

Methods of Discovery: A Guide to Research W

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Chapter 11: I-Search Writing

Posted April 25th, 2008 by pz

The Traditional Research Paper and I-Search Writing

Preparing to write this chapter, I was re-reading published works on I-search writing assignments. One of these works was Tom Reigstad's 2004 essay "Scratching a 'Marvelously Itchy' Itch: Teaching the I-Search Paper." Reigstad begins the essay by quoting from a research paper on the 18th-century British poet Alexander Pope which he had once written as an undergraduate.

The two principles of man which, according to Pope, must be understood before man can come to grips with his condition, are self-love and reason. The pursuit of these two principles is directed toward a common goal—man's happiness. A constructive step toward happiness is to expand self-love, which consists of loving fellow men and animals. The "chain of love" combines "all below and all above." (III ll. 7-8). This is the first way in which rise-fall imagery is resolved by Pope. However, the operation of man's pride often destroys the communion of love among beings on the great chain. The man whose pride elevates him to a feeling of superiority over fellow men and animals "falls short of reason." (37)

In spite of the fact that the paper helped Reigstad to earn an "A-" in the class, he says that he did not like his writing very much. "Where in the text am I (emphasis in the original), the thinker and the writer, amidst those frozen pronouncements and nominalizations?" he asks." (37).

Tom Reigstad's experience with school research papers is a typical one. Ironically, I, too, remember writing an equally frozen college research paper, which also happened to be on Pope. I remember borrowing some books on Pope from the university library, sitting down on the library lawn, and trying to come up with some ideas for my paper. I have not kept that paper, but reading Reigstad's essay reminded me how, after studying some venerable critic's book on 18th-century British literature, I struggled to sound sophisticated and academic in my paper, but ended up sounding stilted, dry, and boring. I received a "B+" for that paper, and the grade was accompanied by minimal comments from my professor.

Like Tom Reigstad, I did not have much fun writing my Pope paper and I was not really happy with the result of my labors. Which is strange, because I genuinely liked the class in which the paper was assigned. I liked the readings, and the class discussions. I also liked my classmates and my knowledgeable and enthusiastic professor.

Yet, somehow, research writing that came out of that course was dry, detached, and just not very interesting to read. It was as if all the enthusiasm, humor, and energy which was present during class discussions and conferences with the professor suddenly vanished every time a writing assignment was given to the students. I think about my writing experiences in

that and many other college classes I have taken, I understand what the problem was. I was just too removed from the subject of my writing. I did not have a reason, an urge to invest myself into my compositions. I had enough skills to write an acceptable school research paper, but I did not have the desire or the inspiration to write it. My research paper writing skills may have earned me decent grades, but did not fulfill me as a writer or make me proud of my work.

I don't want to criticize academic research and literary research in particular. Academic research is a part of my job, and I like doing it. But I do want to question the usefulness of research writing assignments, like the traditional research paper, that require the writer to check his or her interests, passions, and voice "at the door" and to produce dry and boring prose. As a learner, a writer, and a teacher, I want to understand why and how a generally interesting and stimulating learning experience like my 18th century literature class could become such drudgery when it came to research writing. Like Reigstad in his essay on Pope, I also kept my personality out of my paper. Not quite knowing why, I imitated other people's styles and voices and tried to pretend that I am interested in writing the same way they were.

In this chapter, I want to talk about the I-search paper, an approach to research writing that puts the writer's "I" back into research. When I encountered I-search writing for the first time, I was intrigued by the term itself. It sounded playful and even defiant. Up until then, I had the mental image of research writing as inevitably dry, objective, and detached, as many of you may now. This is why it seemed to me that whoever came up with the name "I-search" had deliberately challenged the traditional research paper genre and the voiceless writing it often produces.

What is I-Search Writing?

I-search papers differ from traditional research papers in the methods of topic selection, the research process and, sometimes, sources used, and the look and feel of the final product. I-search assignments also treat the research process as a never-ending journey, one that does not conclude when the paper is finished.

The term "I-search paper" was coined by writing teacher and author Ken Macrorie in a series of books and articles he wrote in the 1970s and the 1980s. To this day, I-search writing remains one of the most popular and enjoyable alternatives to the traditional research paper genre. Macrorie's theory of I-search writing also remains the definitive work on the subject, from which everyone interested in I-search papers borrows heavily.

Let's look at Macrorie's own description of the I-search paper. In his 1998 book *Searching Writing*, he wrote the following:

"Contrary to most school research papers, the I-search comes out of a student's life and answers a need in it. The writing testifies to the subjective-objective character of the project. The paper is alive, not borrowedly inert" (v).

The defining characteristic of I-search writing is that, in addition to reporting the results of research, an I-search paper also contains a narrative in which its author tells of his or her research journey. In this narrative, the author of an I-search paper usually explains his or her

reasons for choosing a particular topic. In addition, the whole process of searching, including both successes and failures, is typically recounted. Finally, the author analyzes what she learned about her topic during research and often mentions any possible practical applications of those results in the future.

In the passage that I quoted earlier, Macrorie mentions three important characteristics of I-search writing. Firstly, topics of I-search projects always come from the writer's own interests and passions. Secondly, unlike the traditional research paper that purports to be analytical and objective, I-search papers require its author to stay personal and acknowledge his or her biases and interests. The last feature has to do with the style and tone of writing which I-search projects produce. Whereas the traditional research paper style is often neutral and detached, the style of I-search writing is lively and personable. Let's look at each of these features of I-search writing in detail.

The last item on this list is particularly important. The writer of an I-search paper does not try to hide behind obtuse phrases or "big" words. She does not try to remove her personality from the text by using dry and impersonal style. Instead, I-search writers make every effort to be present in their writing. Such presence is achieved through narratives, rhetorically effective use of examples and anecdotes, and, first and foremost, through the writer's interest in the subject of his or her writing. That is why, well-written I-search papers often read almost like creative non-fiction pieces. They often combine different genres, styles, and voices. Let us now consider some key features of I-search writing in detail.

I-Search Brings the Author Back into Research Writing

Consider all the times in your life when you had to conduct research. No, I am not talking about all those research papers that you wrote in high school or college. Instead, remember all those life situations, both simple and complex, when you had to find out something in order to solve a "life" problem. Remember that car you bought recently, or that apartment that you rented, or that family vacation you helped to plan.

The first fundamental difference between traditional research papers and I-search project is approach to topic selection. Writers themselves always choose topics for their I-search papers. A good I-search topic cannot be handed to you by your teacher or anyone else. As the author of an I-search project, you have to be interested in your subject. You have to be passionate about your topic, have a genuine need to find out more about it, and be willing to spend time and energy researching it. In other words, the topic must "come out of your life." Taking up the first topic you come across just to fulfill the I-search requirement is a recipe for failure.

The I-search paper and the traditional research paper view subjectivity and objectivity differently. The traditional research paper often requires us to write in an objective voice and even be detached from the subject of the writing. As researchers, we are supposed to study facts and present them in our writing. No personality, emotion, or humor allowed. Facts, or research evidence must not be tainted by any display of the author's attitude or personality. Writing otherwise means being subjective, and, within this view, subjective research is bad research because it is contaminated with opinion,

By contrast, I-search writing is both objective and subjective. This means that while you still want to have solid and reliable research in your paper, it is not only OK, but necessary to explain your attitudes and emotions towards your research. In other words, it is OK for an I-

search display his or her character and personality through writing. I-search writers try to make sure that throughout the paper readers understand how his or her interests, passions, and biases influence the research presented in the text.

