

A Creative Approach to the Research Paper: Combining Creative Writing with Academic Research

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This article describes a combination of a research essay and a creative writing assignment that encourages rigorous academic research while allowing students to get "outside the box" of traditional academic research papers.

When it was time to start this semester's most dreaded task, the research paper with my basic composition students, I craved some way to lighten the burden of the traditional research paper. I did not, however, want to sacrifice the vital skill of academic research in the interest of doing something "fun" because I do feel that learning how to do academic research is one of the vital skills a college writing class should offer. In the weeks and months leading up to the assignment, I mulled over how I could engage the students' creative energy while not sacrificing the need to learn research. The answer came in what I call a creative research story. The assignment follows T. S. Eliot's belief that "[a]mateurs borrow; professionals steal," by having students try to imitate a story they have read by a professional author. After thoroughly researching the author's methods, style, symbolism, and so on, my students will then "borrow" (they are amateurs after all) these ideas to create stories of their own.

This assignment has five steps, culminating in a short story written in the same style as a story we have studied. The first two steps offer the chance to introduce academic research along with summary and paraphrasing. The students' initial task is to find a minimum of four scholarly articles from Galileo or some other academic search tool. These articles should reveal something important about the author they have chosen, the story they will imitate, or the general style of writing they will use as a model. For example, if they choose Flannery O'Connor, they might seek out articles on O'Connor herself, on a story of hers we have read in class, or on Southern or gothic writing—anything, in other words, that will help them understand better what made O'Connor tick and what made her writing unique. The second part of the assignment springs out of this research. By paying attention to the titles of stories by their author that are mentioned in their research, they are expected to choose a second story by the same author and read it for a further sense of this author's style, themes, etc. Once they have gathered their re-

search and read a second story, they are to write quarter- to half-page summaries of the articles and the second story they've read. This provides them with some practice at paraphrasing and summarizing. I ask for a mixture of cited paraphrase, general summary, and direct quotation.

An excellent example of the synthesis I look for comes from a student imitating Eudora Welty who found Leslie Kaplansky's "Cinematic Rhythms in the Short Fiction of Eudora Welty" and wrote that Welty

prolongs some parts of the story by using modifiers and long sentences, and when she wants to come back to "real time," she uses short statements. She "exploits time and space" to convey a message.

Another student, researching William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," found Melinda Schwab's "A Watch for Emily." The student summarizes the crux of the article as follows:

Schwab connects Emily's desire to control everything, including time, with her obsession with Homer Barron. She wants to keep him in her pocket so she can have him just as she wants. If she lets him go, Emily will lose something else she really likes and desires to keep, thus causing her failure.

This research and subsequent writing serve to focus the students' thinking regarding how their authors achieve their desired effects. The students then aim to accomplish something similar in their stories. Once they have researched and summarized, they join with the others who have chosen the same author to discuss what they found. They share the articles, second stories and ideas they have found and do some group brainstorming about how they might tell similar stories in a setting familiar to themselves. One final note here regarding plagiarism: When the groups discuss their second story summaries, I can introduce and discuss issues related to plagiarism, for there are many summaries of these popular stories available for "borrowing" on the Internet. Students are well aware of this opportunity to submit work that is not their own and should be guided in whatever way a teacher deems appropriate to resist this temptation.

After the first two research steps, the third step is to begin to develop their own stories. I hand out a "story details" sheet that asks for the following: two symbols they will weave throughout the story, two symbolic character names, a clear setting, a clear and focused ending, and a major theme.

First, students need to identify two symbols that they will weave throughout their stories. One student borrowed the idea of a Cerberus-like black dog from Greek mythology and made it a symbol of death in his story imitating Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried." In keeping with a social trend from her high school, another student used footwear to comment on popularity in her imitation of O'Connor: Birkenstocks were worn by a popular student who bragged constantly about his academic achievements. In the end, he was killed by a Nike-wearing, unpopular student who had born the brunt of the Birkenstock-wearer's arrogance. I also encouraged students to take one of their author's original symbols and make

it their own. Thus, many who imitated Joyce Carol Oates's "Shopping" chose to create a character similar to the disheveled woman, someone in other words who disturbs the façade of "having things together" as this woman does to the Dietrichs' shopping trip. Many of the imitators of Welty's "A Worn Path" used her rising and falling imagery to mimic Welty's death and resurrection metaphors. This part of the assignment met with great success. Not only did it heighten students' awareness of writers' symbolic elements, it offered them a sort of map as they wrote their own stories, knowing they needed to keep their symbolic elements central.

