

The Curious Researcher



The Curious Researcher

A Guide to Writing
Research Papers

NINTH EDITION

Bruce Ballenger
Boise State University



330 Hudson Street, NY NY 10013

VP & Portfolio Manager: Eric Stano
Development Editor: Ginny Blanford
Marketing Manager: Nick Bolte
Program Manager: Emily Biberger
Project Manager: Alverne Ball
Cover Designer: Anuj Shrestha, Pentagram
Manufacturing Buyer: Roy L. Pickering, Jr.
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For Rebecca, who reminds me to ask, Why?



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Preface

Features of the New Edition

Writing a textbook is like discovering an aunt you never knew you had. She arrives unexpectedly one summer and stands at your door beaming and expectant. Naturally, you welcome her in. How charming she is, and as you get to know her, you get to know yourself. This is her gift to you. At some point, many months later, you see her luggage by the door, and with a certain sadness, you send her off. “Come again,” you yell as she ambles away. “Come again anytime. I’ll miss you!” And you do. Your fondness for this newly discovered relative grows as you learn that other people who aren’t even blood related like her too.

If a textbook is successful, the aunt returns again and again, and you get to know her well. Though you may wish, especially in the beginning, that she wouldn’t visit so often, after a few weeks there are new conversations and new discoveries. That’s the way it has always been for me with *The Curious Researcher*, and the ninth edition is no different. Here are some of the new features of the book that make me feel that way:

- **New content on presenting research in alternative genres.** Since the early editions of *The Curious Researcher*, how students compose research projects has changed. Though they may often still write papers, research is also presented in other genres, many of which are multimodal. In this edition, a recurring feature on “Presenting Research in Alternative Genres” helps students to reimagine their projects as a slide presentation, infographic, photographic essay, or poster. They will find tips for choosing, planning, designing, and reflecting on a relevant genre for their research project.
- **Latest approaches on how to think about sources.** While genres for student research have evolved, approaches for how researchers look at sources have, too. Inspired by the recent *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, a dramatic new report from the group that represents university librarians, this edition encourages students to see sources in a more rhetorical context. The question “what is a good source?” is no longer simply that it is scholarly. Instead, students are encouraged to consider their audience, genre, and purpose.
- **Updated MLA citation conventions.** With the publication of the latest *MLA Handbook* came a revolution in how to document sources in the humanities. In the new edition of *The Curious Researcher*, students will find a straight-forward and lively discussion of these changes that will help them adapt to the new style, including lots of examples.
- **More help on crafting search terms.** Now more than ever, care in choosing search terms and phrases for library databases and Web searches makes a huge difference in the quality of results. This edition includes some new ways of thinking about how to come up with the best language.
- **New sections on narrative and argumentative logic.** From the beginning, *The Curious Researcher* advocated the exploratory research essay as a useful alternative to the argumentative research paper. The new edition looks

at each option more closely, examining how essay and argument draw on different reasoning strategies, information that will help students choose which is most appropriate for their project.

- **New thematic table of contents.** For users who want to tailor their use of the book to meet the needs of a particular course or the particular challenges of their students, this edition features a table of contents organized around five key categories: research skills, research strategies, writing process, inquiry, and genre.

Placing Inquiry at the Heart of the Course

For many of my college writing students, there are two kinds of school writing—“creative” writing and “academic” writing—and the two have very little in common. Creative writing is typically any personal writing assignment—a personal narrative, a reader response, or a freewriting exercise—and academic writing is almost anything that involves research. I’ve spent quite a few years now trying to understand this perceived gap between creative and academic writing, a distinction that I have found troubling because it short-circuits the connection I have been trying to build between the personal and the academic, especially the idea that students’ own subjectivities are not only relevant to academic work but are also an inescapable part of it. I also know from my own experience as an academic that research writing is a creative enterprise. *Why don’t my students see that?* I’ve wondered.

The answer, in part, lies with the traditional research paper assignment itself. Despite our best intentions, students often see the assignment as a closed process: come up with a thesis quickly, hunt down evidence to support it, and wrap it up—all the while focusing less on learning something

than on getting it right: the right number of pages, the right citations, the right margins. This isn’t the way academics approach research at all, of course. We do research because we believe there is something to discover that we don’t already know. How might I help my students understand that?

The answer is to teach inquiry, which is “the heart of the [academic] enterprise.” Reviewing the state of undergraduate learning, the Boyer Commission lamented the largely passive experience that students have during their first year. They sit in lectures, regurgitate information in exams, and if they do write, students often do so without much passion. Rarely do they get a chance to genuinely inquire into questions that interest them where the motive is discovery. How strange this is, especially because we often imagine the first year as an introduction to thinking and learning as college students. Shouldn’t they get at least some experience with genuine inquiry, which is so central to higher education? The Boyer Commission concurred. The freshman year, the report concluded, should provide “new stimulation for intellectual growth and a firm grounding in inquiry-based learning.”

