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## INTRODUCTION

# Rethinking the Research Paper

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### IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU'LL LEARN TO ...

- Recognize the differences between reporting information and *using* it to explore a question or make an argument.
  - Reevaluate your assumptions about the research paper genre and ways of knowing.
  - Distinguish between a research *essay* and a conventional research *paper* and describe the similarities and differences between them.
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Unlike most textbooks, this one begins with your writing, not mine. Open a fresh page in your notebook, computer, or tablet and spend 10 minutes doing the following exercise.

## EXERCISE 1

### This I Believe

Most of us were taught to think before we write, to have it all figured out in our heads before we compose. This exercise asks you to think *through* writing rather than *before*, letting the words on the page lead you to what you want to say. With practice, that's surprisingly easy using a technique called *fastwriting*. Basically, you just write down whatever comes into your head, not worrying about whether you're being eloquent, grammatically correct, or even very smart. If the writing stalls, write about that; or write about what you've already written until you find a new trail to follow. Just keep your fingers moving.

**STEP 1:** Following is a series of statements about the research paper assignment. Choose one that you believe is true or one that you believe is false. Then, in your notebook or on your computer—wherever

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you can write faster—write for 3 minutes without stopping about the belief you chose. Why do you think it's true or false? Where did you get these ideas? Is there a logic behind your beliefs? What might that be? Whenever you feel moved to do so, tell a story.

- You have to know your thesis before you start.
- You have to be objective.
- You can't use the pronoun *I*.
- You can use your own experiences and observations as evidence.
- You can use your own writing voice.
- There is always a structure you must follow.
- You're supposed to use your own opinions.

**STEP 2:** Now consider the truth of the following statements. These statements have less to do with research papers than with how you see facts, information, and knowledge and how they're created. Choose one of these statements\* to launch another 3-minute fastwrite. Don't worry if you end up thinking about more than one statement in your writing. Start by writing about whether you agree or disagree with the statement, and then explore why. Continually look for concrete connections between what you think about these statements and what you've seen or experienced in your own life.

- There is a big difference between facts and opinions.
- Pretty much everything you read in textbooks is true.
- People are entitled to their own opinions, and no one opinion is better than another.
- There's a big difference between a *fact* in the sciences and a *fact* in the humanities.
- When two experts disagree, one of them has to be wrong.



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## Learning and Unlearning 101

By the time we get to college, most of us have written research papers, beginning as early as the eighth grade. Whenever we've done something for a long time—even if we don't think we're

\*Part of this list is from Marlene Schommer, "Effects of Beliefs About the Nature of Knowledge on Comprehension," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 82 (1990): 498–504.



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Using This Book 3

very good at it—we have assumptions about how it's *supposed* to be done. For example,

“Whenever you can, use big words in your school writing to sound smart.”

“The best research is in books.”

Dig a little deeper, and you'll discover that these assumptions are often based on beliefs about how things work in the world. For example, the importance of using “big words” and relying on “book facts” both arise from beliefs about authority in academic writing—where it comes from, who has it, and who doesn't. This might seem like overthinking things, but it *really matters* what implicit beliefs are at work whenever someone is trying to learn to do new things. Our assumptions, frankly, are often misleading, incomplete, or downright unhelpful. But how do you know that? By flushing those birds from the underbrush and taking a good look at them from time to time. That was the purpose of Exercise 1. The first part of Exercise 1 focused on a few beliefs you might have about writing academic research papers. Maybe you had a discussion in class about it. From my own research on common beliefs about research writing, I once discovered that one of the most common assumptions first-year college students share is this one: You have to know your thesis before you start a research paper—which obviously implies the belief that discovery is not the point of research.

The second part of Exercise 1 might have gotten you thinking about some beliefs and attitudes you hadn't thought much about—what a “fact” is, the nature and value of “opinions,” and how you view experts and authorities.

Both sets of assumptions—one about the research paper genre and the other about how we come to know things—have a huge effect on how you approach the assignment. No doubt many beliefs have some truth to them. Other beliefs, however, may need to be *unlearned* if you're going to take your research writing to the next level. Keep these beliefs out in the open, where you can see and evaluate them to determine if you have some unlearning to do.

## Using This Book

### The Exercises

Throughout *The Curious Researcher*, you'll be asked to do exercises that either help you prepare your research paper or actually help you write it. You'll need a research notebook in which you'll do the exercises.

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and perhaps compile your notes for the paper. Any notebook will do, as long as there are sufficient pages and left margins. Your instructor may ask you to hand in the work you do in response to the exercises, so it might be useful to use a notebook with detachable pages. You may also choose to do these exercises on a computer rather than in a notebook. If you do, just make sure that it feels good to write fast and write badly.

