

# Writing Matters



## Why Do a Research Paper?

Before giving your students any assignment, it is good practice to ask yourself why you are assigning that particular project. Does this specific assignment reflect the overall goals of the course? If so, how does it help students accomplish the course goals? Does it reflect what students may be asked to do once they leave SCC, either to transfer to another school or to begin their professional careers? The research paper, in particular, should undergo this type of scrutiny simply because it is the type of writing assignment that can take on many different shapes and styles. Too many times, we assign research papers simply because it's what college instructors are "supposed" to do. After all, *we* wrote many research papers during *our* college years! Aside from assigning it out of habit, the research paper can be a valuable teaching tool encompassing many skills: finding/evaluating resources, reading comprehension, critical thinking, note taking, drafting, revision/editing, and more. If those skills are valuable to your students' futures, the research paper may be just the assignment you need!

## Practical Tips in Assigning the Research Paper

For a formal assignment such as a research paper, it is important to think of it in terms of steps and tasks. Ask yourself what concrete tasks students must perform in order to succeed on the research paper.

First, students need support in finding and evaluating resources. Knowing what is considered an "academic" resource and what isn't is not an automatic skill. Remember, our students are novices, and many have never done research of any kind before. Resources can seem overwhelming.

The second place that students often need support from their instructor is in

the note-taking phase. The process of reading a particular passage, understanding it, converting it into one's own words, and then writing those words down is a highly complex process. Students will frequently write word-for-word what they see in a resource because they don't understand the benefit of taking notes in order to "digest" the information.

After taking notes from their resources, students are often left bewildered as to what to do with the information they have. Overwhelmed and insecure, they can fall prey to plagiarism out of a sense of desperation to simply get

something on the page to turn in. Again, this is a step in the process that does not come naturally to any student. Our students need our support in figuring out how to organize the information they have and, in particular, how to integrate it into their own writing. The skills required in using quotations, paraphrases, summaries and citations are foreign to many students.

Finally, most of our students have bought into the myth of the perfect writer. They believe that writing is a one-time shot; once they've typed up their papers, they are done with them and are ready to turn

them in. We must be very concrete in our support and instructions to students in regards to revision and editing. It is surprising the number of students who admit that proofreading is a good skill, yet they do not do it. One helpful tool is the writing conference, a brief 15-minute meeting with a student where you answer questions and offer advice on polishing a rough draft into a finished, final draft.

Assigning the research paper gives us a unique opportunity to instill in our students habits and skills that benefit them in other classes and their careers. Lay it out in concrete steps, and they will be well on their ways toward success.

**Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.**

**— Zora Neale Hurston**

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## NEWSFLASH!



### WAC Essay Awards Deadline is Quickly Approaching!

Students have until 4 pm on Thursday, March 31, 2011, to submit their entries for the WAC Essay Awards. This is a unique opportunity for students to showcase the writing they have done for classes during this academic year (Fall 2010-Spring 2011). And, the cash prizes offer their own incentive!

Essays are accepted in one of two categories: **Research** and **Non-Research** Essays.

Official rules and a submission cover sheet can be found at:

[www.southwesterncc.edu/wac/essayawards/2011](http://www.southwesterncc.edu/wac/essayawards/2011)



While the signs in these photos offer good advice, the message is lost in the presentation.

If we knew what is was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?

— Albert Einstein