

Teaching with *The Curious Researcher* 9e

The Back Story

Nearly twenty-five years ago, I had a student named Jayne in my Freshman English class at the University of New Hampshire. Jayne was a fine writer from the start, writing eloquent and insightful essays that I always looked forward to reading. But her research paper, an assignment that consumed the last five weeks of class, wasn't very good—wooden, uninteresting, and formulaic. For some reason, Jayne couldn't apply her considerable writing skills to the researched essay. But why? What was it about the genre or assignment that confounded even the strongest writers in class? These questions became a scholarly project, but they also inspired a textbook, *The Curious Researcher*. Part of the answer, I thought, was to remake the research assignment into a project that was approached in the genuine spirit of academic inquiry: to make discovery and learning the heart of the enterprise.

In spring 2017, the 9th edition of *The Curious Researcher* will build on the versions that came before it. While the spirit of inquiry remains at the heart of the book, the new edition reflects the recognition that students don't simply write research papers anymore, but may present research in multiple genres. In addition, the 9th edition offers a new way of thinking about evaluating sources, one that disrupts the idea that "good" sources always have the same characteristics. Finally, in keeping with the book's view that the research *essay*, with its emphasis on exploration, is a powerful companion to the argumentative research paper, the latest edition highlights the power of narrative thinking. Of course, the latest MLA update is featured, too.

Chronological Approaches

The book was originally designed to be taught chronologically. The chapters are organized into five weeks of instruction, beginning with an examination of student assumptions about the genre. What is a "research paper?" How does it differ from a research "report" or a research "essay?" Because many students believe they already know about research writing from papers in high school, the beginning of the book focuses on surfacing and examining those assumptions. From there, students learn invention techniques generate ideas for topics, learn how to craft opening inquiry questions, and developing "working knowledge" on a tentative topic. Building on this, the middle chapters get students working on their projects—developing a research strategy, deepening their understanding of their topic (focused knowledge, and considering a range of information sources. In the process, students are also encouraged to develop research skills, including how to use library databases, take notes, conduct interviews, and so on. The idea here is that the best way to engage students in practicing research skills

is in the context of a project they're enthusiastic about. The final chapters focus on the "moves" research writers make in texts, including integrating quotations, offering interpretations, summaries, and analysis, and signaling their purposes. Then students are guided through the drafting and revision process. Throughout the book there are low-stakes writing exercises that help students steadily progress on their projects over time. Quite a few instructors build syllabi using the chronological, week-by-week structure of the book. The 9th edition of *The Curious Researcher* now includes a thematic table of contents that will help you organize your use of the book in other ways. Let's look at some of these alternatives.

Genre Approach

Because the research paper seems like such a familiar genre to students, they work from a lot of assumptions about what it means to write and present research. Some of this prior knowledge is useful to them, and some isn't. But the situation does provide a powerful opportunity to engage students in discussions of the rhetoric of genre, and *The Curious Researcher*, with its unique approach to the research paper, sparks great discussions about how genres work and how we might analyze them.

A writing course that wants to emphasize genre might use the book to initially challenge students' assumptions about what is a "research paper," then focus on the differences between the two approaches to researched writing the book promotes: the argumentative research paper and the narrative research essay. In addition, new content in the 9th edition on "Presenting Research in Alternative Genres" can be used to prompt students to "re-genre" their written research project into a multimodal presentation (a slide presentation, a poster, a photo essay, or infographic). Finally, instructors might assign sections in the book describe the "moves" research writers make in academic papers. Some of the relevant sections include the following:

- Most of the Introduction, especially Exercise 1, "Understanding Your Assignment," and the assignments that analyze the sample research essay, "Theories of Intelligence."
- All of the boxed features on "Presenting Research in Alternative Genres," which are scattered throughout Chapters 1-5.
- The sections in Chapter 1 on "Possible Purposes for a Research Assignment" and "Reading for Research." The discussion of "Crafting Your Opening Inquiry Question" has a relevant discussion of the relationship between the kind of question you're asking and the genre of writing that might lead to.
- The treatment of plagiarism in Chapter 3, which raises some interesting questions about acknowledging sources as a genre convention.
- Much of Chapter 4, but especially the discussion "Deciding Whether to Say I," "Synthesizing Sources and the Moves Writers Make," as well as "Following Narrative Logic" and "Following Argumentative Logic."
- Chapter 5 has several particularly relevant sections: "Other Ways of Reviewing Structure," "Managing Person Through Diction and Style," and "Considering Reader-Friendly Design."