Write badly? Well, not on purpose. But if the notebook is going to be useful, it has to be a place where you don't mind lowering your standards, getting writing down even if it's awkward and unfocused. The notebook is where you have conversations with yourself, and what's important is not the beauty of a sentence or airtight reasoning but breathlessly chasing after language that threatens to run away from you. Many of the exercises in this book, including the one that started it, invite you to write badly because in doing so, you can use writing to discover what you think.



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### The Five-Week Plan

If you're excited about your research project, that's great. You probably already know that it can be interesting work. But if you're dreading the work ahead of you, then your instinct might be to procrastinate, to put it off until the week it's due. That would be a mistake, of course. It's likely that the paper won't be very good. Because procrastination is the enemy, this book was designed to help you budget your time and move through the research and writing process in five weeks. But there's another reason, too, that you should think about how your research project will develop over time: You will start out not knowing very much about your topic, and how much you know impacts how much you can do. You will not, for example, be able to come up with a very strong research question until you have some working knowledge of your topic. Behind the five-week plan is the idea that research is developmental—your abilities will develop over time.

It may take you a little longer, or you may be able to finish your paper a little more quickly. But at least initially, use the book sequentially, unless your instructor gives you other advice.

### Alternatives to the Five-Week Plan

Though *The Curious Researcher* is structured by weeks, you can easily ignore that plan and use the book to solve problems as they arise. Use it when you need to find or narrow a topic, refine a thesis, do advanced searching on the Internet, organize your paper, take useful notes, and so on. The overviews of Modern Language Association (MLA) and American Psychological Association (APA)



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research paper conventions in Appendixes A and B, respectively, provide complete guides to both formats and make it easier to find answers to your specific technical questions at any point in the process of writing your paper.

## The Research Paper Versus the Research Report

In high school, I wrote a research “paper” on existentialism for my philosophy class. I understood the task as skimming a book or two on the topic, reading the entry on “existentialism” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, putting notes on some notecards, and writing down everything I learned. That took about six pages. Did I start with a question? No. Was I expressing an opinion of some kind about existentialism? Not really. Did I organize the information with some idea about existentialism that I wanted to relay to readers? Nope. Was I motivated by a question about the philosophy that I hoped to explore? Certainly not. What I wrote was a research *report*, and that is a quite different assignment than almost any research paper you’ll be asked to write in college.

### Discovering Your Purpose

For the paper you’re about to write, the information you collect must be used much more *purposefully* than simply reporting what’s known about a particular topic. Most likely, you will define what that purpose is and, in an inquiry-based project, it will arise from the question that is driving your investigation. In the beginning, that question may not be very specific. For example, why do dog trainers seem so polarized about the best way to make Spot sit? Later, as you refine the question, you’ll get even more guidance about your purpose in the essay. A question like, “What is the evidence that domestic dogs behave like wild animals, and how does this influence theories of training?” might lead you to make an argument or explore some little-known aspect of the issue.

Whatever the purpose of your paper turns out to be, the process usually begins with something you’ve wondered about, some itchy question about an aspect of the world you’d love to know the answer to. It’s the writer’s curiosity—not the teacher’s—that is at the heart of the college research paper.

In some ways, frankly, *research reports* are easier. You just go out and collect as much stuff as you can, write it down, organize it,

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and write it down again in the paper. Your job is largely mechanical and often deadening. In the *research paper*, you take a much more active role in *shaping and being shaped* by the information you encounter. That's harder because you must evaluate, judge, interpret, and analyze. But it's also much more satisfying because what you end up with says something about who you are and how you see things.

**How Formal Should It Be?**

Whenever I got a research paper assignment, it often felt as if I were being asked to change out of blue jeans and a wrinkled oxford shirt and get into a stiff tuxedo. Tuxedos have their place, such as at the junior prom or the Grammy Awards, but they're just not me. When I first started writing research papers, I used to think that I *had* to be formal, that I needed to use big words like *myriad* and *ameliorate* and to use the pronoun *one* instead of *I*. I thought the paper absolutely needed to have an introduction, body, and conclusion—say what I was going to say, say it, and say what I had said. It's no wonder that the first college research paper I had to write—on Plato's *Republic* for another philosophy class—seemed to me as though it were written by someone else. I felt I was at arm's length from the topic I was writing about.