The presence of the writer's voice in any text, including an I-search text, is important for several reasons. First of all, as was discussed in Chapter 1 of this book, complete objectivity is impossible anyway. Treatment of any subject is always influenced by the writer's choice of research sources, their arrangement, and so on. Researched pieces of writing which try to create the illusion of objectivity do so by forcing the author to omit any elements that might indicate even a tinge of subjectivity. These elements may include explanations of the reasons behind the research, expressions of the writer's interest in the subject, and others, the removal of personal pronouns, and so on. Finally, large portions of traditional research papers are written in passive voice. The use of passive voice serves to emphasize the subject and to remove the writer further from the subject of the text. To understand how the subjective-objective nature of I-search writing is implemented into practice, study the student I-search paper at the end of this chapter.

I-search writing also requires its authors to use a strong personal voice because, in most cases, voiced writing is rhetorically-effective and convincing. Your readers are humans who want not only accurate research, but also a lively and interesting account of it.

Consider the meaning of the word "search" itself. Anyone beginning an I-search writing project needs to keep in mind that his or her purpose is not to prove something, not simply to compile existing information, not simply to create an argument where you take one side and reject the other, but to search. As an I-search writer, you will be looking for meaning and making meaning; you would be exploring different possibilities and perspectives; you would be examining various facts and opinions and decide what they might mean for your topic and your search on it. Searching is driven by your passions and by your interests. To take this further, behind the word search stands the idea that you, as a writer and as a human being have to get involved in the I-search project not only on the intellectual level but also on an emotional one.

The objectivity of I-search writing is evident in the fact that when you have finished collecting and interpreting your data, you will want to present them completely, accurately, and fairly. You will want to create theories and interpretations of your data which can stand scrutiny. But as you do all that work, you keep your personality, your presence, and your style in your writing. And that makes the I-search paper subjective, in a good way.

The simultaneous objective-subjective attitude of the I-search writing assignment seeks to correct this mistaken approach. I-search writing relies on research data collected by the writer. Yet, it is the subjective relationship of the writer to that data and the way in which the writer uses and interprets it that defines the success of failure of every I-search endeavor.

What he means by this is that many beginning writers are intimidated by the demand placed on them by the traditional research paper assignment to rely heavily on borrowed information and opinions rather than developing new theories and ideas of their own. As a result, research sources often take control of the writer, and the resulting text looks, reads, and feels artificial. Macrorie describes this kind of writing as "borrowedly inert." This description suggests two things. Firstly, that research writing relies primarily on the materials gleaned from external sources and secondly, that writers of research papers move with inertia, out of habit and because they cannot stop, rather than because they are driven by curiosity and willingness to tell something interesting to their readers. As you know from the chapter on rhetoric of this

book, the objective of every writer should be to create the best possible text. While it is true that in research-based writing external sources often provide the jump-start for the writer's own creativity, simply retelling what the sources say is not enough to produce an rhetorically effective piece. Research is a tool for this creation, not an end in itself. I-search writing re-affirms this idea.

To summarize this section, here are some basic characteristics of I-search writing

- Every I-search paper should be about a subject deeply interests the writer.
- Before starting an I-search project, writers should consider, openly acknowledge, and discuss with others their current knowledge, opinions, and biases about their subject. Not only do these activities serve as excellent invention techniques, but they also help the writer to realize his or her personal stake in the project which.
- I-search projects not only present the results of the research, but also describe and discuss the research process. I-search writing requires writers to provide narratives of their research methods, successes and failures, surprising finds, and dead-ends.
- I-search papers have a strong writer's voice throughout. They do away with has been called "English"—the artificial voiceless language of the generic research paper. Writers of I-search projects should use a clear, personal writing style.

Based on these principles, in the process of researching and writing an I-search project the writer needs to consider the following questions:

- What in my subject interests me and why? What personal stake do I have in it?
- What do I already know about my subject?
- What else do I want to find out?
- Who do I need to talk to and what sources do I need to consult in order to find out?
- How do I write my paper making sure that I not only present the results of my research but also narrate its process, mentioning and analyzing both its successes and failures?

I-Search is Natural, Passionate, and Interactive

In *Searching Writing*, Macrorie explains the I-search paper further:

"...the I-search paper is a natural activity; if you let a genuine need or desire grab you, you'll find people helping so much that you become embarrassed. They'll do that because they sense how much you care about what you are looking for and because like all human beings they enjoy telling someone else what they know" (1998, 66).

This passage contains three key concepts. First, as a human endeavor, research is natural. The same cannot be said about the generic research paper assignment. Second, to be a successful researcher, you need to be passionate about your subject. Third, when people sense your passion, they are willing to help you find the answers to your questions.

Let us look at these three qualities of the I-search writing a little more closely.

I-search Research is Natural

Macrorie's first claim is that research is "natural," that it is essential for all human activity. If you are used to writing traditional research papers whose topics are often exclusively academic and are even sometimes handed down to students by teachers, you may think that noting could be further from the truth. To show what he means by this, Macrorie tells of a time in his life when he and his family were planning a year-long trip to Mexico. Macrorie's wife Joyce began the research. He writes:

"All the searching was fun for Joyce." She brought home each armful of books excitedly and opened them with anticipation...When I thought of her habit of searching, I thought 'Why couldn't school research be like that?'" (56).

I am sure that Macrorie's example is familiar to many of us. Think of all the times when you had to solve a life's practical problem, such as buying a car, looking for an apartment to rent, or planning a trip to an unfamiliar place, and of all the research you had to do. You probably consulted a variety of sources, such as Internet sites, books, and brochures. You probably also talked to people whom you considered experts in the questions you were trying to answer and problems you were trying to solve. For example, when deciding on which car to buy, you may have sought out other people who already owned the make and model you were interested in. Or, when planning a trip to a new place, you may have talked to someone who had already visited it. In addition, you probably chose not to rely on one source, instead deciding to consult several publications or people. And, of course, when conducting your searches, you probably will not rely too much on the opinions of people who have vested interests in selling you that car or that trip. Instead, you will try to balance the information you receive from them with other, less partial sources.

Prime examples of I-search sites are public library and bookstores. In them, you see people who search, read, and ask questions either to solve some practical life problems or to quench their thirst for knowledge and curiosity. If you have ever gone to those places to either purposefully look for answers to questions or to just while away the time and found yourself immersed in a book or a magazine, you have engaged in I-search.

Practical searching described in the preceding paragraphs has much in common with what researching writers do. They research and write on a topic that interests them. They also use a variety of sources, both primary and secondary. They carefully select their sources in order to ensure obtaining the latest and most accurate information. Finally, they try to obtain different perspectives on their subject to ensure that their knowledge and opinions about their subject are based on the best available sources. To prepare for I-search writing activities later on in this chapter, explore the following questions.

Writing Activity—I-search for Life Questions.