Next, students choose two symbolic character names that allude to these characters' personalities. We talk a lot about how to make up believable, meaningful names that aren't too obvious or too obscure. We talk about using initials such as J. C. to represent a Christ figure or using words from other languages so long as they are believable as names. I encourage them to see if the thesaurus may offer a synonym to a commonly known word that might work as a name, and so on. They have a lot of fun with this part, though it is quite challenging—and often memorable! Some favorites from this past semester are Phil Anderson, to represent a womanizer (philanderer, in other words), Ben Trilla, to represent a boy who didn't speak for himself (ventriloquist), Avery Jones, for average Joe, and Conrad McMann, for con man.

These first two elements of their stories offer an excellent opportunity to introduce students to archetypal symbols, and it allows us to underscore the need to read carefully and thoughtfully (I tell them to read each story at least twice) to catch the clues to less obvious symbols an author has used.

After students' work on symbolism comes their choices of settings. These must be places very familiar to them: the school they attend, their local town, a summer camp, a grandparent's house, and so on. I share with them over and over the old saying, "Write what you know!" Since setting is vital to an author's work, this is something students must get right if they are to achieve the chosen author's tone and message. The biggest problem for students comes when the author they are imitating writes regionally specific stories that happen to be set somewhere with which the students are not familiar. For example, how can students who want to imitate a distinctly Southern author like Tennessee Williams do so when they live in Washington, DC? One of two flexibilities in such cases is required by the teacher: either allow students who choose an author from a different region for whom setting is essential to use the author's setting, but only so long as they do a bit of extra research about the place where they will set their stories, or insist that students who choose regional authors focus their imitation on other distinctive aspects of their chosen authors. In other words, though one cannot make O'Connor a Western author, per se, there are many other facets of O'Connor's writing that could still be imitated in a non-Southern story—such as her religious undertones, her choice of extreme or grotesque characters, and so on. If I feel that allowing students to compromise on setting ruins the idea of imitating an author, I might consider limiting their choice of authors to those from our area. What better way to increase students' appreciation for local artists!

Some examples of settings chosen this semester include one impressive story that imitated Welty's "A Worn Path" by following the path of a young golfer playing a round of golf at a local course as his mother clings to life in a nearby hospital, mimicking the rising and falling path of Phoenix Jackson as she travels to town to obtain medicine for her sick grandson. O'Connor's family road trip to Florida in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" became a high school class field trip to Stone Mountain, Georgia (which is actually mentioned in O'Connor's story) in which a student dies at the hands of the class bully rather than an escaped convict. One student who imitated Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" set her story at a high school prom with the "winners" of prom king and queen being killed by the other attendees for her twist at the end. While choosing a setting can be a great chance for students to make their stories their own, they must understand that the wrong setting could completely ruin an otherwise strong imitation. The right setting, on the other hand, can *make* the story.

I insist that students have a clear idea of how to end their stories. To convey the importance of knowing this from the beginning, I ask them how they are able to get driving directions off the Internet . . . what do they need to know, in other words? Of course, the answer is that they have to know where they are going before they can know how to get there. I had one student this year, long before I assigned this project, say to me, "Mr. Blue, it seems like these authors start out with an ending in mind and then write the rest of the story leading up to it." "Bingo!" I replied.

Some examples of the choices students made include the young man who imitated Welty by setting his story on the golf course; he knew that the mother would die at the end of his story. Therefore, he decided to have the mother's health rise and fall with the golfer's performance on the course. As she died, the student had the golfer ruin his chances to win the golf tournament by hitting a ball into the water. The "Lottery" imitator who set her story at prom knew that, like Jackson, she wanted to kill the main characters at the end, but that it needed to be a shock to the reader. Knowing the ending helped her create her prom king and queen and their campaigns for those roles in a way that led the reader to believe it was just another prom king and queen campaign. Again, having a clear idea of the ending makes for much easier writing and much better results.