What we're usually talking about when we talk about formality in research writing is trying to locate ourselves in the final product. How is locating ourselves possible if we can't use first person or can't draw on our personal experiences and observations? If the best research is "objective," aren't we supposed to vacate the building? The simple answer to the last question is "no." Even in the most scientific articles, writers have a presence, though it's often ghostly. They are present in the questions they ask, the things they emphasize, and the words they choose. Academic researchers work within *discourse communities* that may limit their movements somewhat but do not ever bind their feet. "Discourse community" is a term academics use to describe certain identifiable ways in which people with expertise talk to each other, ask questions, or evaluate evidence they consider convincing. We all belong to discourse communities; any time you have a feeling that there are certain things that might be said and certain ways to say them, you're probably thinking of a particular discourse community.

Although you've been going to school for years, you're still fairly new to the academic discourse communities. You don't yet know how they work; that's something you'll learn later as you begin to

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specialize in your academic major. What's far more important as you begin academic research is developing the habits of mind that will help you know what might be a researchable question and how to see patterns in the information you collect, along with skills like knowing where to find the information you need. Most important of all, you should feel—no matter what you end up writing about—that you're part of an ongoing conversation about your topic: speculating, asking questions, offering opinions, pointing to gaps, making connections. In short, you must not vacate the building but occupy it, and the easiest way to do this, at least at first, is to worry less about the "rules" of the research paper than the process of discovering what you want to say.

## The Question Is You

Okay, so how do you have a strong presence in a research paper aside from talking about yourself? More than anything else, you are present in the questions you ask, particularly the inquiry question that is at the heart of your investigation of a topic. An inquiry question both makes you curious about a topic and suggests what might lead to answers in which other people have a stake, too. A good question is a wonderful thing. As kids, my friends and I used to mess with magnets and iron filings. We would scatter iron filings on a steel pot lid and move the magnet around underneath, marveling at the patterns it produced in the filings. Good questions have the same power. They help you to see patterns in information and to organize it in a way that makes scattered information easier to make sense of. Finding the question, particularly the one *key* question about your research topic that most interests you, is how any project becomes *your* project. In an inquiry-based investigation, questions power the process, and learning to ask good ones may be the most essential skill.

## Thinking Like an Academic Writer

What does it mean to *think* like an academic writer? These are some habits of mind that are typical:

1. Academic inquiry begins with questions, not answers.
2. Because genuine inquiry must be sustained over time, it's essential that researchers suspend judgment and even tolerate some confusion. You do research not because you know what you think already but because you want to discover what you think.

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3. Insight is the result of *conversation* in which the writer assumes at least two seemingly contrary roles: believer and doubter, generator and judge.
4. Writers take responsibility for their ideas, accepting both the credit for and the consequences of putting forth those ideas for dialogue and debate.

## A Method of Discovery

If college research assignments don't simply report information on a topic, what do they do? They are organized around what you think—what you believe is important to say about your topic—and there are three ways you can arrive at these ideas:

1. You can know what you think from the start and write a paper that begins with a thesis and provides evidence that proves it.
2. You can have a hunch about what you think and test that hunch against the evidence you collect.
3. You can begin by not knowing what you think—only that you have questions that really interest you about a topic.

Academic inquiry rarely begins with item 1. After all, if you already know the answer, why would you do the research? It's much more likely that what inspires research would be a hunch or a question or both. The motive, as I've said before, is discovery. *The Curious Researcher* promotes a method of discovery that probably isn't familiar to you: essaying.

*Essay* is a term used so widely to describe school writing that it often doesn't seem to carry much particular meaning. But I have something particular in mind.

The term *essai* was coined by Michel Montaigne, a sixteenth-century Frenchman; in French, it means "to attempt" or "to try." For Montaigne and the essayists who follow his tradition, the essay is less an opportunity to *prove* something than an attempt to *find out*. An essay, at least initially, is often exploratory rather than argumentative, testing the truth of an idea or attempting to discover what might be true. (Montaigne even once had coins minted that said *Que sais-je?*—"What do I know?") The essay is often openly subjective and frequently takes a conversational, even intimate, form.

