can be so duped, but best of all, that unethical academic and media writers can be caught and exposed.

A Closing Anecdote

Anthony first joined me in a precollege, developmental writing course. On the second day of class, he brought in his personal interest inventory with

the second column filled in to use as an outline for his get-acquainted, in-class diagnostic writing. In the space beside “Family,” he had noted that his mother is a single mom, and in the essay he shared some reserved yet revealing emotions about having grown up without a father in his life.

In a follow-up conference about his autobiographical writing, we brainstormed toward the third column, related issues in the outside world. I detected that the issue of absentee fathers was important to him. He chose that topic to search for a news article for his simple summary assignment. Not until we built a little more trust in a subsequent conference about his upcoming response to the simple summary did Anthony share his excitement about soon becoming a father himself. His girlfriend was still in high school, but he could not conceal his pride and commitment to the expectant mother and their future child. His summary-response documented those feelings as an extension to the summary of the article he had read and written about before.

Anthony moved on to other topics for the next several papers, but when it came time later in the semester to construct his source paper (a synthesis-response, salted with some quantitative data), he chose to return to the issue of absentee fathers. FactSearch gave him more information than he could possibly use to document the troubling statistics. Particularly distressing to him were the gloomy numbers about the number of African American kids without fathers, because they corroborated his observations from his own neighborhood. His passion for the subject developing along with his unborn child, he also refined his personal observations, motivations, and dedication to the importance of fatherhood. His source paper was one of the best I had received from a developmental writer.

The next semester, Anthony showed up in Writing I, the first college-level course. Beaming, he opened his wallet and displayed a photograph of his new son. That semester, he wrote several papers about several subjects, but when the time came to choose a topic to thoroughly research for a more substantial project, fatherhood was still on his mind. He had visited the financial aid and housing offices to see if he could help his girlfriend come to school with him after graduation so their family could be together.

Early in the Writing I research project, we looked back at his source paper from the previous developmental writing course and found passages and sources that were still useful for his new approach, but he proceeded to

learn new research techniques to find additional sources with more challenge to read, interpret, and synthesize as evidence for his argumentative critical analysis. He conducted interviews and other field research. By the end of the term, he had constructed a college-level research paper on the importance of a father in a child's development, full of evidence from well-documented outside sources and charged with the credibility of an engaged writer's voice. It was a huge contrast to his first attempt at a research paper, but (seventh principle) he had to start somewhere.

Appendix A INVENTORY OF EXPERIENCES, INTERESTS, AND CONCERNS

Topic	Me	Related Issues in the Outside World
Family	<i>Parents divorced, remarried Single mom My kids...</i>	<i>Children and divorce, step families Single parents Non-traditional college students</i>
Home life	<i>Army kid Moved around a lot Fighting at home Stable, loving family</i>	<i>Military kids Coping with stresses of change Domestic abuse, sibling rivalry Family values</i>
Friends/ roommates	<i>Friend in high school died Roommate uses drugs</i>	<i>Teen mortality, risky behaviors, drunk driving Dealing with drug abusers, co-dependency</i>
School	<i>Middle school teacher ruined my life Didn't learn enough in high school School pressures</i>	<i>Irresponsible, unprofessional educators Quality schools, educational liability Dress codes, student rights</i>
Activities/hobbies	<i>Sports Music</i>	<i>Drug-testing for athletes, college football playoffs Rap and violence, album labeling</i>
Influences/beliefs	<i>Grandma is my mentor What my friends believe What I believe</i>	<i>Extended family, grandparents' rights, heroes Peer pressure Faith and values, search for meaning</i>

Appendix A (continued)

Worries/conflicts	<i>Sex</i> <i>Kids killing kids</i>	<i>Trends in teen sexual behavior, virginity, promiscuity</i> <i>Children and violence</i>
Ambitions/goals	<i>Majoring in CIS</i> <i>Want to make lots of money</i> <i>Happiness</i>	<i>Careers in computers</i> <i>Most lucrative professions, job market</i> <i>Satisfaction indexes, quality of life</i>

APPENDIX B LIST OF SAMPLE RESEARCH TERMS

Absentee fathers	Incompetent teachers	Suppressed memories
Backpack injury	Interracial adoption	School bullies
Bottled water	Light deprivation	Second-hand smoke
Cell phone dangers	Music & I.Q.	Sleep deprivation
Circumcision	Non-traditional studentsv	Sports & drug testing
College football playoffs	Organ donation	Step-families
Hate crimes	Pet therapy	Teenagers & shoplifting
Hazing	Racial profiling	Telemarketing scams
Human cloning	Radon	Year-around school

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