Think of a "life problem" you had to solve. Perhaps you were looking for a place to live. Or, maybe, you were considering moving to a new town, but were not sure whether that would be a right decision. Or, maybe you were looking for the best school for your child. In each of these situations, how did you proceed? Either by yourself or with a classmate, consider the following questions:

- What did you know about the subject of your search before you began?
- How certain was your knowledge, and what were the sources of it? How reliable were those

sources?

- What else did you need to find out in order to solve your problem or answer your research question?

I-search is Passionate

In life outside of school, would you spend much time and energy on something you don't care about? Probably not! The same is true in writing. Of course, by doing only the required minimum, you can produce an adequate paper. But that's all it is ever going to be—adequate. To truly excel at research and writing, to interest your readers in what you have to say and to enjoy yourself in the process, you have to be passionate about your subject.

All good writing, research writing including, begins with passion and curiosity. Not with note cards; not with learning your way around the library or the Internet; not even with the knowledge of how to draft and revise. All these are important tools of the writer's trade, but they are only as useful as your interest in the subject and your desire to find out and tell others about it will allow them to be. Research allows you, the writer and your readers to fulfill their curiosity about something, to search for answers to important questions. I-search writing provides us with an excellent platform for this by encouraging writers to search and write with passion.

We are all experts on something. Even if you believe that you don't know much about a subject that interests you, you probably know something. Enough to get you started and help you find out more. Exploring your current knowledge of your topic is an excellent way of bringing that passion into your I-search writing. Your current knowledge is a great start, but you will not be able to write using only it. Because research writing pushes us beyond our current knowledge, it is essential that you do not stop at describing what you already know but try to find out more. Later on in the chapter, you will be offered activities designed to help you tease out and explore ways to use your pre-existing knowledge in I-search projects.

I-search is Interactive

I-search projects require writers to study both primary and secondary sources. When working on an I-search project, tell others what you already know and what you want to know. Ask them if they can help. Actively seek out experts in the field you are researching. People who are interested in the same subject that you are will gladly give their time and expertise to you if approached properly. For a detailed discussion of how to conduct these kinds of research, see Chapter 4 and Chapter 7 of this book.

I-Search Writing is a Journey

I will tell a story here. This is a "life" example, but since, as we discussed, I-search writing is suitable for life situation, I used to live in Tallahassee, Florida. One weekend (I think it was a long weekend) my wife and I decided, pretty much on a whim, to go to Atlanta, which is about five hours away by car. We must have spent two or three days in Atlanta and surrounding

towns and headed back home. On the drive back, we visited one of the most interesting and fun places we had ever been to. And we visited it without any planning.

As we drove along Interstate 75 bypassing the town of Macon, Georgia, about half-way between Atlanta and Tallahassee, we saw a roadside sign that said "Georgia Music Hall of Fame." Since we were in no particular rush to get home that day, we decided to stop and see the place. Our visit there turned out to be very memorable, one that we still talk about five years later and tell all our friends to be sure to visit the place if they are ever in Macon. Now, had we not passed that roadside sign, we probably would never even heard about the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. In preparation for writing this chapter, I did a quick search for the museum on Google in an attempt to refresh my memory. I discovered that the Hall of Fame does not even have its own website, being hosted instead on a website called Roadside Georgia (www.roadsidegeorgia.com). And even though we are both music fans and like many of the artists whose life and work the museum celebrates, it is very unlikely that we would have sought out the knowledge, the art, and the humor which we so inadvertently received by following a roadside sign that day.

In a way, we conducted an I-search project that day. Of course, we did not write formal papers about our visit, but we learned quite a lot about various famous Georgia musicians, from the soul and blues great Ray Charles to the pop group TLC. What allowed us to gain this knowledge was in part luck, and in part willingness to be spontaneous and veer off the beaten track of our journey home. This is a rather trivial example, and I am sure many of us have had similar experiences in life. But it makes an important point about writing and about research writing in particular.

As a writer, you know that before beginning a writing project, it is necessary to do some planning. Before beginning to research, it is also important to devise a solid research plan, and how to do that is discussed in Chapter 6 of this book. At the same time, as a writer, you probably also know that it is important not to plan too much. It is crucial for the success of your research and writing to leave room for adventure and unpredictability in every search and in every writing project. Writers who plan too much can become stuck in their original designs and ideas even if those designs do not work well later on in the project. For a more detailed discussion of planning for writing, see the chapter dedicated to the writing process.

Achieving an appropriate balance between planning and spontaneity is particularly important for researching writers, and especially for writers who work on I-search projects. Planning too much, for example, deciding well in advance and once and for all, what sources to use, can lead to shutting out all other possibilities and, thus, cutting you off of many potentially interesting and important ideas and answers and questions.

Think about your next I-search projects as one of those road trips where you have to generally stay on course and to get from point A to point B, but where you can also take detours and stop to see interesting things and people if they happen along the way. When we travel, it is usually during those detours that we find the most interesting things to see and do.

You might ask what this personal anecdote, which is not about writing at all, has to do with the I-search assignment. As Tom Reigstad tells us in "Scratching a 'Marvelously Itchy' Itch: Teaching the I-Search Paper" that it is important for I-search writers to have such traits as "'enterprise,' 'resourcefulness,' 'doggedness,' 'originality,' 'ingenuity,' 'intrepidity,' 'risk-taking,' 'legwork,' 'initiative,' and 'open-mindedness'" (2004, 40). Notice that what is valued in I-search writing, in addition to following principles of solid research, is the ability to think

and act in a non-standard way. The idea that writing is an exploratory act which is capable of giving the writer many wonderful and unexpected results, is particularly important for I-search. After all, one of the primary purposes of research in general and of I-search writing in particular is find out new things about the topic of the writing. As has been emphasized elsewhere in the book, writers should not be afraid to explore uncharted territories, even if those territories yield unexpected or uncomfortable results. With this idea in mind, in the next section you are invited to begin an I-search project of your own.

Invention Activity: Getting (Re)Acquainted with your Research Topic.

What would you like to know and share with others? Is there a subject (academic or not) in which you are an absolute novice and which interests you? Or, do you know a little about something but would like to find out more? You can accomplish either goal through an I-search project. In the following invention activity you are invited you to begin such a project.

Working on your own or with a partner, go through the following steps. The objective of this activity is to help you get started with the first stage of the search and prepare you for the writing of the first draft of your I-search paper.

- List several topics or questions that interest you. These can be either academic or “life” topics, although in some cases your teacher may limit you in your choice. I recommend listing at least eight to ten potential subjects for you I-search investigation. Why so many? Simply because the more options you have, the more likely you are to select a truly inspiring and interesting topic. For more on listing and other invention methods, see Chapter 2 of this book. If listing is not your favorite invention method, you may try brainstorming, mind mapping, or any of the other invention strategies listed in Chapter 2.
- Study the list you have created. Choose two or three potential topics and free-write about each of them for five or ten minutes. Remember that one rule of free-writing is not to stop even if you feel that you have nothing to say. Aim to have at least three or four substantial paragraphs about each topic as a result of your free writing.
- Now, work with the results of your free-writing. Take a blank sheet of paper (or open a new file on your computer), and divide it into two columns. Put your free-write next to you and consult it frequently. In the left column, write everything you know about your topic. In the right column, write everything you would like to find out. Consider both what is interesting to you and what will be interesting to your future readers. Repeat this process for all the free writes. In examining your existing knowledge, remember to include not only facts, but also personal experiences, stories, experiences of other people, and so on. Later on, you can include these into your draft to engage your readers.
- You have made a list of everything you know about your potential subjects and a list of what you would like to know. But every research project begins with a series of research questions. After you have completed the preparatory work described in this activity so far, you should be well prepared to begin asking research questions of your own.
- Read through the lists you have made in the left and right columns. Try to ask questions about your topic. You may begin by using the journalistic pentad “What, Who, Where, Why, or When.” Remember to ask the questions that genuinely interest you because these are the questions you will work with during the project. Aim to have at least five or six such questions at this early stage of the project. These initial questions will guide you through the first round of research.

