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The Daunted Become Dauntless: Composition Students and the Research Project

M. J. Ewald

The weight of the assignment descended over my students like a shroud cutting off air and light.

"We have to do what?" chorused several of my students.

"You have to write a 12-20-page biography of any character, real or fictional, using a minimum of 10 sources. You must provide an annotated bibliography," I replied.

"A what?"

"Annotations provide information concerning the validity of the source; simply, why you chose that particular source."

"You've got to be kidding. We have to do a presentation, too?" asked a wide-eyed junior.

"That's the best part of the assignment," I said. "You have to come to class dressed as that character and perform, in full costume, some aspect of his/her life. You have to become your character."

My students eyed each other and stared in disbelief at the task that lay before them. I could tell that they were apprehensive about the research project, so I tried to quell their fears by telling them that they would not be "fed to the wolves" and left alone. I would be there to help them throughout the researching and writing processes.

"You'll see. This will be the best work that you have done all year."

"Yeah, right."

The nervousness that my students felt is normal when confronted with what they saw as a foreboding task; I knew, though, from completing a similar assignment that their worries were unnecessary. This assignment is one that I modified from an assignment that I completed while a senior at Plymouth Salem High School in Canton, Michigan. Maribeth Carroll, Cynthia Burnstein, and the rest of the PSHS Humanities teachers required each student to choose a character, real or fictional, from any period of time, and research enough material to "become" that character. No paper was required; we researched, completed note cards, and provided an annotated bibliog-

raphy. Most importantly, we had to become our character, taking on his/her personality, diction, costume, and mannerisms. As a writing teacher, I modified the original assignment to include the composition of a biographical narrative. The presentation, the unique feature of the assignment, is an extension of the paper because students act out a scene that best reflects their character's life.

Getting Started: Researching, Choosing, and Setting the Scene

As a class, we brainstormed a number of characters from throughout history and literature. I tried to give a small bit of background information about the characters as the list grew. If I don't know anything about a character, I'm honest with my students. I'm learning from this project too. If, however, they do choose a character that I am unfamiliar with, I have to do a little research on my own! From this list, students chose three possible characters that interested them and began a brief search for information. For this assignment, encyclopedias are discouraged, so all information had to come in the form of biography, autobiography, Internet web-sites, films, and music. After researching, students listed five qualities about each character that made his/her life interesting to them with emphasis on what specifically was appealing about this person. Students also provided a bibliographic citation, using MLA standards, of one source.

Based on their preliminary research, students chose their characters for their biographical narrative and provided a brief, at times superficial, explanation. Choices for the narratives ranged from Kurt Cobain (I love Nirvana) and Queen Elizabeth (She ruled for how long?) to Georgia O'Keeffe (Were flowers all that she painted?) and Beethoven (It's so cool that he composed while deaf). As students progressed through their research, we completed activities that evaluated the validity of the source material (i.e. what is the quality of information provided? Is the information useful? Does it provide telling detail, what the

reader learns about the character from reading, or does the source lack substantial details about the character's life?). Students also considered the following guiding questions while researching:

- Were there any significant events in the person's childhood that shaped his/her outlook on life? If so, describe in detail. If not, what was his/her childhood like?
- What are his/her major accomplishments?
- What was his/her role within his/her time period?
- What were his/her views towards family, career, life in general?
- What is this character's significance? Why is he/she so important?
- What should we, as the general public, know about this character?

In addition to the questions that I provided, students were encouraged to create their own. Most of the time, students were able to find an angle that suited their purposes for the paper and for the presentation.

Composition: Organizing the Information and Telling the Story

Once students were researching, I required them to complete a total of 200 note cards. This may seem like "busywork," but the cards allow students to sort out information and organize it in a logical fashion. They must consider where they want their strongest examples and details to appear. To illustrate this, I brought in the analogy of playing cards organized by suit from highest to lowest card. Students needed to organize their information in a similar fashion; the stronger the detail, the higher the card.

Students then pulled out their "best" information; that is, the strongest details that best paint the picture of their character. The clearest pictures were what my students lead with. This created reader interest and allowed the students to effectively tell the tale. Using guiding questions and details, students created mood and setting based upon their research. They had to paint a picture with words as they told the story of their character. That was one of the hardest things for my kids to realize. They were telling a story. Though the assignment was a formal research paper, students had to understand that a simple "laundry list" of, for example, Frank Lloyd Wright's life and work would not suffice. As an audience, the readers need to be put into Wright's life and be able, through words, to experience him. Students need to feel the tension as Wright struggled to meet a deadline or the pride he felt as he saw "Falling Water" for the first time. While daunting, this approach allowed students to be creative in their approaches even though they would be using parenthetical documentation of source material.

As my kids were furiously researching, we also spent class time examining strong leads and effective organization of papers from previous years. This

kind of rhetorical analysis was research because students were asked to identify what exactly made the introduction, for example, strong. What elements were included to make the paper "come alive?" How could the example be improved? We edit these as a class on the overhead and, usually, generate a solid discussion about the merits of the piece. As an in-class assignment, we rewrite the paragraphs and critique the responses of brave individuals. These become models for my students and, when the final products are completed, I can see that some of the students have followed some of the techniques we have studied in class.

Most of my students seem to choose writing the biography in flashback starting with details, for example, from late in the character's life and then proceed chronologically throughout the paper. We spend several days in class composing and organizing the information into a cohesive piece. During this time, we also work on developing presentations for each character, again stressing story telling and creativity.

One of the aspects of this assignment that is most important for me to stress is that it is mostly student directed. Granted, I provide the paper format and the rubric for the presentation (see Appendix A), but students are free to take whatever direction they wish, within reason. The rationale behind the amount of freedom given is that students choose their characters based upon their interests. I want them to enjoy who they are researching. I will, of course, offer suggestions, but that is all. I want my students to think for themselves.

Appendix A: Presentation Rubric

*Each aspect of the presentation is scaled from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest)

Costume:	How accurate were you to the original?
Speech:	How well did you speak? Were you too fast? Too slow?
Introduction:	Did you grab the audience's attention? What telling detail did you provide?
Presentation:	Did your presentation flow in a chronological order?
Did you provide specific details about your character's life?
How did you handle questions from the audience?
Did you answer the questions convincingly or did you stumble?
Overall:	Overall impression: how convincing were you as your character?

Total: _____

About the author

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