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Explorations in Expository Writing 11

BY ELIZABETH W. PETERS

Several recent newspaper and magazine articles have focused on the inadequate writing skills of today's high school students. According to The National Commission on Writing, "75 percent of seniors never receive a writing assignment in history or social studies; and the senior research project has become an educational curiosity, something rarely assigned because teachers do not have time to correct such projects" (p. 2). The sheer magnitude of grading as many as 120 term papers deters many English teachers from assigning written projects of any depth.

Not at Marian High School. All the students enrolled at Marian, a Catholic, college preparatory high school for young women, write a six- to ten-page research paper either as sophomores in Honors English or as juniors in Expository Writing 11. The English Department faculty divides the workload to ensure that each teacher has no more than 50 students—two classes—working on this project at one time.

The total enrollment at Marian is approximately 600 students. The families that constitute the Marian community devote hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars to help create an educational environment committed to excellence. They expect their daughters to be well prepared for a college career. And most of their daughters meet their expectations; all the graduating classes in the past 5 years have had 98-100 percent of the students proceed to higher education. Students receive scholarships amounting to class totals in the millions of dollars. These students are motivated, intelligent, and often exceptional.

The students expect to use the skills they acquire in Expository Writing 11 when they go to college. This mandatory English course takes the students through the steps of writing a formal, persuasive research paper using MLA format and standards. The primary

text is Lucille Vaughn Payne's book, *The Lively Art of Writing*. After teaching this one semester course several times, I identified a few areas that needed improvement:

- the course traditionally included very few types of expository writing
- plagiarism, whether intentional or unintentional, presented a problem
- the students needed to develop broader research skills
- the students needed to develop the ability to critique information and research

The limited varieties of expository writing traditionally taught in the course begged for expansion. I intended to provide the students with the opportunity to learn different types of writing that they might use outside the classroom. I decided to augment the curriculum to include writing in other formats, writing for varied audiences, and writing for different purposes.

Plagiarism issues presented another area of concern. Each semester I had students who included "borrowed" phrases and sentences without proper citation. Although for some students the borrowing seemed unintentional, others certainly intended to pass off

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scholarly writing as their own to boost their grade or decrease their own effort. I decided to alter the curriculum to include assignments intended to foster greater personal interest in and commitment to the topics selected for research. I hoped that increasing a sense of personal ownership toward the research paper would decrease the tendency toward plagiarism.

A final area of concern involved the research process itself. The Internet offers a wealth of information to students. Many students, however, are not savvy consumers. They tend to think that anything in print is reliable and accurate and consequently experience difficulty achieving the critical perspective necessary for evaluating Internet sources. In addition, they fail to look outside the box of the computer monitor for other sources of valuable information. I expanded the curriculum to include assignments designed to reshape the students' perspective on authentic research and reliable data.

The Expository Writing

11 class selected for this project consisted of 26 female juniors, 16 to 17 years old. Two students were first generation Americans; one student was African American. Almost all of these students were highly motivated, disciplined, and attentive. As a private school, Marian can expel students who fail to maintain a C average. Consequently, these students are average to exceptional. This high level of academic prowess is reflected in many of the students' written comments quoted in this paper.

The first assignment that departed from the standard curriculum required the students to begin the research process from the perspective of personal inquiry. After distributing an extensive, but suggested, list of possible research topics, most of which focused on social issues, I encouraged the students to select two to three topics for brainstorming. The assignment handout provided four questions on which to focus their inquiry:

- What do you already know about this subject?
- What dilemma or striking fact about this subject captured your attention and made you wonder about it? (Elbow, 1981, p. 348)

- What intriguing questions or ideas does this topic generate?
- What personal experience—either first or second hand—can you relate to this issue?

The next step of this assignment involved writing a personal letter of intent to me. We discussed the composition of the letter. We identified the audience: me, and the purpose: to identify the topic of inquiry and the student's personal connection to it. The audience and purpose denoted the "personal" element, and thus allowed for first person voice. We discussed the structure: an introductory paragraph in which the student identified her purpose in writing the letter; one body paragraph that focused on her personal connection to that issue; a second body paragraph that focused on the questions she intended to explore; a concluding

statement and closure. The students had to follow format guidelines for a formal business letter (Aaron, 2001, p. 458-460). This allowed them the opportunity to create what was essentially a rough draft of a business letter and to receive

feedback on it before sending another letter into the community in the next step of the process.