Finally, I ask students what their overall themes or meanings will be in telling these particular stories. Similar to knowing the endings, I want my students to have underlying themes or meanings in mind as they write their stories, something they want the reader to take away or ponder. Given their age, a majority of my students chose themes related to independence, in regard to both family struggles and peer pressure. An especially poignant story took Joyce Carol Oates's mother-daughter struggle for understanding and independence and turned it into a father-son struggle. The young man who wrote the story shared with me that he, an aspiring jazz musician, longed to be understood by his sports-obsessed father. He, like many of his peers, played out his desires for both independence and acceptance through his story. Many of the stories portrayed various teenage "outsiders" grap-

pling in different ways to accept their social status (or perceived social status) among unkind peers. A few strayed from ordinary teenage themes. One story encouraged readers to avoid blindly following rituals, much as Jackson's "The Lottery" does. A few who held strong opinions on the current war in Iraq dealt with the ironies of war as they imitated Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried." Here my goal is for students to ponder the various ways an author might raise some of literature's (and life's) profound questions through well-conceived stories.

The fourth step in this process seeks to get students thinking of how their research will affect their story specifically. I ask them to go back to their research (now that they know their story's plot more clearly) and write a short paper discussing how they will take what they have learned from the process they have undergone to tell their particular story. This step provides the chance to cover any elements of research paper writing that have been missed by the initial research and writing. It reinforces the selection and integration of quotations, in-text citations, works cited pages, and so on, allowing them to focus on how the research is related to their own creative stories. In this piece, students must cite multiple scholarly articles as well as the two stories they have now read. Also, as it is more traditional, this step gives students a chance to learn appropriate documentation and provides teachers with an opportunity to discuss plagiarism issues. The critical ingredient to this step lies in integration. I am after a cohesive explanation of how their research will be infused into their writing. As an example, one student wrote:

O'Brien's characters are all real. Philip Gerard mentions, "O'Brien's main effort is to make the men and women mortal" (100). As of now, my characters aren't "real" enough yet. They are still flat characters and need more depth. It is difficult to describe how I must go about fixing this. I will start by outlining their personalities and implement their character quirks into the writing, through dialogue and actions.

This self-analysis mixed with a desire to imitate O'Brien demonstrates the thinking I'm looking for here. Another example comes from an Oates imitator. The student writes,

One review explains that "Oates uses the 'falls' metaphor to powerful effect, dramatizing how our lives can get swept up by forces beyond our control" (Cohen 116). Water is used as a metaphor in my story to show how the flow of the water represents Lilian's control over her life.

Once again, such an analysis demonstrates that the students are integrating what they have found in their research with the story they are telling—the crux of the assignment.

The fifth and final step is to write the stories themselves, with as many drafts and peer reviews as time allows. While the creative writing can present difficulty for some students, it should be the enjoyable part, the icing on the cake of the deep thinking they have done. Their grades have been determined to a significant degree by completing the multiple steps of the project, so when it comes to assigning grades to their stories, my interest lies largely in the "feel" of the story—does it

have the same overall feel as reading the author they have imitated? Does the story demonstrate that the student has attentively “borrowed,” as T. S. Eliot suggested, the author’s style and technique? Their stories need not be masterpieces; they must simply reflect thoughtful attempts to imitate their authors.

I encourage students to share what they have created with one another. If my budget permits, I have books bound for each member of the class with all the students’ stories in them. If that’s not possible, we meet at a coffee shop and read stories aloud. One way or another, this assignment will have pushed them in ways both academic and creative (I don’t mean to imply that the two are entirely distinct!), and they deserve the chance to reflect on what they have learned and to enjoy what they have created before rushing on to whatever’s next. What I’ve found is that students are much more stretched by this than they first thought they would be. They are relieved to be done, yet also proud of what they have accomplished. Whatever their age or ability level, this assignment is a great way to allow students to express their too-often stifled creativity, and it accomplishes the important task of teaching academic research at the same time. ◀

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Tim Blue has taught English for the past six years at levels ranging from middle school through college and is interested in continuing to explore ways to make the English classroom both more engaging and more relevant to all his students; he welcomes comments and feedback from readers of this article.