The Curious Researcher answers that call. Research-based assignments, especially in the first-year writing class, present an ideal opportunity to encourage inquiry-based learning and the kinds of thinking it demands. In the many years I’ve taught inquiry, I’ve found that students—though sometimes confused at first—embrace the opportunity to exercise their curiosity. In some ways, new generations of college students are better prepared for inquiry-based approaches because they have lots of practice following trails on the Web as they explore questions that interest them. They know discovery. They just don’t experience it much in school. This book provides students with a more systematic approach to exploration, one that draws on intellectual practices and skills that will help them search, think,

and write well. *The Curious Researcher* also tries to inspire students to ask those questions that will shape their thinking well after they leave school. But how does it do that?

Teaching the Spirit of Inquiry

Over the years, I've refined *The Curious Researcher's* approach to teaching inquiry, but it still rests on these premises:

1. **Students should have the experience of investigating a topic in an open-ended way, at least initially.** Whether their research projects are ultimately exploratory or argumentative, students should experience the power of suspending judgment. This goes completely against their instincts, which are to nail things down as quickly as possible. However, discovery depends on entertaining contradictions, tolerating ambiguities, and simply wondering about what you read and hear.
2. **Inquiry seeds argument.** Most research writing in college is argumentative. Yet in most cases, we develop arguments inductively, through inquiry. We discover our thesis either by exploring the evidence or by testing our thesis against the evidence, including evidence that is inconvenient or contrary to what we already think.
3. **One of the most useful—and difficult—things to teach and to learn is the power of questions.** Inquiry-based approaches rest on wonder. These investigations often begin with questions of fact—*What is known about the health effects of tanning booths?*—that later flower into a question, say, of policy—*What should be done to minimize the risks of tanning booths?* The power of questions fuels the critical mind and drives the research.
4. **Writing as a way of thinking is a vital tool in discovery and learning.** What students in any major can learn in a writing class is how to put language into the service of inquiry.

As any composition instructor knows, writing isn't just a means of getting down what you already know. It's much more interesting than that. Writing can help writers *discover* what they think. In an inquiry-based classroom, this is invaluable, and we need to teach students how to use writing not only to report the results of their research but also to think about what they're discovering *as* they do research.

Ways of Using This Book

Because procrastination ails many student researchers, this book is uniquely designed to move them through the research process, step-by-step and week by week, for five weeks—the typical period allotted for the research paper assignment. The structure of the book is flexible, however; students should be encouraged to compress the sequence if their research assignment will take less time or ignore the sequence altogether and use the book to help them solve specific problems as they arise.

Naturally, the book is organized narratively, beginning with some of the issues students will initially encounter as they begin a research assignment, things like confronting their assumptions about research and finding a topic, and then taking them through the process of acquiring the knowledge about it to create a composition. Students who follow the five-week sequence usually find that they like the way *The Curious Researcher* doesn't deluge them with information, unlike so many other research texts. Instead, *The Curious Researcher* doles information out week by week, when it is most needed. I've also been told by instructors who use the book for online classes that its structure is particularly well suited for teaching research writing in that environment, especially because each chapter contains exercises that help students work on their own to push their projects along.

Alternatives to the Five-Week Plan

The narrative structure is just one way your students might experience the book. Imagine the content falling into the following categories:

- **Skills.** Discrete practices and techniques that students might begin to master (e.g., paraphrasing, documentation, annotated bibliography, understanding databases, crafting interview questions, avoiding plagiarism, integrating quotes)
- **Strategies.** Approaches to gathering, evaluating, and organizing information (e.g., evaluating sources, developing working knowledge, notetaking as conversation with sources, choosing appropriate databases)
- **Genre.** Consideration of how forms and conventions of research are shaped by users and situations (e.g., considering alternative genres, reading academic articles, citation conventions, types of research papers, etc.)
- **Writing Process.** Methods of composing, including invention exercises, and how they respond to rhetorical situations (e.g., brainstorming topics, drafting lead paragraphs, revision, structuring the draft, writing for readers, model student essays, etc.)
- **Inquiry.** Intellectual practices and ways of knowing that encourage exploration and discovery (e.g., unlearning, narrative and argumentative logic, qualities of strong inquiry questions, etc.)

Because writing courses that feature research assignments vary widely, you might consider which of these five categories best support the class you're teaching. The new edition includes an alternative table of contents on page xii that is organized around each of these categories and will help you decide what content might work for your class.

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Bruce Ballenger



About the Author



Bruce Ballenger, a professor of English at Boise State University, teaches courses in composition, composition theory, the essay tradition, and creative nonfiction. He's the author of seven books, including the three texts in the Curious series: *The Curious Researcher*, *The Curious Reader*, and *The Curious Writer*, all from Pearson Education. His book *Crafting Truth: Short Studies in Creative Nonfiction*, is also from the same publisher. Ballenger lives in Boise, Idaho.