The letter of intent allowed students to explore a different genre and voice within the context of expository discourse. When I graded the letters, I looked for the strength of that voice as a sign of interest in and commitment to the chosen topic. When a personal attachment seemed lacking, I challenged the student to stretch for an enticing connection or consider a different topic. In addition, I evaluated the direction of inquiry expressed in each letter. I looked for questions that touched on problems and controversies associated with the topic that were broad enough to allow for extensive research but narrow enough to point toward a potential thesis statement. One student intended to write about biological weapons. Her letter of intent suggested an academic interest but little passion. Because the final product would be a persuasive paper, I challenged her to form an opinion about biological weapons. I prodded her with questions, such as: Was she afraid of biological weapons being

The letter of intent allowed students to explore a different genre and voice within the context of expository discourse.

used? Did she think biological weapons could serve a beneficial purpose? This process took her from thinking about a paper that would merely inform about the types of biological weapons to a paper in which she argued in favor of continued research and development of biological weapons. Finally, this assignment served as a rough draft for a formal business letter, the next item on the agenda. (See Appendix A on page 37 for the assignment handout.)

The business letter assignment required the students to locate organizations associated with their particular topic and write a letter requesting pertinent information. Many students discovered that the phone book provided a valuable resource. One student who wrote about adoption contacted the local Department of Social Services. Another student interested in exploring immigration procedures contacted the Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services. Another student wrote to a local doctor for information on the effects of media violence on children. Once the students selected a target resource, we again discussed purpose, audience, structure, and format.

I suggested that students begin the letter by identifying themselves and their reason for requesting information. The next section of the letter discussed some pertinent lines of inquiry the student intended to pursue. First person was still acceptable, but diction had to be formal, rather than informal. The personal connection to the topic included in the letter of intent was eliminated in this letter to achieve a more formal tone. I wanted the students to realize that a letter they might write to a college coach or a prospective employer should not have the same, informal, personal tone as a letter written to an acquaintance. In addition, I suggested that if the students phrased their lines of inquiry diplomatically, rather than reveal their opinion on the topic, they would be more likely to receive a broad range of information. For example, one student who intended to argue that Ritalin often caused more problems than it solved for children with

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ADD, wrote to the pharmaceutical company requesting general information about the effects of Ritalin. Had she identified her negative position, the company might not have responded. (See Appendix B on page 38 for the assignment handout.)

Writing the business letter achieved three objectives. First, this exercise made the students consider the audience more carefully than any previous assignment. Second, the students (ideally) perfected the format for a formal business letter, something many of them will use when they begin communicating with universities next school year. Third, the students learned about alternative sources of information outside of the library and the Internet. As one student wrote in her personal reflection piece, "By having to generate my own research, I feel that I have become more resourceful and independent.

I was forced to stretch my usual sources and come up with alternative routes for finding information. I feel more confident in my ability to write and find good, credible information."

The third addition to the curriculum also focused on empowering the students as independent researchers. Each student had to design a research instrument. The students chose between conducting an interview and designing a survey. The choice provided an option for students unable to find an appropriate interviewee. Both research documents exposed the students to new genres of expository writing.

For those students conducting an interview, the first step required selecting an appropriate interviewee. The students considered three questions as part of the selection process:

- What expert knowledge on my subject does the interviewee possess?
- Will the interviewee provide factual information or knowledge gained by personal experience?
- How can I assess the interviewee's credibility?

Each student had to consider whether or not her interviewee would be knowledgeable enough to

provide reliable opinions that could be cited as data in the research paper.

By considering criteria for selecting a worthwhile candidate for their own interview, the students became more perceptive about evaluating interviews in other research pertaining to their papers. At the very least, they began to question the validity of statements made in an interview, rather than just assuming that because it was in print, the interview offered reliable information.

After selecting a potential interviewee, each student had to determine the information she hoped to learn from the interview and frame questions most likely to elicit complete, informative answers. The assignment handout (see Appendix C on page 39) provided guidance in this process. Each student generated a list of at least 15 questions, then partnered with two others to compare their lists. The peer collaboration offered another perspective that assisted each student in reframing existing questions or including new questions she had not considered. I evaluated the questions for thoroughness and relevance before the students proceeded with the interviews.

