

A Few Key Issues in Passionate (and Creative) Research

As you and your students hit the research trail, there are certain issues you will want to explore with them. The passionate novice may develop some initial habits that should be discussed and highlighted, asking when are they useful and when not? As discussed in this chapter, these include but are not limited to, spending more time on the research than on the writing itself, resulting in a less than satisfactory product and a lot of good intentions; trying to cram all the products of research into the text and forgetting that sources are best used to amplify the author's insights; forgetting that there's no such thing as wasted research since what is learned on one project may eventually inform a later project; relying too much on the voices of others and neglecting to trust lived experience; forgetting, as well, that sources are variable and must be evaluated; overlooking the reality that writing is both solitary *and* communal and that research is as well; and ignoring or paying too much attention to the reader, for either extreme can potentially present a problem.

Spending more time on the research than the task.

When Catherine Wald interviewed novelist Frederick Busch, she learned that Busch, an academic and a novelist whose *job* it is to write, spends remarkable stretches of time involved with research. Busch explained he would "...live with photos of New York city at the end of the century. Every day before work I would put a new photo on my desk. I'd lean my head on my hands and fall into the picture, and try to imagine from visual elements what might have been

available to the other senses.” (Wald 2000, 65) In a similar manner, interviews Busch conducted provided atmosphere and background for his novel “‘I will probably use none of that information directly, but I will have it as part of the psychological weather in which my characters lived,’ he said” (Wald 2000, 65). Certainly undergraduates cannot *live* with photographs and return home for a week of family interviewing, so they have to learn to strike a bargain between the ideal and the possible:

I have no classes on Friday and worked on my paper all day. I finally completed the introductory part and proceeded to re-word some of the telegrams. I eliminated two of them and added a postcard, which was more factual, since I had decided to forego the telegram theme. I wasn't used to importing clip art and that took me awhile, but I finally got it. I changed the ending from a dialogue to a summary of the remainder of my mother's life. Some people wanted to know what happened to everybody. I worked a full eight hours on this project today. In fact, it's almost eight o'clock and I haven't eaten today, so I am going to do that now.

Some students can keep up with Margaret's—a focused reentry student--pace, others will find it helpful to brainstorm together about ways to work these projects into busy lives, including the need to master new technologies (clip art, web page design) that will allow them to deliver a product vision that they have become invested in to their readers.

At various points in a project, I ask students to memo me about their progress and to include a timeline that indicates all the things that could “get in the way” of the successful completion of their project. By putting class due dates on the same calendar with social and work schedules, by visualizing how much time and work actually exists, some researchers have a better chance of finishing what they have started.

Trying to cram all the results into the product.

Well, at this point I’m laughing. Perhaps you found this discussion crammed too full. Like any writer, I love the pithy epigraph, enjoy finding a kindred soul, the author who says something better for me than I can say it myself. Since it takes one to know one, the self-indulgent researcher benefits from readers who will help them achieve an effective balance. With even a single passionate researcher in your midst, you’re well positioned for a class discussion about the ways readers process block quotes and in-text documentation, and respond to a weave of voices. There are many ways of providing visual aids (having researchers initially include all paraphrased or cited work in a different color in the main text, and so on). You can also help writers view citation in a new light, as a stylistic option.

When writing about the year of her birth and the Iowa winters, Rachel Herrington intentionally styled her essay to include more of her own descriptive prose than the factual evidence she reviewed with such energy:

While the majority of the class was jamming as much general facts into their papers, I put away all my research and delved into learning about the patterns of Iowa weather. I lived there off eight years and visit family frequently, so I have had some first hand experience with the winters, the beautiful aspects and the scary aspects. I wanted to concentrate on my birth as well, because my individual history is an interesting story to me. I went to two libraries and looked up information through climate related books, as well as checked out several books that catered to just Iowa and its state history. I sorted through it all, and found a lot of research about the winters in this state.

