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What? or That!

Reflections on Reports

By Andrew Pudewa

In sixth grade or thereabouts, you had to write A REPORT. Searching for a subject that seemed moderately interesting, such as Japan or Betsy Ross, you went to the encyclopedia and began to browse. Typically, your finished report had to be three to four pages, plus illustrations, which seemed like a lot—really a lot. Japan beat out Betsy Ross, simply because there was more information available. In the back of your mind, you knew it wouldn't be quite "kosher" to copy verbatim from the big book, but the unanswered question was: How could you get information out of the encyclopedia and into your report without copying it? With a jolt of inspiration (or perhaps a whiff of common sense), you arrived at the natural conclusion, which was to copy the really good sentences, changing a few words here and there. It was important to strike a balance. If the report blatantly sounded like you copied from an encyclopedia, the teacher might be suspicious. Conversely, if your paper didn't seem somewhat organized and intelligent, with a reasonable sprinkling of sophisticated words, you might not get an A. The struggle was in trying to predict what the teacher would think when she read your report. Perhaps you even felt the temptation to misspell, purposely, an occasional long word, with the hope that it might add to the authenticity of your pseudo-plagiarism. Spell checkers didn't exist then, and most reports in sixth grade were handwritten.

Later, in eighth or ninth grade, objectivity and analysis became the major thing. The literature-loving language teacher, with genuine sincerity and enthusiasm, determined to extract from you a character analysis paper, or perhaps a compare-and-contrast essay. Burdened with new and unpleasant vocabulary words such as "foreshadowing," "metaphor" and "sub-plot," you wondered what kind of person would actually ever choose to ruin a good book by having to talk and write about it ad nauseam. After somehow struggling to squeeze out your five pages (this time typed, double-spaced), you received the paper back with marvelously helpful red ink margin comments similar to: "This doesn't work," or "Needs smoother transition," or perhaps "Topic unclear," or worst of all, "Develop this." "If I had any idea how to implement these suggestions," you mutter, "I would have done it in the first place!" Fortunately, the semester was soon over, and you weren't thinking about having to write another literary analysis paper...ever.

Now you're all grown up and trying to teach writing yourself. You believe your students should write reports and do literary analysis essays like you did, but being a compassionate person, you'd like their experience to be less stressful than yours. *How* can you help? More importantly, though, you should ask yourself, *why*? *Why* ask kids to write reports and essays? What should they learn from the exercise? What did you learn? Unfortunately, we bring to teaching all the experiences we had as students ourselves, some of which are perhaps less than ideal. So we should occasionally take a moment and rethink the purpose of the assignments we give.

First of all, let's define what we mean by "report" and "essay." A *report* is basically the collection and presentation of existing facts. In police work, journalism or administration, to "report" on something means to state the necessary facts clearly and concisely. Similarly, children's "reports" serve much the same purpose, and give a student opportunity to learn and practice several basic skills:
1) How to locate sources of information, get an overview of a subject and choose possible topics.
2) How to limit the number of topics for the report, and select from available references a limited number of facts pertaining to those topics.
3) How to organize those facts, and present them in an engaging, understandable way.
The term "essay" implies something more than just reporting facts; by definition, it includes the opinions or thoughts of the writer. Expanding a simple report into an essay by adding an introduction and conclusion, we teach children how to "frame" the topics, and, especially in the concluding paragraph, how to comment on the relative importance or underlying significance of the facts presented in the body. As essays become more sophisticated, commentary is smoothly integrated with factual information inside the topic paragraphs themselves, and in persuasive writing, topics and facts are selected and presented in such a way as to cause a strengthening of, or a shift in, the opinion or attitude of the reader. Because essays are built on facts, effective essay writing develops from a foundation of good report writing.

In writing a short 2–3 page report on a subject such as Japan, or Benjamin Franklin, or the French Revolution, the first task of any student is to determine the topics. Generally, the number of topics will be based on the assignment length. (At the Jr. High level, a paragraph with a topic sentence, 5–6 details or facts and a clincher sentence will average approx. 90–130 words.) Next, the student must find and choose specific facts about the topic. Let us say he (or she, of course) has chosen the subject Benjamin Franklin and four topics: Franklin as a child, Franklin the author, Franklin the scientist, and Franklin the statesman. As there is a lot of information available about these topics, no one would imagine that you could tell everything there is to tell about Franklin in three pages, or even ten pages, and perhaps the subject (Franklin) should be narrowed. But let us assume the student proceeds with these topics. Now, several good things happen in the process of tackling this. Of course, the child will undoubtedly learn a few things about Mr. Franklin. Secondly, he will have to exercise his discriminative faculty and make some decisions—

choices about which facts among the hundreds available he will use in his report. How will he choose? There are two basic methods: choosing what is *important*, and choosing what is *interesting*.

If the child feels he needs to choose what is most *important*, he will read the reference looking for facts that seem to have the most significance. But how does a child determine what is most important? Without a breadth of cultural literacy and life experience, it's hard for him to know which facts truly carry more weight than others. In many cases he's primarily trying to find the facts that he thinks the teacher will consider the most important. On the other hand, when a child feels free to choose what is most *interesting*, what will he be doing? Searching for the things that best capture his attention or imagination, he is engaged. He gets excited. He enjoys the process. Now, perhaps you are the type of teacher who feels that what is important is more important than what is interesting. Or possibly you are the type of teacher who thinks that what is interesting is more interesting than what's important. Although a good report will have a balance between the two, which teaching approach will encourage the best writing? And more vitally, which approach will teach the skill that the child most needs?

If a student selects his facts based on what he thinks you want him to choose, is he really making a choice? Is he exercising his independence, his will, his intellect? Or is he simply trying to make you happy? Consider this teaching approach: "Hands on structure and style; hands off content." As long as a child presents his facts according to the model and checklist for the assignment, does it really matter what facts he chooses to write about? Is it not more valuable for a child to practice of the *act of choosing* than to always be trying to second-guess a teacher? Let the child decide what they want to write and run with it. Even if the facts they choose aren't, in your opinion, the most important or significant things about Japan, or Florence Nightingale or the Apollo Missions, the very fact that they made a choice is what teaches them to think, to be bold, to write. "What they choose" is not nearly as important in the long run as "that they make a choice," even if in their childlike simplicity their choices aren't the "best" ones. As they grow and mature, their sensibility and choices will improve, while the freedom to make choices in report writing will have strengthened their fundamental ability to think. This year, as you assign reports to your students, let them know that what you are really looking for is not "what" facts they choose, but "that" they do choose facts and put those facts on paper with structure and style.

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