Once the students conducted the interview, they had to submit a written version for evaluation. I allowed the students to choose the written format for the interview. They could present it in a question-and-answer format or in a narrative format. Students who interviewed people for factual information generally preferred the question-answer format; students who focused on case history information generally preferred the narrative format. My criteria for assessment included evaluating the choice of interviewee for relevance, evaluating the questions for quantity and quality, and evaluating correct English grammar and usage.

Designing a survey was the other research option. Through this assignment, the students learned how to evaluate raw data and to create an interpretive report. Ideally, the students also learned to critically evaluate statistics they read about in other research, which they

were pursuing concurrent with this assignment. Two Internet sources were especially useful for creating the assignment sheet for the students ("Creating a Survey"; "Survey Tips," 2001). (See Appendix D on page 40 for the assignment handout.)

One of the most challenging aspects of designing the survey proved to be framing the questions. The students had to carefully consider what information they hoped to obtain, then make sure each question pertained to the informational objectives. They also had to determine whether or not they wanted to include intentionally biased questions in order to elicit opinions from their respondents. If not, the questions had to be free of bias—a difficult task for adolescents. Avoiding asking two questions in one also challenged the students. After designing a rough draft, each student shared her work with at least two other students. This peer editing proved valuable for identifying ambiguous questions and enabling each student to revise the survey before distributing it. I also evaluated the survey questions for clarity and relevance.

Some students were amazed to learn how easy it is to obtain impressive sounding percentages and statistics from one survey.

In the next step of the survey process, I defined demographics for the class and we discussed the potential effect demographic differences might have on the survey responses.

For the limited objectives of this assignment, I insisted on a minimum of only 35 respondents. Some enthusiastic students ventured beyond the halls of Marian and included parents, neighbors, and boys, obtaining as many as 85 surveys, but most students contented themselves with 35 of their peers. Demographics were not necessarily significant to their results. Some students were amazed to learn how easy it is to obtain impressive sounding percentages and statistics from one survey.

After completing the survey, the students had to submit a written report summarizing and interpreting the data. My criteria for assessment included: evaluating the statistical analysis of each question; evaluating a written interpretation of the most interesting, surprising, or compelling results; evaluating correct

English grammar and usage. Several students needed instruction on the mathematical technique for creating percentages from raw data. Some students experienced difficulty creating a written interpretation of the data. In the future, I would provide good models of this complex analytical skill to assist the students with this process. Most of the students met the criteria established for the written report.

In addition to expanding the scope of the curriculum for Expository Writing 11, each of these new assignments contributed to the major task of writing the persuasive research paper. The letters helped the students to formulate their ideas and obtain information. The interviews and the survey results contributed to the overall research cited in the final research paper and were required criteria on the rubric. By the time the students began writing the actual paper, they had completed three new steps that forced them to think about their subject and their argument and obtain external feedback of some sort on their topic. The research instruments increased student awareness of other people's opinions on their topic, which was useful in framing the main arguments in the paper.

The overall quality of the research papers improved modestly. Using essentially the same rubric I used in previous semesters, but with the addition of points assigned for inclusion of the interview or survey, the class grade average increased over previous classes from 87 percent to 92 percent. Because I made no attempt to covary the groups, I can't say if this is a significant increase due to the intervention or a product of a more able group of writers. It did, however, suggest the likelihood that this work did not decrease student writing success.

Only one addition to the curriculum did not contribute directly to the primary composition: a personal reflective piece in which each student evaluated all the assignments and the process itself. At the end of the semester, I asked each student to consider what she learned that was especially useful, what she would do differently the next time, and what she thought was irrelevant. Although I always ask students to reflect

The higher degree of engagement evoked by the intervention made the process a success.

on what they have learned in a course, this particular piece provided me with valuable input to assess the relative success or failure of this project. One of the most significant effects of the intervention became apparent in these evaluations. Most of the students, except those who, for various reasons, failed to put forth consistent effort, developed in themselves a greater confidence to find and evaluate information and to write a major research paper. The students expressed a greater degree of enthusiasm, pride, and personal accomplishment than students in previous classes. These intangible effects are difficult to measure on a grading rubric but become apparent through written and verbal response. The higher degree of engagement evoked by the intervention made the process a success.