As you know by now, research and writing are recursive and non-linear processes which often take place simultaneously. This means that in the process of writing your I-search paper, you will likely have to conduct research and writing in several stages. You will probably need to come back to your sources several times, look for new and better ones, and, of course, revise your paper at least a couple of times. All this will come later, however. Now, it is important to start the project. The following activity will show you how to conduct the initial search and use its results in a first draft of your paper.

Writing Activity: Preparing for the Search

At the beginning of the search, ask yourself a simple but crucial question: "Now that I have my topic and my initial research questions, where and how can I get the best, most reliable, and most complete answers which would allow me to create an effective and readable paper?" The following activity will help you answer this question. You can work on this activity on your own or with a partner.

- What sources would allow you to answer your question best? Consider both secondary sources (books, websites, etc.) and primary sources (experts on your topic, for example)?
- Do you have easy access to people who are experts on your topic? By the word "experts" I mean not only academics who may have written books or journals articles about your topics, but also people who practice an activity or live in a place you are interested in studying. For instance, to study blacksmithing, it will be useful not only to read books on the craft, but also interview and observe blacksmiths at work.
- Do you need special skills to conduct interviews or observe your subjects? For example, do you need to learn how to write and conduct an interview or a survey or how to keep a researcher's notebook? For more on interviewing and observing as research methods, see Chapter 7 of this book.
- Do you need special note taking and critical reading skills? For more on these components of the research process, see Chapters 6 and 3 respectively.

Writing Activity: Beginning the Search

Now that you have answered the questions above, you are well equipped to begin searching. The advice below will help you.

- Begin researching your topic not by going to the library or to the Internet, but by talking to the people who know something about your topic. If your topic is an academic one, seek experts on your campus. For example, the teachers whose classes you are currently taking or have taken in the past are excellent sources of knowledge. If your topic is non-academic, use the experts in your community. For example, if you are researching a travel destination, visit a couple of travel agents and people who have been there. If your topic is a local environmental issue, talk to local government agencies and environmental activists. Whatever sources you decide to use, be sure to cast your research net broadly, gathering a wide range of data, opinions, and ideas. You will need such a wide range in order to create as complete picture of your topic as possible. Sometimes, no experts will be available locally. In such cases, if time permits, you should try to contact them by e-mail or by phone.

Sometimes they will reply and sometimes they will not. But, you will not know until you try.

- Next, read about your topic. This stage will require you to consult secondary sources, such as books, journals, and Internet sites. You should include a variety of sources in your search, from academic publications to popular magazines and newspapers, to community newsletters. In other words, when it comes to secondary research for an I-search project, just about any source can be useful as long as you know how to determine its credibility. It is important to cover a wide range of secondary sources, too, since that will allow you to contextualize your findings and build a broad and multi-dimensional picture of your topic.
- Once you have gathered initial data from different sources, write brief summaries of your findings in your notebook or in a separate computer file. These summaries will be your springboard for the first draft of the paper. As you summarize your findings, pay attention to both similarities and differences between the data you have received from your different sources and constantly compare that data with you knew about the topic before you began searching.

Writing the First Draft

After examining your pre-existing knowledge and completing the first round of research, you are ready to compose the first draft of your I-search paper. Because I-search writing is different from the traditional research paper, you should approach writing the first draft differently. Instead of struggling with a general introduction or even a thesis statement, begin by following the drafting strategies on the list below.

- Tell a story explaining why you are interested in the topic.
- Summarize what you know about the topic and explain where you learned it.
- State what you are hoping to accomplish as a result of your research. Your goals may include solving some practical problem or learning more about an academic subject.
- List your initial research questions.
- Tell the story of the first round of your research, describing your sources, your research methods, and your findings. Be sure to mention and analyze both successes and dead-ends. For instance, if one of your sources yielded less information than you expected, mention it and discuss where you might find the information you need.
- As you draft, always keep in mind that process is as important for I-search writing as product. Therefore, together with reporting their results, I-search writers should constantly describe, analyze, and reflect upon the progress of their research.

Moving On: Exploring your Topic Further

The worst kind of the traditional research paper assignment has almost eliminated searching and investigating from the act of research and writing. The kind of research which the traditional library paper espouses focuses too heavily on teaching how to compile information or “prove” theses and not enough on exploration and close study of one’s subject.

Consider the meaning of the words “search” and “research” again. To search means not only

to look for something, and looking is exploratory. It does not always result in satisfactory or neat data that you can use in your paper right away. But exploration is important because it allows you to get to the heart of your topic, to become a true expert.

You have conducted the initial round of research and written a rough draft. It is now time to take your search further and deeper. It is time to examine the data already available to you further as well as to try finding some new ones. The following activity will help you with that.

Asking Deeper Questions

Work through the items on the list below on your own or with your partner. Before you begin, make sure that you have your draft and all your research notes available to you.

Part I: Asking Questions about Existing Research

In this part of the activity, you will be asked to dig deeper into the information you gathered during the first round of searching.

- Re-read your first draft and your research notes, including any interview transcripts, secondary source summaries, double-entry journal entries, and so on.
- What in your research about your topic surprised you? What was expected?
- Did the experts you spoke with confirm or contradict your existing knowledge about your topic?
- Did the secondary sources you consulted confirm, contradict, or expand on the information you obtained during the interviews and observations?
- In the light on your new knowledge, try to revise any or all of your initial research questions to accommodate this new knowledge.

Part II: Planning Further Research

As I mentioned earlier, research and writing are recursive processes which do not end after the first round of searching or the writing of the first draft. Now that you have completed the first stage of the project, updating your knowledge on the subject of your investigation, it is necessary to take your research further by seeking out new sources and new knowledge they can offer.

- Study your revised research questions.
- Notice what questions remain unanswered and what problems remain unsolved after the first round of searches.
- Plan additional research, both primary and secondary. This means finding additional experts as well as consulting additional books, journals, websites, and so on.
- Be particularly alert to contradictory information on your topic that your sources may have given you. Try to reconcile the contradictions by using your personal experiences or by consulting more sources.

Revising the First Draft

Of course, now that you have written the first draft of your paper, it is necessary to revise it. As you know, revision will help you not only to learn more about your topic and formulate your ideas better. It will also aid you in focusing and developing your argument better, thus enabling you to read your audience. Fundamentally, revising I-search writing is not different from revising any other type of writing. But because of I-search paper's several special features, there are some revision considerations specific to this assignment. After you complete the second round of searches, try the following revision activity.