Inquiry Approach

The spirit of inquiry infuses *The Curious Researcher* from beginning to end, so it's hard to find much of the text that *isn't* relevant to that theme. But if your course is intended to lay the groundwork for inquiry-based thinking, then there are sections of the text you might want to emphasize. *The Curious Researcher* makes the argument that the purpose of inquiry is discovery, and an ability to suspend judgment is an essential habit of mind that makes discovery more likely. Since much school writing emphasizes the thesis-proof model, many students assume that coming up with a thesis immediately is the best approach to research. This rush to judgment short-circuits discovery. Much of the Introduction focuses on challenging students' ideas about thesis-driven writing—and the purposes of academic research. Since inquiry is driven by questions, not answers, it's helpful to emphasize the sections in Chapter 1 about how to craft an inquiry question, a topic that the book circles back to in Chapter 4, "Refining the Question." Calling out this material early in the course introduces students to question-asking as a fundamental element of inquiry. In addition, a class that emphasizes inquiry-based thinking might highlight content that reinforces the idea that scholarly work is a "conversation." A great deal of Chapter 3 focuses on this idea, starting with the opening section, "Writing in the Middle: Conversing with Sources." The section on "Notetaking Methods," which includes the double-entry journal, builds on these ideas by suggesting practical methods for turning notetaking into a dialogue with sources. Foregrounding this material early in the course lays the groundwork for how students can use writing to have a conversation with reading throughout your course. Other relevant content includes the following:

- Most, if not all, of the Introduction might be assigned, but you might assign the exercise "Facts Don't Kill" right away. This involves analyzing a "creative" research essay I wrote, and it raises questions about why researchers do research, and the various forms it can take.
- Exercise 1.2 "The Myth of the Boring Topic" in Chapter 1 is a fun, powerful introduction to the power of questions and suspending judgment. This exercise is a great introduction to the concepts that drive the inquiry approach of the book. Students struggle with crafting inquiry questions that will sustain a project over time and lead to judgment. The treatment of types of inquiry question in Chapter 1 is foundational.
- Sections of "Working" and "Focused" knowledge in Chapters 1 and 2 are essential reading if students are to have enough information to craft strong questions.
- Consider making a slide of the excerpt from "The Unending Conversation" by Kenneth Burke in Chapter 3 to get students focused on knowledge as adding to a conversation. You might also consider doing Exercise 3.1 "Getting into a Conversation with a Fact," and Exercise 3.2 "Explore, Say Back, and Synthesize" early in a course to give students practice with dialogic notetaking.
- "Narrative Logic" and "Argumentative Logic" in Chapter 4 provide contrasting ways of thinking about how to approach an inquiry project.

