

In Defence of the Research Paper

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, FEB 13 2014

There's been talk in some circles of the academy about the future of the research paper. This discussion which, truth be told, is trending towards a majority view that the college research paper is outdated and has lost utility, was launched with the publication of column in *Slate* back in December. In that column author and academic Rebecca Schuman argued that the college research paper was widely hated by students and professors alike, writing:

Everybody in college hates papers. Students hate writing them so much that they buy, borrow, or steal them instead. Plagiarism is now so commonplace that if we flunked every kid who did it, we'd have a worse attrition rate than a MOOC...Nobody hates writing papers as much as college instructors hate grading papers (and no, having a robot do it is not the answer)...It wastes 15 hours of my time to mark up my students' flaccid theses and non sequitur textual "evidence," ...all so that you can take a cursory glance at the grade and then chuck the paper forever.

What's more, if your average college-goer does manage to read through her professor's comments, she will likely view them as a grievous insult to her entire person, abject proof of how this cruel, unfeeling instructor hates her. That sliver of the student population that actually reads comments and wants to discuss them? They're kids whose papers are good to begin with...

Schuman's antipathy to research papers was followed yesterday with a piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* where Associate Professor Marc Bousquet also argued in favour of ditching the research paper:

Generally these papers are just pumped-up versions of the five-paragraph essay, with filler added. Thesis-driven, argumentative, like the newspaper editorials the genre is based on, this "researched writing" promises to solve big questions with little effort: "Reproductive rights resolved in five pages!"

Each paragraph is a brick pounded upside the reader's head until, at last, the reader begs for the sweet release of the Repetitive Closing: "In conclusion, I pounded your head in the following ways"...

Professionals rarely write anything like the writing we most commonly assign.

Take away the hyperbole and there is probably some truth to what Schuman is saying. The end-of-semester research paper grading pile is a daunting sight and just knowing that each paper will take a good 30 to 45 minutes to grade – and always longer for the worst papers – doesn't fill me with a lot of enthusiasm. Certainly for students at CEFAM their international politics research paper is often approached as a necessary evil, something that needs to be completed so that they can return to focussing on finance, marketing, management or whatever else they choose to major in outside of IR.

Bosquet, too, is correct when he claims that professionals rarely write in the same style that a professor demands of their students in a research paper. For the future business professionals graduating from CEFAM they are likely to be engaged in writing company reports, emails and professional communications, and memos, all of which have their own style and structure.

Yet any move away from the research paper is, in my view, a poor one.

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Research papers may drive students and professors crazy at times and the quality of the prose is often weak. Yet research papers also teach students something that is not easily replaced by alternative assignments: clear, logical, deliberate thought. A good research paper is a sustained argument over 10 or 12 pages, examples building on examples, never repetitive, moving the reader step-by-step towards a conclusion that is, by the end, inevitable. The writing may be terrible, but the point of the exercise is not only to write well but to engage in a process of thinking about a subject deeply, reflecting on arguments and counter-arguments, and developing a personal response to an important question.

The fact that the writing style we demand in a college research paper is something that most students will never again be forced to employ is not a good reason to cut out papers, either. I recall the mountains of material I had to learn in high school that has served little practical purpose since. Should students be allowed to avoid differential calculus because it is something that most will rarely engage with outside of a high school or college classroom? What about sports and physical education? In an era where many adults are obese and exercise rarely, is there any point in forcing students to engage in an activity that many of them will never participate in again?

The answer, of course, is yes, there is a reason. I may not use differential calculus much today (though I admit I did use it extensively in my IR honours degree) but learning differential calculus allowed me to learn how to break problems down into manageable parts, apply axioms and seek solutions to higher order problems that, at first, seemed impossible to derive solutions to. So, too, is teaching sport and physical education useful even in an environment where many adults barely move about. The student may never use that tennis backhand or basketball bank shot a single time after graduation but the dedication, patience, training and movement towards a goal that developing that sports skill represents is an important life lesson that the student will maintain, no matter whether they head to the Olympics as a competitor or watch the Games on the couch at home.

Students who are searching for quick fixes, easy points on their grade or who lack interest in a field will find this process of reflection, clarification and development of an argument painful and arduous. Faculty who fail to teach their students about the research process or who do not aid their students in developing higher order skills in writing and argument are likely to hate grading the weaker papers that inevitably emerge. These are not reasons, though, to consign the research paper to the college dustbin. Instead, they are good reasons to re-assess exactly what we hope assigning a research paper to students will achieve, what expectations we have for student research, and an opportunity to push our students to take more interest in the questions we ask of them.

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