Revision Activity: Making Your Research Data Come Alive

Re-read your first draft or have someone else read it. Then, consider the revision strategies below. Remember that the essence of revision is to improve the content of your writing, so do not limit yourself to cosmetic changes in grammar and mechanics.

- It is likely that your first draft primarily summarizes your research results. In the second draft, try varying summary, quotes, and paraphrase with analysis.
- When recounting your conversations with the experts, alternate between summary and dialog. Quote the experts, but do it sparingly.
- Remember that even if you are not taking a side on an issue in it, your I-search paper is still an argument. Therefore, make sure that your readers get a strong sense of your worldview and your voice. Although typically formal thesis statements are not required of I-search papers, you may decide to create such a statement summarizing your position on the subject or your findings. If you do so, make sure that the evidence you offer to your readers throughout the paper supports and explains that thesis. Note also that the thesis does not have to appear in the very first paragraph of the paper.
- Experiment with various ways to begin and end the paper. For example, after summarizing your current knowledge about your topic, try diving straight into a scene or an interview with an expert or into an analysis of an interesting source.
- Use visual information and elements of innovative document design. For example, if your paper uses statistics, present it in various types of charts and graphs. Use images and bulleted lists, but use them sparingly. For more information on visual rhetoric, see Chapter 10.
- After you have completed the activity, share your results with your classmates and your teacher.

The Style of I-Search Writing

Good writing matches its style with its rhetorical purpose. All elements of a writing style, such as arrangement of paragraphs, structure of the paper's sentences, which is also known as syntax, word choice, and so on should be adequate to the writer's goals, his or her intended audience, and the context in which the piece is created. I-search writing is no exception.

One of the difficulties that many writers have with the generic research paper assignment is that it requires them to sound “learned” and artificial. As we discussed in the chapter of this book dedicated to rhetoric, the generic research paper assignment claims (falsely) complete objectivity. To achieve such objectivity, the assignment requires the writer to completely remove him or herself from the writing. As a result, many student writers writing traditional research papers use what they call “big” words and intentionally, but unnecessarily complex sentence structures.

I-search writing puts the writer back into the writing. It calls on the writer to use clear, even conversational language. Remember that your goal in an I-search paper is to conduct an investigation of a topic that is interesting to you and to tell your readers of the results of that investigation. While I am not suggesting that the language you use in your I-search writing be primitive, I do believe that artificially complicating the vocabulary and the syntax of any piece of writing, I-search writing included, detracts from the writing’s persuasive power and makes readers less interested in it.

Perhaps one of the biggest stylistic challenges facing new I-search writers is the need not only to report dry facts or even construct an effective thesis, but to create an attractive narrative of their search. Beginning writers often find it difficult to reconcile the requirements of a research assignment (being analytical, commenting on your sources and so on) with the need to be an engaging storyteller (using vivid descriptions and detail, dialog, building the story towards a climax, and so on). The following advice will help you to achieve such a combination of analysis and storytelling:

Remember that your goal in researching your topic is to find answers to your questions. Your goal in writing the paper is to present those answers as well as the process of looking for them, to your readers in an interesting and attractive manner. The style of your paper, from the arrangement of your paragraphs down to sentence structure and word choice must be selected according to that goal.

When creating a narrative of your research remember principles of good narrative writing. Use vivid descriptions and details; use dialog where appropriate; do not be afraid of speaking in the first person.

When constructing your narrative, mention and interpret your research results. While doing so, try to speak in a natural, conversational voice.

- Experiment with different voices and tones, including both serious and humorous ones.
- Combine narration with reflection and interpretation. Remember that your research results are only as good as what you have to say about them. One way to achieve that is to alternate narrative paragraphs and analytical ones.
- When all is said and done, don’t forget that your goal is to create an interesting (well-researched, but interesting) account of your topic for your readers. Be guided by that principle in your stylistic choices.
- Do not be shy about showing your personality and your voice through your writing. But, while doing so, don’t forget the rhetorical situation.
- Don’t forget to cite and document your sources, both primary and secondary, properly.
- Overall, remember that stylistic choices should be made in accordance with your purpose, audience, and context.

Examples of I-Search Papers

In this section, you are invited to read two I-search papers written by student authors. The first paper is by Peter Merrigan. In the paper, Peter tackles an important problem for all students—grades and their role in education. The second paper is by Adrien Funk. In her paper, Adrien looks for way to start a career in music journalism. As you read both papers, consider to the following points:

- The author's use of primary and secondary sources. Notice how he combined the information he received from interviews with material from secondary sources which tackle grade-worry as a national problem. Would either paper have benefited from more secondary sources?
- The author's use of both academics and fellow students as his research sources. Notice that for this project Peter interviewed one of his teachers and a grade conscious fellow student for this project.
- The structure of the paper. Notice that the author retells the story of his search together with reporting and interpreting his results.
- The evolution of the author's research questions and interests as he gathers and evaluates new information.
- Consider what you would do differently in your own I-search project.

Grades: The “White Elephant” of Academia, By Peter Merrigan

“There's an elephant in the room. We all know it's there. We are thinking about the elephant as we talk together. It is constantly on our minds. For, you see, it is a very large elephant.”

- Terry Kettering

What I Knew

While I have been a student for many years, the focus of my studies has not been on the expansion of personal knowledge and skills but rather on the success of my grades. Although I continually try to avoid the trap of overemphasizing grades, grades quickly lure me. Students and teachers alike have persistently placed the educational focus of the classroom on academics. Despite encouragement from teachers and professors, students very rarely write a paper without thinking about the grade he or she will receive. Students cannot avoid the tendency to focus on academic marks often in sacrifice of academic authenticity. Ultimately grading serves as a gatekeeping device.

Although gatekeeping through academic grading is present in educational institutions throughout America, the process inevitably affects the way students think and act. The systematic process of grading transforms student creativity into a methodical practice. As the saying goes, “Life is not a multiple choice test!”. A student who focuses on grades is often able to perform given tasks with success, but I ask the greater question of what is the purpose of academia? Does academic success echo throughout the life of a student yielding professional success in the years to come? Academics strive to create certainty through

correct or incorrect teachings, but academics simultaneously send a message to students that there is no "correct answer". Students quickly dismiss the teacher's assertion because history has taught the students differently. In the end grading is systematic and methodical, but is life? Does success in one determine success in the other?

Although I have spent the majority of my life in the academic classroom, beginning this project, I understand that I know relatively little about the impact of grades and grading. My attitudes and philosophies are a reflection of my experience and act as a hypothesis for what I believe to be true rather than what I know to be true. I believe that grading creates a system where students sacrifice personal ingenuity in order to achieve noteworthy credentials. While this is certainly a cynical view of the grading process, it is simply a hypothesis. Inevitably all actions have both positive and negative impacts. Grading does not break this rule, but rather demonstrates a framework through which our society functions. So I must ask, how does grading negatively and positively affect me?

Throughout my life I have heard stories, myths, and even legends about some of America's most revered. Although many successful people achieve success with a perfect academic record, many of them do not. I cannot help but ask myself how this happens. The hypothesis that I propose suggests that those that do not provide a flawless academic record falter academically because they possess intangible qualities such as creativity, vision, and independent thinking. Grading does not always measure these qualities. Furthermore, I believe that it is the very presence of these qualities that inhibit a student's ability to achieve high academic marks in a class that requires simply regurgitation. Following a similar logic then, I also believe that a certain, intangible element of ingenuity and independent thought is lost by students that succeed by blindly memorizing and reciting the teacher's material. Certainly my hypothesis is cynical at best, however I think this topic is immensely important in an American society where students spend the entirety of their developmental lives in the classroom.