Rachel is beginning to understand research as a writer: “Always with research, when you get it all done, you think, ‘Geez, I read one hundred things, and there were probably only ten that really helped.’ But the only way you knew how helpful those ten things were was because you did read the other ninety.” (Patricia O’Toole, quoted by Catherine Wald, 2000, 63). Help your writers remember, that if they put it in, they have that many more options for deciding what to take out. Rachel found she had the opportunity to decide: “I did cut quite a few weather information pieces out, but I left the ones that seemed the most effective in explaining how brutal Iowa winters could be.” Without including this research and

sharing with peer readers, Rachel might not have known which of her citations were “the most effective.”

Forgetting that research on one project may inform future projects.

In “This, Too, Is Research,” Melissa Goldthwaite discusses the ways poets use research; they look for inspiration, details, enriching and supplementing memories, and for learning (2001). Catherine Wald interviewing Arthur Golden, author of *Memoirs of a Geisha* about the place of research in his process confirms Goldthwaite’s sense of the range of roles research can play for creative writers. Golden explains: “You are drawn to a subject because it interests you. Then as you begin to learn about things through research, you begin to imagine moments and aspects of your character, and you find your imagination sparked.” Slightly later in the interview, Golden adds: “reality is always so much more interesting than what I would try to imagine.” (qtd. in Wald 2000, 61-62).

To aid in this process, Goldthwaite suggests that poets carry a notebook, just as professional poets often mention they do. And for some writers like herself, the notebook becomes a lifelong collection of potential writing ideas: “I have an old shoebox full of newspaper clippings, scraps of paper and restaurant napkins with ideas written on them, and countless ticket stubs from concerts, movies, the ballet. When I can’t think of something to write, I dig through the shoebox for inspiration” (2000, 200). Leaving something out is a hard lesson to learn. It seems counter-intuitive to realize that showing only the tip of the iceberg is not the way to show off as a writer, but in this case, as in so many others, less

is more. And novice authors can be consoled with the idea that no research is ever really wasted. Writers have virtual and literal shoeboxes, notebooks, and a lifetime of memories of lived and learned experience that they will regularly draw upon.

Relying too much on the confirmation of others and forgetting experiential authority and/or forgetting that sources are variable and must be compared and evaluated.

Often, when research is undertaken, it primarily informs the author who adds new data to his central storehouse, his CPU, the brain. Understanding that this process need not result in plagiarism but instead provides a background, develops narrative assurance, suggests that the writer who is always learning is a writer who can draw on experience and intuition as well as secondary sources. Also, writers can learn from ethnographers, those who study cultures and represent those cultures—to the degree possible—from the culture's point of view. Ethnographers triangulate, compare multiple sources: interviews, documents, artifacts, observations. So too the essayist and article writer needs to learn to compare interview sources, WWW sources, conflicting historical interpretations, and so on. Initially, an interview of family members can highlight the complexity and fallibility of memory (and lead to a discussion of how to reconcile other sorts of sources like interviews and documents). Here's what Rachel Herrington found:

I was born during a bad snowstorm, something that I know from family stories. But I hadn't heard this story for quite some time. So, I interviewed both of my parents which was the most helpful research pertaining to the personal aspect of the paper. My parents have been divorced for seventeen years, and it is amazing what memories and details have been lost or morphed in that time period. The generally story of my birth was about the same coming from both my mom and my dad. But they each remembered specific details that the other did not. Between the two of them, I gathered the most vivid description of my birth and the weather that surrounded it.

Rachel found that parents don't agree but also that disagreement can be mediated and other sources consulted.

Asking students to interview professional writers about their research practices can be fruitful early in a term and may result in lists and options few in class have ever thought of as when Melissa Goldthwaite suggests poets consult the *Oxford English Dictionary*, paint swatches, online catalogs, conduct interviews with experts and look to "public records: court records, driving records, birth and death records, probate records, police records, property records, and so on. Many of these records are available online..." (2001, 196). Using records like these, the student writing about a parent in 1978 could surely gather a great deal of background data that will contextualize family stories.