Skills Approach

Writing teachers never simply teach skills, but your interest in using *The Curious Researcher* might be to supplement your teaching of research strategies with a book that students can use as a guide to things like using databases, crafting search terms, avoiding plagiarism, building citations, and so on. There is plenty of this kind of content in the text, but the question is what and when to assign it. Many students have little or no experience doing college-level research. One study suggested that novice students in a research class had most difficulty understanding how to come up with a good research question. Treatment of that topic in Chapters 1 and 4 would seem key. But generally, students in First Year Writing approach research in ways that mirror their online search habits—Googling everything, not spending much time crafting keywords, taking the first sources listed, etc. A good introduction to research skills, then, might be to challenge students to see the difference between academic searching and casual searching. “What Are Your Research Routines,” the opening section of Chapter 2 will get students talking about these habits. This is followed by treatment of how to craft keyword and subject searches. Secondly, you might want to introduce students to notetaking skills early on, a topic that is covered extensively in Chapter 3. Consider assigning at least the first half of that chapter in the first few weeks of class. Then you might want to shift to “Understanding Your Assignment” in the Introduction. This helps students analyze what a research assignment is asking them to do, a skill that many students say they lack. Much of the rest of the skills content can be tailored to your course. For example, if you’re encouraging students to do interviews and field work, then you will ask them to read those sections in Chapter 2. You might want to emphasize evaluating sources, which is covered in Chapter 2. And, of course, there’s lots on how to cite sources in Appendices A and B. Other relevant content for a skills approach might include,

- How to develop an annotated bibliography and research proposal are two discrete skills you might want to call out. The bibliography is first introduced in the Introduction, and there’s an initial exercise in Chapter 1. That chapter also includes an exercise for creating a research proposal.
- Consider assigning the material in Chapter 2 (“The Power of Words to Find and Filter Information,” “Evaluating Online Sources,” “Searching Library Databases,” “Advanced Internet Searching” before your students receive instruction from the library staff on using the university library.
- Students struggle with how to integrate sources into their own prose, and this skill is extensively examined in Chapter 4 in “Writing with Sources.” You might combine reading “Theories of Intelligence” (Introduction) with reading that section and ask students to analyze how the source material is blended.
- Plagiarism often occurs when students simply don’t realize they’re doing it. Assign the material in Chapter 3 on the topic, beginning with “Your Voice and Theirs: Using Sources Responsibly.”

Writing Process Approach

The Curious Researcher was written to help students draft and revise their research essays. With very few exceptions, the exercises in the book are intended to help students do this work. In that way, the book is essentially about a writing process for composing research-based projects. Though the emphasis has always been on written texts—research papers—the new edition introduces research in alternative genres as well, though the description of the composing process for these is necessarily very limited. Instructors who want to use *The Curious Researcher* as a writing process guide typically teach the book using the chronological approach (see above) since it was organized as a week-by-week timeline for getting the work done. But it can also be used more selectively to emphasize the composing processes you're most interested in teaching. For example, in themed courses, instructors may not need to emphasize some of the invention techniques for coming up with a topic in Chapter 1, and instead begin with "From Topic to Question" and through the rest of the chapter. In addition, the treatment of notetaking as a conversation in beginning of Chapter 3, and the discussion of "Notetaking Methods" might be assigned very early in the course, since that's much of the initial writing students will do. But Chapters 4 and 5 are the richest for guidance on writing process, and these would seem essential reading. Other content to emphasize might include,

- The new content on "Presenting Research on Alternative Genres" (PRAGs) focuses on four genres: slide presentations, posters, photo essays, and infographics. There simply wasn't sufficient space in the book to say much about the composing processes for these, but your students could generate "Best Practices" for each based on their own online research.
- I can tell you from reports over the years by users of the book that several of the writing exercises are especially productive for students. These include Exercise 1.1 "Building an Interest Inventory," Exercise 1.2 "Myth of the Boring Topic," Exercise 1.4 "Finding the Questions," Exercise 3.1 "Getting into a Conversation with a Fact," Exercise 4.1 "Dialogue with Dave," and Exercise 5.3 "The Frankenstein Draft."
- Templates for making academic moves in writing are popular of late, and Chapter 5 includes a version of these in "Verbal Gestures."
- Students struggle with structure in extended essays, and the book has lots of new (and old) content to help with this, especially in Chapters 4 and 5. However, you might want to frame the problem of structure as related to motive. What kind of essay are you trying to write: exploratory or argumentative? This distinction is explored in the Introduction. New content on argumentative logic and narrative logic in "Organizing the Draft" in Chapter 4 should really help a rationale for two distinct structures.