The Search

To begin my research I interviewed a writing professor of mine, at James Madison University, Professor Sarah O'Connor. When I sat down with Professor. O'Connor, I quickly realized how complicated the subject of grading is. As I asked Professor O'Connor about what she believed the main purpose of academic institutions in America was, she paused. Professor O'Connor said that the purpose of a liberal arts education was to prepare students for citizenship enough so that they are able to contribute to society. She then added that students attend academic institutions so that they are able to learn to communicate, which requires knowledge. Finally O'Connor affirmed that the purpose of academia was to train the mind to learn how to learn. I thought Professor O'Connor's answers clearly depicted the goal of the American academic institution. It was with this premise my interview was able to proceed.

When I proceeded to ask Professor O'Connor about the role of grading, she mentioned that there were both positive and negative aspects of grading. The trick is to balance not discouraging a student with not allowing a student to become complacent. I then ask Professor O'Connor whether or not she thought the grading system was successful. O'Connor asserted that the grading system should serve as an accurate mirror for a student. From this response it would become clear that Professor O'Connor does believe the current system is successful. She furthered her claim by declaring that the collegiate system reflects the workplace due to the importance of credibility that one's personal record reflects. It was also

interesting to note that Professor O'Connor supported the current system but concurrently provided the provision that grading does not necessarily reflect learning.

Up to this point in the interview I felt that the answers I received were almost expected. Somewhat uncertain about the direction of the interview I asked Professor O'Connor the very direct question, "Is there a correlation between grades and success?". When I asked this question I also specifically reminded Professor O'Connor that success was not a word that simply referenced money but rather was a reflection of her own personal definition. It was O'Connor's answer to this question that provided the most interesting insight into my research. Professor O'Connor again paused to ponder the complexity and implications of this question.

When she spoke she did not answer with a simple "yes" or "no" but rather provided numerous anecdotes and assertion regarding this correlation. Professor O'Connor began by declaring, "If a student succeeds academically because they do everything they are told, they could be successful; however they might not be leaders or bring about change." O'Connor further developed her thoughts by claiming that the more important quality is not simply grades but rather ones ability to think independently. Noting that independent thinking is sometimes sacrificed for academic success, O'Connor said that it is not necessarily limited by academic success; rather it is the student that bears the responsibility. Finally O'Connor raised an important idea that what determines leadership is a reflection of ones relationship to authority. Proposing the query, "To question or to not?", O'Connor referenced the prisoner abuse that occurred at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Clearly, O'Connor noted, the American soldiers who participated in the prisoner abuse missed an opportunity to think independently and as a result they had no ability to say "No".

My interview with Professor O'Connor was very important for a number of reasons. Most importantly this interview specifically narrowed the variable that I was evaluating, while also narrowing the broad definition of success. While I question the correlation between success and grades, really what I am evaluating is the process of independent thinking and grades. Although I attribute independent thought to success, I realized through this interview that my opinion is not a universally held belief. Professor O'Connor directly stated that without independent thought an individual could certainly be successful, but could not simultaneously be a leader that brings about change. It became very clear to me after finishing this interview that to associate independent thinking directly with success is flawed logic. My definition of success naturally incorporates the ability to lead, influence, and thrive. This interview helped focus my research because from this point on I wanted to evaluate the influence of grades on independent thought rather than talk about grading in general. It is from this evaluation I was then hoping to be able to make conclusions about the impact of grading on a person's life after college.

In order to further evaluate the role of grades in the academic university, I interviewed my good friend and roommate Jeffrey Stottlemeyer. Jeff is an honor roll student and is also a member of JMU honor fraternity, Phi Sigma Pi. As a successful student, Jeff provides a unique insight into the role of grades in the academic arena. After a very productive interview with Professor O'Connor I sat down with Jeff and asked him a number of very similar questions. When I first began the interview by asking Jeff about the role of the collegiate university in America, Jeff took a very different approach by suggesting that the role of the university is to provide the American economy with a work force. From the very onset of my interview with Jeff, the questions and answered seem to connect each other and naturally control the direction of the interview.

Although my interview with Jeff was notably shorter than my interview with Professor, my interview with Jeff was equally as productive. After Jeff noted that he believed the purpose of the American university was to provide a workforce for the American economy, I followed up my previous question by asking Jeff how he believed grades influenced this process. Jeff specifically stated that he believes grades play the most important role in the process. "Through grades", Jeff noted, "students learn how to think in a fashion that is relevant to corporate America". Jeff furthered his statement by asserting that through grading students lose the ability to think independently, and as a result become custom to reiterating information rather than questioning it.

I then proceeded to ask Jeff how this phenomenon could occur in fields such as history, writing, and English where the very premise of study focuses on questioning the concept of truth. Jeff then provided a less harsh response. Jeff affirmed that although there are many fields that provide students with the opportunity to question the validity of the academic material, the system remains the same. Student use grades as the ultimate measure of their success. Inevitably, Jeff concluded grades alter the process of learning by encouraging students to provide simply what the teacher wants.

My interview with Jeff raised a number of interesting questions that I had not anticipated prior to the interview. Although I do not necessarily agree with all of Jeff's answers, I thought it was interesting to note that in fields such as English, Writing, and History Jeff still thought students were simply dictating a desired response for the teachers appeasement. I do not necessarily agree with this statement but rather I believe that students and teachers together have an obligation to avoid this trapping.

What I Learned

After interviewing both Jeff and Professor O'Connor the impact of grades in America is apparent. Despite the efforts to transport the focus of academic learning, the role of grades plays an unavoidable role in the way students think and learn. In the end students and teachers must balance the influence grades have in the classroom. While students use grades to measure their ability to perform, students must simultaneously focus their efforts on personal development. Professor O'Connor clearly indicated the most important role in the learning process is the ability to think independently. Jeff's own understanding of the educational system provided a very different perspective. Jeff believed that in fact the education system, through the use of grades, was systematically eliminating the presence of independent thought from the American culture.

While I do not agree completely with either Jeff or Professor O'Connor, the discrepancy that exists between Jeff's student perspective and Professor O'Connor's teacher's perspective indicates a miscommunication. I agree that grades play a very important and influential role in the process of learning. I also do not think that they are necessarily bad. My research has led me to understand that the problem with grading is not simply their existence, but rather the lack of discussion concerning the role of grades in the classroom. Ultimately grades cannot replace learning in the classroom because if they do students will no longer think independently, but rather students will rely on authority to think for them. As Stephen Dick writes in his 2001 article "Students Fight Battle between life, Drudgery", "By drudging we will all lose touch with what we really feel in exchange for some letters closer to the top of the alphabet."

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Music Journalism, by Adrien Funk

When the idea of an I-search paper was proposed in class, I felt lost trying to determine what area to study. I spent a couple of classes discussing ideas with my classmates and with my professor. I just could not figure out what I was passionate enough about to get some joy and excitement out of the assignment. Then it occurred to me one day when I purchased some tickets to a concert. I love music; especially live music. That is where the motivation for my paper topic got its start because of my passion for music. If I had any musical talent, then I would try to make that my life. However, since I cannot play any instruments, I guess I will have to pursue my music interest in a different way. This is why music journalism appeals to me so much.

