Guided Research: Good Questions Inspire More Than Answers
by Wendy L. McBride

In 21st-century elementary school classrooms, American children begin to solve problems using aspects of the scientific method. In math, science, and language arts, they are asked to support their conclusions with evidence. On the other end of the spectrum, graduate students, PhD candidates, and postdocs work on research in labs, in the field, and in libraries; theirs is a quest to discover. While this range is not limited to the U.S. educational system, international students often have difficulty understanding the purposes and processes related to research writing. Compounding this, the infinite range of topic possibilities can be daunting to the point of paralysis. It can also produce, for lack of a gentler term, the ridiculous.

For example, is "why people shouldn't smoke" a good topic? Or "peace in the Middle East"? Gender differences? Is the earth really flat?

The 5 Guiding Questions

In *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*, Swales and Feak (2012) present a systematic approach for "creating a research space." From this, five guiding questions have been formulated to engage writers of all levels in meaningful inquiry and writing:

1) How is this topic significant in my field?
2) What has already been established on this subject?
3) What is the focus of current research on this issue?
4) What information needs additional investigation or substantiation?
5) What can I contribute?

The process of responding to each of them directs students: first, toward the higher purpose of research and, second, toward compelling topics and projects. Outcomes for teachers and students include the promotion of innovative, complete, analytical, and persistent scholarship and deliberate service to the research community and the evolving body of knowledge.

That is in theory. In practice, guiding students through the arduous task of producing an interesting and well-written research paper begins with that thorough understanding of and respect for the process. When all goes well, students at any level can generate information that has authentic application.

Evaluate the Topic

First there is the conundrum of choosing a topic. This is when it is most useful to interweave research questions with a general sense of direction and an objective that are suitable to the learners and their level.

Returning to the topic of smoking, versions of this conversation are not uncommon:

> **Teacher:** Okay, (1) *how is the topic significant?*

Student: Smoking is bad and a lot of people still smoke.
Teacher: Yes. Research has already established that smoking is bad; there is no need to pursue that, right? What do you think the focus of current research on smoking is?
Student: It's probably about why people still smoke, or treatment for lung cancer.
Teacher: One of those might be a better direction for you, then.

International students arrive with a broad range of reading skills. When they face some form of a literature review—even if it is not called that in secondary schools or undergraduate classes—they have to marshal their abilities. Graduate students are likely to already have solid responses for (or at least a familiarity with) the significance of topics in their field and the extant research. Nevertheless, students at even the earliest levels can also begin to evaluate topics against the broader existing context.

Utilize a Theme

For genuine first-timers, offering a flexible but unifying theme reduces the range of possibilities and facilitates the topic-choosing procedure. Themes can be general enough to appeal to the majority and still allow room for the outliers to find something interesting yet still related. Some "international student"—geared themes include

- cross-cultural transition strategies,
- technology that reduces distances,
- staying healthy in the dormitories, and
- making versus keeping friends.

For higher level courses, instructors may consider inviting students to explore

- an aspect of artificial intelligence,
- political participation (especially in an election year), or
- the intersection of modern technology and health.

In narrowing the focus, the questions are repeatedly addressed:

(2) *What has already been established on this subject?*
(3) *What is the focus of current research on this issue?*

In courses where the materials include a reader, students can produce research questions that support in-depth exploration of related topics. The resulting supplemental material provides insight and context for new vocabulary and cultural references. For example, to engage in a "deep read" of Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, students were asked to explore details of prerevolutionary Cuba, in social, economic and political terms; to examine the Cold War and its implications in England and the United States; and to investigate spying and espionage networks. Additionally, students researched the author's personal history with Catholicism, Latin America, and international media. The results—two drafts of a research paper and an oral debriefing—provided extensive background on the novel and created a learning community with a shared mission.

Consider All the Angles

The initial reading phase, even on very simple topics, is more efficient when the mission is clear:

(4) *What information needs additional investigation or substantiation?*
(5) *What can I contribute?*

Middle and high school students as well as IEP learners may not be equipped to make contributions to the field, but they can be encouraged to look at a problem or question from a different angle and to contribute richer information to their classroom community. In the case of the student who is determined to research smoking, she and her classmates might consider the physical and psychological aspects of addiction and what current research reveals about causes and cessation strategies. The environmental perspective is another valuable perspective: how long does a cigarette butt take to decompose? What kinds of hidden repercussions come from this specific litter?

Provoke Introspection and Connection

When the questions provoke introspection, the research and writing processes allow in-depth skill development and a rich learning experience. Positioning a research assignment to extend to or overlap with another aspect of a class or community is worth the "frontloading" effort. The culmination of a project that integrates skills and information from multiple sources produces a greater sense of achievement. Additionally, students get a visceral sense of their own intellectual and linguistic development.

The control and direction provided by examining these questions throughout the research writing process take the "scary" out of the daunting processes of introducing research writing to scholars of all shapes and sizes.

Reference

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2012). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills* (3rd ed.). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

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