Buying into the myth of solitary genesis (and forgetting research inevitably resituates the writer in community).

To illustrate this point, I return you to my opening discussion about poetry writing. When students compose camellia poems, they begin in community and return to that community in order share their observations several times over a drafting sequence. Certainly a certain amount of drafting, revision, and editing takes place at home or in the dorm on a personal computer but these days students also regularly compose in writing centers, computer classrooms, computer labs, and within assorted on-line communities.

When a group of authors agrees to a similar topic, say to investigate the history of the paper clip together, they learn a great deal about writing options, style, and voice by comparing their five essays (or ten essays if you choose to have them draft two versions each as described above). They learn, as well, that no two authors addresses the same topic in quite the same manner. When a group shares a topic prompt, they can also share research duties, help each other verify sources, and even be informed by each others organizational decisions. To some degree our students have reached such an understanding before many of their instructors. Notice how students in computer classrooms move easily from one workstation to another to consult and console. I'd suggest that plagiarism takes place more often outside the collaborative environment than within it, and that discussions about influence and the use of sources finds a natural home when writers begin at a similar spot before heading out on their own (if they ever really do).

Thinking too little or too much of the reader.

Not only does the researcher consult readers about how well she has used and integrated and balanced sources, each writer hopes to ascertain whether her excitement in the search and the drafting has been transferred to her readers. The engaged writer is an author who can now consider more than rushing to a deadline. The rush may still be there (admittedly we *all* procrastinate) but there's interest in evaluating whether or not the rush, the writing, has proved worthwhile. Writers want to know that a reader enjoys the results of the research, even if the majority of the research is not directly visible in the final project.

At the same time, the writer has to learn not to be too easily swayed by readers. It's a drafting-cycle balancing act that can be made easier by asking writers to keep all drafts in newly numbered files: Mother1, Mother2, Mother3, and so on. Regarding her essay on family and telegraphs, Margaret changed her paper regularly, and did so in response to peer and teacher response. Reading Margaret's observations, it seems she was responsive to but not over-awed by her respondents. Near the project's end she says:

The response was good for the editing session. It reads much better. The suggestion was made to return to the original title. I agreed with this," but a few days later she feels free to reverse herself: "For the final paper I made a few more revisions. Wendy had pointed out that the reader still got confused because of too

many characters [introduced early in the essay]. I had added some characters in my introduction and so I took them out and changed the title back to the original one.

Margaret was able to “try on” titles and think and rethink her options. Likely, with more drafting time, the essay would continue to evolve.

The more invested a researcher is, the more he needs to negotiate this delicate balance between letting the reader talk him into changing and being so enamored of his own work that he refuses good advice. There's no sure way to learn this except by writing, as much as possible, with as much time to share with readers as possible and in supportive environments. When a writer feels involved enough to tinker—to add and subtract—including sources and citations, then that reader is on the way to meeting a broad set of goals.

Rachel negotiates these needs as well:

After half-class workshop, I felt much better about the quantity of research that I had. Actually many members of my group felt that the research took away from the personal approach of my paper. Many of them said it was even boring to read. But I still felt the majority of research needed to remain in the paper, mainly to follow the guidelines of the assignment....And despite that they may not have found the storm research interesting, I kept it. I find weather patterns to be very fascinating myself, especially in a climate where I am not as familiar considering I have lived in the south for fourteen years.

While listening to peers and teachers, Rachel continues to listen to herself, working out her own understanding of the paper and learning how to compromise and still enjoy the results of her research and writing investment.

By now *my* reader, if he or she has indulged me to this point is likely to be saying, huh? This isn't about creative writers, it's about all writers. They all think too much or too little of the reader, have to decide on the quality and quantity of their sources, and all the rest. To which I reply, as I close: *Exactly*.