I do not know much about music journalism, so there are quite a few questions I will need to research. Of course I pick up a copy of Rolling Stone every once in a while, and I read reviews and biographies on bands, but I do not have the slightest clue where these come from. I have no knowledge of what goes on behind the scenes. I can only assume that research takes place before a journalist does their interview and writes their piece.

So, to begin my pursuit into the world of music journalism, I have to figure out exactly what it is that I want to know and research. This came easily to me during class one day. I started making a list of questions with the help of some fellow students and my professor. These are the questions that I think are important and will help me to determine what I want to know about music journalism.

The hardest thing for me to overcome in music journalism would be that of being unbiased. So, my first question is how do music journalists write and make reviews from an unbiased standpoint? I know I would be biased because I only like the genre of music that I listen to and dislike everything else. Also, what is the criterion for critiquing music? Maybe this helps the journalist to be un-biased.

Another question I have is how do music journalists form questions for interviewing bands? I know that such journalists have to write up biographies on bands and they write up articles on interviews. So how do they formulate their questions which are the first part of their writing

process?

Something that seems to be very important for journalists is their audience. So, what kinds of audiences do music journalists keep in mind when writing their piece? What kind of a role does the audience play in such writing? I would assume that the audience plays a huge role because they want to sell their magazines or journals.

I would also like to know what kind of pressure journalists receive from editors. I understand that journalists have deadlines to meet, but do they have editors breathing down their necks throughout the entire writing process? Or do editors usually sit back and allow the writer freedom?

Finally, I want to know how this type of professional writing should be taught. Do most music journalists have degrees? How important is their educational background?

To find answers to these questions, I started searching the Internet for music journalists. I came across many and started sending e-mails to people asking them if I could interview them for an I-search paper. Of course I had to explain what an I-search paper is. I had two people respond to me and told me to send my questions. They were both very prompt in replying.

The first interview I did was with Scott Harrell who writes for the Weekly Planet. This is a weekly newspaper in Florida and Scott is the music critic. I sent Scott six questions and here is what I found out.

I asked Scott how he overcame biases when writing reviews. He responded, "There's a difference between liking something and respecting it, and any music writer should know enough about the technical aspects of music-making to be able to make a decision whether or not he or she respects something. That's really the key; to have that knowledge to go to, especially when your heart feels unqualified. Look for good, any good, in any particular piece of music, and look hard. [Look for] good production, good arrangements, good performances. Then again, it does help to be an inordinately open-minded or omnivorous music fan." (Harrell).

Scott hit on a really good point here that I had never considered. Respecting the music that a writer is reviewing is the key. A writer cannot make a review based off of whether or not they personally like the sound. They have to take into consideration all of the technical aspects that go into music making.

Secondly, I asked Scott what kind of criteria he followed when writing a review or biography on a musician/band. He said the first thing he does is decide if the band is well-known or not. "If the subject is really famous, I don't want to re-hash the same old information. I try to get stuff into the story that I haven't read elsewhere." He did say this can be tough though. Scott said that he prefers to interview lesser known artists, and in these cases it is important to provide a lot of background information.

From Scott's response, I can gather that writing on a well-known band would be very difficult. I think Scott makes another great point in saying that you do not want to write the same kind of review on a band that everyone else has already written. The challenge would be to present information that fans are unaware of. It seems that this would involve a lot of research.

The next question I asked Scott was how he began his writing process when writing a review. Obviously the first thing he does is listen to the record. He also said, "Generally, if I'm reviewing an act that's relatively new, I'll give some background on it before launching into the particulars, and if it's something that a good portion of readers would recognize, then I'll open with something arty, inane, funny, offensive, or otherwise attention-grabbing." (Harrell).

It would make sense to start the writing process by trying to draw the reader in. Depending on the record that is being reviewed, there may be the need for background information. If the musicians are fairly well-known, then there is no need for background information; just start into the particulars of the record.

As anyone who has ever written anything knows, audiences can be overwhelming. So I asked Scott how big of a role does the audience play in his writing process. He responded by saying, "A huge one. I always think of the audience when I'm writing something that's going into a periodical. I don't wonder what they want to hear, and then try to give it to them. I try to turn them on to something with which they might not be familiar with, and entertain them in the process. I try to interest my audience without hectoring or talking down to it." (Harrell).

Of course audiences are always important; especially when writing for a periodical or newspaper. I like how Scott says he tries to turn his audience onto something new while entertaining them at the same time. My main goal would be to turn people onto different types of music through my reviews.

My next question to Scott was about editors. I asked him what kind of pressure he has received from editors he has dealt with. Scott responded, "It really depends on the week, and what's on the table as far as content that needs to be filed. With regard to my usual weekly music-writing duties, there's not much more than a constant, unexpressed low-grade pressure. My editor knows that I know what is expected of me, and I've done the job long enough to develop a habitual rhythm that ensures I meet my deadlines." He did say that this can change when everyone is pitching in on a special issue or feature on top of their normal workload. He said in these cases, "...editors [are] constantly reminding you that you've got other stuff, stuff that screws up your usual work rhythm and that needs to get filed." He also added, "I've been really lucky in that while I've worked under several very different editors over the years, they have all been pretty willing to let writers police themselves, unless the writers give them reason not to." (Harrell).

It seems that most editors will back off some if you can prove yourself by meeting deadlines. I've always pictured editors as being uptight and always in your face, but this is probably an image that I got from television. I guess if the writers are responsible and prove themselves to the editor, then they will not receive much pressure.

Lastly, I asked Scott about his educational background and the educational background of most music journalists. He told me that he did not have a degree, but he did study creative writing, English literature, and journalism in college. He said that most music writers who work for magazines or newspapers have degrees in something related to the field such as English, Journalism, Mass Communications, or Marketing.

I was a little surprised that Scott did not have a degree because I thought it would be very difficult to get into this field without one. I assumed that a journalism degree would be needed to get your foot in the door. However, if you can prove that you are a great writer, then I guess it does not really matter if you have a degree or not. Sometimes you have to prove yourself by writing without being paid, but if it eventually gets you a job, then it seems

worth it.

Next, I came across a website for a music writer, Holly Gleason. Holly has written for many magazines such as Rolling Stone and Creem. She now has her own website where she still pursues her writing passion. I e-mailed her just as I did with Scott and also got a prompt response. I sent her the same questions that I sent Scott to see if I could maybe get a different perspective. Here is what Holly had to say.

My first question to Holly was how to overcome biases when writing a review. Her response was, "You have to consider how it connected with the people that like it, and how does it compare. It's not about your personal taste, but the artist's level of commitment, connection, and execution. Actually, reviewing acts that aren't as important to you is easier. [That way] you're less likely to be disappointed if they don't measure up, and it's easier to be objective about a great performance." (Gleason).

Holly's response was similar to Scott's with regard to the technical aspect of music. Paying more attention to the artist ability is more important. I like what she says about disappointment. It seems like it would be easier to be more objective.