Now, this probably sounds nothing like any research paper you've ever written. Certainly, the dominant mode of the academic research paper is impersonal and argumentative. But if you consider



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writing a *research essay* instead of the usual *research paper*, four things might happen:

1. *You'll discover that your choice of possible topics suddenly expands.* If you're not limited to arguing a position on a topic, then you can explore any topic that you find puzzling in interesting ways, and you can risk asking questions that might complicate your point of view.
2. *You'll find that you'll approach your topics differently.* You'll be more open to conflicting points of view and perhaps more willing to change your mind about what you think. As one of my students once told me, this is a more honest kind of objectivity.
3. *You'll see a stronger connection between this assignment and the writing you've done all semester.* Research is something all writers do, not a separate activity or genre that exists only on demand. You may discover that research can be a revision strategy for improving essays you wrote earlier in the semester.
4. *You'll find that you can't hide.* The research report often encourages the writer to play a passive role; the research essay doesn't easily tolerate passivity. You'll probably find this both liberating and frustrating. While you may likely welcome the chance to incorporate your opinions, you may find it difficult to add your voice to those of your sources.

As you'll see later in this Introduction, the form a research essay can take may be a bit different from the usual thesis-proof research paper. But even if you write a more conventional (and frankly more common) paper that makes an argument, the method of essaying can help you discover the claims you want to argue.

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## Firing on Four Cylinders of Information

Whatever the genre, writers write with information. But what kind? There are essentially four sources of information for nonfiction:

1. Memory and experience;
2. Observation;
3. Reading; and
4. Interview.

A particular type of writing may emphasize one source over another. For example, literary analysis obviously leans very heavily

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on reading. The information largely comes from the text you're studying. A personal essay is often built largely from memory. The research essay, however, is a genre that typically fires on all four cylinders, powered by all four sources of information. For example, for an essay exploring the behavior of sports fans, you may observe the behavior of students at a football game, read critiques of unruly soccer fans at the World Cup or theories about group behavior, and remember your own experience as a fan of the Chicago Cubs (God help you!) when you were growing up.

What makes research writing "authoritative" or convincing is less whether you sound objective than whether you are able to find *varied* and *credible* sources of information to explore your research question. Credible to whom? That depends on your audience. The more specialized the audience (the more expertise they have on your topic), the more demanding their standards for evidence.



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### "It's Just My Opinion"

In the end, *you* will become an authority of sorts on your research topic. I know that's hard to believe. One of the things my students often complain about is their struggle to put their opinions in their papers: "I've got all these facts, and sometimes I don't know what to say other than whether I disagree or agree with them." What these students often *seem* to say is that they don't really trust their own authority enough to do much more than state briefly what they feel: "Facts are facts. How can you argue with them?"

Perhaps more than any other college assignment, research projects challenge our knowledge beliefs. These can reach pretty deeply: things like how we feel about the value of our ideas, our relationship to authority, and most profoundly, whether we think that knowledge is fixed and certain or is something that is constantly shifting. Step 2 of Exercise 1, which began this Introduction, may have started you thinking about these questions. Are facts unsailable? Or are they simply claims that can be evaluated like any others? Is the struggle to evaluate conflicting claims an obstacle to doing research, or the point of it? Are experts supposed to know all the answers? What makes one opinion more valid than another? What makes *your* opinion valid?

I hope you write a great essay in the next five or so weeks. But I also hope that the process you follow in doing so inspires you to reflect on how you—and perhaps all of us—come to know what seems to be true. I hope you find yourself doing something you may not have done much before: thinking about thinking.



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## Facts Don't Kill

When my students comment on a reading and say, “It kinda reads like a research paper,” everybody knows what that means: It’s dry and it’s boring. Most of my students believe that the minute you start having to use facts in your writing, the prose wilts and dies like an unwatered begonia. It’s an understandable attitude. There are many examples of dry and wooden informational writing, and among them, unfortunately, may be some textbooks you are asked to read.

But factual writing doesn’t have to be dull. You may not consider my essay, “Theories of Intelligence” (see the following exercise), a research paper. It may be unlike any research paper you’ve imagined. It’s personal. It tells stories. Its thesis is at the end rather than at the beginning. And yet, it is prompted by a question—Why is it that for so many years I felt dumb despite evidence to the contrary?—and it uses cited research to explore the answers. “Theories of Intelligence” may not be a model for the kind of research essay you will write—your instructor will give you guidelines on that—but I hope it is a useful model for the kind of thinking you can do about any topic when you start with questions rather than answers.

### EXERCISE 2

#### Reflecting on “Theories of Intelligence”

The following essay may challenge your “genre knowledge.” That is, it may defy your expectations about what a “research paper” should be like. Before you read it, then, spend a little time jotting down the five or six features of an academic research paper, at least as you understand it. For example,

- What should it sound like?
- How should it be structured?
- How should it use information, and what kinds of information?
- What are appropriate topics for academic research?
- What kind of presence should the writer have?
- What makes a research paper authoritative?

Jot down your list of research paper conventions, and then read “Theories of Intelligence,” paying attention to the presence or



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