Each step of the intervention needs to be evaluated. The personal letter of intent, the first new addition to the curriculum, achieved its primary objectives.

The students learned a new type of expository composition; they learned the format for a formal business letter; they explored a research topic through personal inquiry. This assignment also presented an effective means for me to offer feedback at an early stage in the process, in some cases steering the students in a different direction when I detected a lack of true interest or passion. The students who wrote specifically about this assignment expressed positive opinions. One girl commented that "the personal letter of intent allowed me to identify and state my argument." Another student claimed: "Writing my personal letter of intent allowed me to organize my thoughts for the first time."

The formal business letter elicited considerably more comments from the students than the first assignment. The students' perception of this assignment generally depended on whether or not they received a response from the organization they contacted. Students who never received a response tended to feel negatively about it, that it was "irrelevant" and "a waste of time." One student who did not receive feedback thought that in the future she would contact two or three organizations. Another student com-

mented "that the letter we wrote to an organization to divulge information on our research topic was a bit redundant. This may be due to the fact that I received absolutely no help from Novartis, the company who manufactures Ritalin. I am pleased, though, that I learned how to write a business letter in the process."

One of the objectives for this assignment was to encourage the students to explore alternative sources of information beyond the Internet and library. One student was "introduced to the major amount of people, organizations, etc. that have concern with my subject." Another student "really liked writing the letter to the business. The information they sent back was extremely useful." Since my goals focused more on the process than the product, I judge this assignment a success.

Several beneficial outcomes emerged from designing a research instrument. In fact, this particular assignment, regardless of whether the student chose an interview or a survey, had the most exciting impact of all the assignments. In addition to making the students more skeptical about the validity of statistical data or the credibility of interviewees, this assignment enhanced the students' sense of ownership in the entire process. It also promoted a sense of empowerment to the students as independent and capable researchers. Following is a list of comments, taken verbatim from the personal reflection pieces of several students, that support these claims:

"When I generated my own research it helped me learn to remain impartial in the evaluation of information I gained from other sources. I was able to perceive myself as an independent researcher."

"Creating my own survey was something I had never done before. It was very interesting to get the results from that. [It] helped to reinforce the information I found in other sources. It brought my topic more to life for me since I knew the results of the survey were from people I interact with every day, not just a random statistic.... Conducting my own survey definitely made me become more skeptical of the information I found on the Internet."

"Generating my own research impacted my perception of myself as an independent researcher because it allowed me to go out[side] myself and find interesting information and learn multiple things about my topic. It made me feel like I was capable to do it all on my own."

"Finding my own research helped me to understand the information from other sources better and be able to pick out what I need from other sources. [It] made me feel more confident in my ability to find good sources that are pertinent to my topic."

"I became increasingly aware of ways to extract useful information from somewhat random sources."

This is just a sampling of the positive comments the students made about this process.

Even students who were unsuccessful in using the data as a significant contribution to their paper benefited from the process. After completing the entire research paper, some of these students developed a more concrete idea of how they could have incorporated the information derived from this assignment more effectively. They would, perhaps, interview a more knowledgeable individual or ask different survey questions to develop a more effective contribution.

Although the survey was intended to generate data to use in support of the thesis of the research paper, an unexpected outcome occurred. Some students learned, surprisingly, that the public opinion or knowledge of their topic differed significantly from their own. "I found that generating my own research made me realize how little people know about cloning," commented one girl. Another student stated: "The survey gave me insight into the public opinion of my topic and let me know which specific issues I should address in my paper." These students used the surveys to shape the content of their papers.

In spite of the changes to the curriculum designed to reduce plagiarism, some students still relied on improperly cited outside sources for the content of their arguments. Two students out of 26 failed to rectify this problem by the final draft. One of those two students displayed chronic problems with late or

incomplete work, generally poor organization skills, and poor motivation throughout the semester. The inadequate citations in her paper probably stemmed from these issues. The other student had serious health issues that caused her to miss two weeks of school. Not only did she miss instruction time, but she also had to condense writing time.