I then asked Holly what criteria she followed when writing a review or biography on a musician/band. Her response was a couple of questions she thinks of in her writing process. The questions are, "What are they trying to communicate? How does their life experience impact that? Were they successful and why or why not?" (Gleason).

I like how Holly presented her response in the form of questions. This gave me helpful insight on where to start when writing a review or biography. I think that these questions could also help with overcoming biases when reviewing a record.

My third question to Holly was how she began her writing process when writing a review. She responded with another question that she uses to get ideas flowing. That question is, "What did I just see, and how did it measure up to both the audience's expectations and the scale it's measured against?" After this she said, "Then you look for the most pertinent moment and build out." (Gleason).

I found this response to be interesting because it is from the perspective of reviewing a show and not a record. Reviewing shows never occurred to me when I decided to explore music journalism; only reviewing records. It would be much easier to start the writing process if the journalist had just seen the artist perform because the journalist would have experienced the music on a different level and see how the artist interacts with the audience.

My next question to Holly was that of the audience and the role they play in her writing. Her thoughts were, "You have to communicate. In order to connect, you have to know who you're talking to. Consequently, I write with someone who'll be reading in mind. On days when writing is hard, you almost make it a conversation with that person about the topic. It's a good trick and it works." (Gleason).

Holly's trick about having a conversation with the audience seems like it could be an effective one. It seems to me that if the journalist tries to have a conversation with the reader, then they may feel less inhibited by their audience. Audiences can be intimidating and inhibiting, but if you feel like you are talking to the reader, it seems like it could make the writing process easier.

The next question pertained to editors and what kind of pressure she felt from them. She said the most important thing is to "make your deadlines." She also said, "No one cares what YOU think, only SEE in profile writing. Keep that copy clean." Then you ask, "Can you make it more engaging?" (Gleason).

I pretty much took from Holly the same thing I took from Scott about editors. As long as you make your deadlines, then there is not much pressure. The editor just wants the final piece by a given date.

My last question to Holly was about her educational background. Her degree is in Communications, Broadcast Management, Programming, and Law. She also said she took no journalism classes. She did however, "...read every music magazine I could get my hands on: Rolling Stone, Creem, Hit Parader, and Crawdaddy. I was immersed in critical perspective, studying why they said what they did, and trying to separate the legend from the moments." She also said something that I found very interesting, which is, "Very famous people fell under my pen before I was 20, and they were all shocked at how strong of an interviewer I was. It's about listening and following what they show you." (Gleason).

It surprised me that while Holly studied many fields in college, she never took a journalism class. It seems that by reading any music magazine she could fine was enough for her. By studying pieces written by other music journalists, it is possible to understand what is needed to become successful in the field of music journalism.

She then gave me some advice. "Study your world. Read everything you can that has a powerful voice. There's a lot of sloppy self-indulgent rock writing these days. It's hard to find things that aren't elevated fan babble or cynical hipper than thou naysaying. Look for good writers, then hope they have enough depth that they truly reveal something."

I found that these two interviews were extremely helpful in finding out what I wanted to know about the field of music journalism. It was especially helpful to get the perspective of two different people who both work in different areas of music journalism. However, a third perspective is needed and I sought this from a professor at JMU, Dr. Jim Zimmerman. I chose to interview Dr. Zimmerman because I had heard that he had had experience in the field of music journalism.

Dr. Zimmerman had many helpful things to say. We mostly discussed reviewing shows. What I got from this discussion is that the writing process always begins with research. It is essential to get the background information of the artist. Secondly, journalists write all the way through the show. This might be difficult for me because I would rather be rocking out and enjoying the music. But I guess it is a sacrifice one must make when writing a review on a show. After the show, he said that it is important to get an interview. He also said that when writing the review, it is important to get the reader involved in the subject. The best way to do this is by showing them something interesting about the artist right away.

We also discussed reviewing records. The writing process for this begins with listening to the record over and over again. Then the writer must put the record into a genre or in context with their other work. Finally, when writing the piece, discuss individual songs and maybe even background on who wrote the songs or discuss if they are cover songs.

Dr. Zimmerman gave me his perspective on editors as well. He said that at first a writer may receive some pressure from them, but eventually it may turn into the writer pressuring the editor for certain assignments. I found this interesting because it put a new spin on my

assumption that editors were the ones who did all the pressuring; not the writers. He said that the editor is most commonly the writer's audience. I kind of translated this into college courses where the professor is mostly the audience.

After these interviews, I decided that it was time to look into how to become a music journalist. I found some helpful information on getting started, and the bottom line seems to be that the best place to start is to be a freelance writer. There are, however, other ways to get involved.

According to the book *Music Journalism Careers*, by Sean McManus there are a few things that can really help someone to get their foot in the door. The first of these is to have a good knowledge of musicians who are considered to be the greats. This helps to put today's music into context. Also, if the writer specializes in a certain type of music such as rock, hip-hop, country, etc, then the writer may have an easier time landing a job. Sean also states that being a musician can help because this opens the door on musician magazines. There are other opportunities if one does not fit into any of these categories, but it is difficult because music journalism is a competitive marketplace making it important to differentiate yourself from everyone else. (McManus).

Sean feels the best way is to work freelance. This gives the writer the freedom to write about other subjects to help bring their average pay up. This also provides for greater creative freedom by writing for different magazines.

Scott Harrell has also created a list of, what he calls, The Ten Commandments of Music Journalism. The very first "commandment" that he lists goes along with the idea of being a freelance writer in order to get started. Scott was actually a freelance writer and that is how he landed his job. He says that writing freelance is a great way to build a resume. It is hard to get a job if one does not have experience, and it is hard to get experience if one cannot get a job. Writers may not get paid for some of the reviews they write, but at least they can get a spot in the paper or magazine.

Even though it seems really difficult to land a job in the field of music journalism, it still seems like an ideal gig. It would be great to get the opportunity to meet lots of musicians and to be able to get paid to write about something that I am passionate about. Through the process of writing this paper and all of the advice I have been given, I have decided that I am going to give music journalism a try by publishing reviews of shows in the JMU newspaper. I go to shows about once a month, and for the next show, I am going to take all of the advice and tips from Scott Harrell, Holly Gleason, and Dr. Zimmerman and incorporate them into writing a review. These individuals have definitely given me inspiration to pursue my music passion as a hobby, for now, while I am still in school and have the opportunity to write for the school newspaper.

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Looking Ahead

Writing a successful I-search paper requires you to combine creativity with analytical abilities. It requires you to write narration, analysis, summary, and possibly even dialog. This diversity of genres and styles is what makes I-search writing so unique and interesting to read. A well-written I-search paper certainly looks very different from many other research-based kinds of writing to which you may be used. At the same time, at the heart of a successful I-search project lie the same principles of rhetoric, writing process, and critical reading and interpretation of sources which underpin all writing.

As you finish this chapter on I-search writing, ask yourself the following questions.

- In the process of completing my I-search project, what have I learned about I-search writing in particular and writing in general?
- What are my strengths as a writer which became apparent as I was working on the I-search paper?
- What areas do I need to work on?
- In the process of writing the I-search paper, what new knowledge about writing that I gained which can be applied to other writing projects and situations?

< Chapter 10: Ethnographic
Research

up

Chapter 12: Mixing Genres and
Voices in Multigenre Writing >

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