The majority of students commented on one other particular benefit in their reflection pieces. When we embarked on the research process, I distributed a list of due dates for all the new assignments as well as other steps in the research process. I collected, graded, and returned each of these pieces. This provided several opportunities for feedback and guidance before writing the final draft. Many students felt that breaking down this intimidating project into steps made the entire process manageable. Furthermore, those inclined to procrastinate on such projects were forced to achieve specific goals and meet specific deadlines along the way. The students appreciated this model of organization that they can adapt to future projects.

When I teach Expository Writing 11 in the future, I intend to use all of these additions to the curriculum. Even though some students expressed negative feedback about each step, other students provided positive feedback. The most salient deterrent to implementing this process is time. I was fortunate enough to have almost an entire semester to devote to this research paper; yet I still could have used more time to develop elements of the process. If time constraints limited me to choosing one new step, I would focus on expanding the research process. Helping the students to investigate the outside community as a source of information forced them to extend beyond their usual domain of the Internet and to connect with live human beings and real organizations. In a world increasingly dominated by technology, a bit of old-fashioned sleuthing can provide a gratifying mental challenge. One of my primary goals as an educator is to challenge and expand my students' minds. This assignment fulfills that goal.

Whenever I embark on a new instructional unit, whether it's teaching a novel for the first time or making curricular changes to a course, a phrase from Amy

Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, runs through my mind: "... see the endgame before the game begins" (p. 96). I try to visualize the desired results to know how all the pieces will fit together along the way. Invariably, I miss something that first time around. In retrospect, I would consider two alterations to the curriculum changes to Expository Writing 11. Requiring the students to have a personal connection to the topic prohibited them from exploring some topics of interest. Suggesting the personal connection, rather than insisting on it, would avoid this restriction. The other alteration would require spending more time helping the students to incorporate their interviews or survey data into their research papers. Most students referred only cursorily to their own data, relying instead on the information from outside sources. On a more positive note, my "endgame" vision was myopic enough to exclude some of the beneficial outcomes of the process—benefits that extended beyond the objectives I hoped to achieve.

The students at Marian High School will be in that 25 percent minority of high school seniors who know how to "struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else"; essential skills according to *The Neglected 'R': The need for a Writing Revolution* (cited in *The National Commission on Writing* p. 1). In addition, most of the students who completed Expository Writing 11 this past semester will emerge from high school as confident researchers, capable of procuring and critically evaluating information from a variety of sources, even generating their own. The students are not the only ones to benefit from this learning adventure; my colleagues in the English Department anticipate perusing the results of my explorations and perhaps making similar changes to ensure that the curriculum in Expository Writing 11 remains challenging and continues to prepare our students for their next academic endeavor.

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Appendix A

Lesson 1: Letter of Intent

Objectives:

- To focus topic selection on a subject in which the student has a personal interest
- To begin the research process from the perspective of personal inquiry
- To encourage development of personal voice within the context of an academic research paper
- To consider purpose and audience in writing
- To familiarize students with the business letter format

Procedure:

Distribute list of possible research topics.

Encourage students to select 2-3 topics for brainstorming.

Focus brainstorming on the following questions:

1. What do you already know about this subject?
2. What dilemma or striking fact about this subject captured your attention and made you wonder about it?
3. What intriguing questions or ideas does this topic generate?
4. What personal experience, either first or second hand, can you relate to this issue?

Assignment:

Compose your brainstorming ideas into a letter of personal intent addressed to your teacher. Use first person: the purpose and audience allow it. Your letter should begin with an introductory paragraph in which you identify yourself and your purpose in writing the letter. Focus one body paragraph on the questions you intend to explore. Focus another paragraph on your personal connection to that issue. Finish the letter with a concluding statement and closure. Follow the guidelines in *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook* for the correct business letter format.

Assessment:

Evaluate each letter for correct format. This serves as a rough draft for the next assignment.

Evaluate sentence and paragraph structure for clarity and cohesiveness.

Evaluate the direction of inquiry expressed in each letter. The questions posed should touch on problems and controversies associated with the topic. They should be broad enough to allow for extensive research, but focused enough to point toward a potential thesis statement.

Appendix B

Lesson 2: Business Letter

Objectives:

- Students will research organizations that could provide information on their selected topics
- Students will learn about alternative methods of research outside of the library and computer/internet.
- Students will compose a business letter requesting information.

Procedure:

Using the internet and/or the telephone book, students will find an organization, either a private business or a government agency, that is involved in their topic area. For example, a student who is exploring the use of prescription drugs for children with ADD may choose to write to a pharmaceutical company that produces those drugs.

Students will write a business letter, using the same format as their letter of intent, requesting information from the organization. Students should identify their reason for requesting information and some of the pertinent lines of inquiry they hope to pursue. The personal connection to the topic should be eliminated from this letter.

Assessment:

Evaluate each letter for correct letter format.

Evaluate each sentence and paragraph for clarity and cohesiveness. Make sure the students' lines of inquiry are phrased diplomatically.

Evaluate writing style for appropriate purpose and audience

Appendix C

Lesson 3: Designing a research instrument

3A: The interview

Objectives:

- Students will learn how to conduct an informative interview.
- Students will learn the criteria for selecting a reliable individual for an interview.
- By generating their own research, students will develop an informed perspective from which to evaluate the internet sources they consult for their research paper. Ideally, they will be more prepared to discern worthwhile research, to evaluate legitimate sources, and to detect bias.
- Students will gain experience with one of two composition formats.

Procedure:

Designing an interview:

Students will consider the following questions:

Selecting an interviewee

1. What expert knowledge on my subject does the interviewee possess?
2. Will the interviewee provide factual information or knowledge gained by personal experience?
3. How can I assess his/her credibility? Can I verify the information somewhere else?

Selecting interview questions:

1. What information do I want to learn?
2. How can I frame my questions to elicit the best responses?
Tip: avoid questions that can be answered by yes or no
3. Should I include opinion questions? Is this individual knowledgeable enough on the subject to provide an informed response?
4. How important is it to focus strictly on the prepared list of questions? Is it possible to obtain beneficial information if the interviewee is allowed to digress?
5. Generate a list of 15 or more questions.

Recording the interview:

1. tape recorder?
2. hand-written notes?

After answering all the above questions individually, the students will partner with two other people to share their answers. The peer collaboration will enable each individual to consider reframing questions or to include questions she hadn't considered.

Assessment:

Evaluate the choice of interviewee for relevance.

Evaluate the questions for quantity and quality, i.e. clarity, relevance.

Evaluate the written piece for correct English grammar and usage.

Appendix D

Lesson 3B: Designing a survey

- Students will learn how to design a survey to obtain statistics and information on a specific topic
- Students will learn how to evaluate raw data and interpret the results
- Students will create an interpretive report of the data

Procedure:

1. Write a welcome paragraph. Introduce the respondent to the survey, thank them for taking the time to complete it, and explain why you are conducting the survey.
2. Include survey instructions telling the respondent how to answer the questions.
3. Designing the survey questions:
 - a. What information do you hope to obtain? Make sure all questions pertain to your informational objectives.
 - b. Do you want to include intentionally biased questions (to ascertain a specific opinion)?
 - c. Do you want to obtain demographic information to use as a possible tool in analysis?
Note: be sure to obtain useful cross sections from the different groups
 - d. What question type do you intend to use? single response, multiple choice, open ended? (consider what would be easiest to evaluate)
 - e. Make the questions quick and easy to complete.
 - f. Don't combine two questions into one.
 - g. Ask important questions first, demographic questions last.
 - h. Provide room for a written response at the end.
4. Selecting the respondents:
 - a. Do you have a sufficient number of responses? Some sources assert you need at least 100 to have a viable cross section of respondents. For our purposes use a minimum of 35.
 - b. Based on the information you hope to obtain, think about what demographic information may influence the responses, and use that as a consideration in selecting respondents.
5. Writing the report:
 - a. Tabulate the responses: Total number of respondents, compared with the number of responses for each question/answer. (example: 30 out of 50, or 60% disagreed with question #1...)
 - b. Determine relevance (if any) of demographics to the data
 - c. You may create a graph to display the analysis
 - d. Write a brief report summarizing the information.

Assessment:

Evaluate the relevance of the questions to the research topic.

Evaluate the statistical analysis of each question.

Evaluate the written interpretation of the most interesting, surprising, or compelling results.

Evaluate correct English grammar and usage.