Variation in research assignments across the community college curriculum

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VARIATION IN RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS ACROSS THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CURRICULUM

A Thesis
Presented to the
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San Bernardino

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by
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ABSTRACT

Some of the most common types of academic writing assignments given during the first years of higher education are research assignments, commonly referred to as "research papers" or "research projects." This popular writing assignment is considered by most college and university faculty to be a traditional academic genre designed to teach students the fundamentals of conducting and reporting on academic research. Although widely understood and accepted by both faculty and students, a closer look reveals a traditional assignment that varies considerably, not only across disciplines, but also across instructors within the same discipline.

The variations may stem from differing perspectives on the purpose for assigning research writing. Many English department instructors, for example, may view this assignment as a way of teaching critical thinking and writing skills, while other instructors may view research writing as a way to reinforce course content. Students, on the other hand, often view research assignments as a series of meaningless tasks designed to please the instructor and receive a passing grade. These mixed perspectives call for
a closer examination of what students are being asked to do as writers of research and why these assignments vary so widely.

This thesis aims to show ways in which research assignments vary, despite the oft-held assumption that these assignments are fundamentally the same, regardless of discipline. For this purpose, research assignments were collected from instructors at one community college. These assignments were analyzed in terms of the following six dimensions: assignment title; topic selection; purpose; approach; format; and source requirements. The assignments were then examined for patterns in their variations across the disciplines, and across instructors within the same discipline.

The findings reveal variation along each of the six dimensions. Assignment titles were perhaps the most variable; in fact, in many cases the terms identifying the assignment as research-oriented were not used. Topic selection was often left to the student, with very little guidance from the instructor. In terms of approach, instructions for organization of the assignment were most variable between instructors. Formatting and documentation instructions were consistent, often placing more emphasis
on correctly formatting sources and less on the overall style of the paper.

The results of this analysis suggest that research assignments are prevalent and vary widely across the curriculum and that inexperienced student writers must learn the conceptual skills necessary to recognize these differences. By integrating critical writing skills and course content, instructors can teach these conceptual skills and help students successfully produce research assignments in different academic disciplines.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

An increasing interest in teaching composition to first-year students at the college and university level has brought certain forms of academic writing to the foreground. One of the most recognizable and generic of composition writing assignments is the cited research paper (Larson, 1982; Russell, 1991, Schwegler & Shamoon, 1982). This well-known form of academic writing originally began as an oral tradition designed to sharpen "powers of expression," which then evolved into a "thesis," or what is often described today as a research paper or project (Russell, 1991, p. 85).

Research assignments, such as the research paper, have become an integral part of instruction, especially for new university and college students. Instructors often use these research assignments to "help students familiarize themselves with the ways of gathering, interpreting, drawing upon, and acknowledging data from outside themselves in their writing" (Larson, 1982, p. 815). In addition, many professors view the cited research paper assignment as "the most important vehicle teachers at all
educational levels have for fostering independent thinking and responsible writing" (Stotsky, 1991, p. 99). Although these instructors may rely on the cited research paper assignment as a way of giving students "formal instruction in these skills," (Ford & Perry, 1982), the value and purpose of research assignments may not be as clear and explicit to students. What may be most problematic for many "inexperienced writers" (McDonald, 1990), a term describing students who are new to, or totally unfamiliar with, the ways of academic writing, is the realization that the forms and functions of academic writing in each discourse community and in each assignment often differ from each other. Although instructors may not recognize these variations, their students quickly discover that both course content and writing requirements are important and that the expectations for these are complex and can vary across different contexts, making it sometimes difficult for students to successfully complete writing assignments.

There are several explanations as to why these popular assignments are difficult for new college and university students. First of all, students may have to struggle to identify the assignment's purpose. They also may struggle to recognize important variations in writing conventions as
these requirements shift from one discipline, instructor, and/or assignment to another. In addition, students may fail to understand the various methods used for evaluating these writing assignments. Finally, inexperienced college and university writers, perhaps especially non-native speakers of English (NNSs), may lack a kind of shared cultural knowledge about American forms of academic writing (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995). Despite these concerns, many college and university instructors rely on research assignments, especially variations of the common research paper assignment, as a standard for grading both writing ability and knowledge of a subject. Not surprisingly, these "loosely, and almost casually named" (Johns, 1997) projects often result in frustration for both teachers and students.

Much of the literature written about both the teaching and use of cited research assignments in higher education is limited to instructions about how best to teach these popular assignments. Even though they give helpful suggestions for the research process, these "how to" texts often fail to address the purpose and value of the research paper or the conventions peculiar to different disciplines and courses.
In the remainder of this chapter, a closer look at literature focused on genre and writing across the curriculum, does, however, reveal some underlying purposes for research assignments. These mixed purposes stem from three perspectives: that of composition researchers, faculty and students. The first shows how composition researchers define the characteristics of academic writing genres and discusses the apparent recognition and acceptance of a genre that is considered the “vehicle” for teaching research conventions in most colleges and universities (Swales, 1990, p. 46). The second perspective illuminates the purpose and value of research assignments according to college, university and high school faculty. It appears, in this case, that the cited research paper assignment functions as a model of the kind of writing students should expect to encounter in other academic disciplines. For this reason, instructors utilize “models” of writing that they believe will “transfer” across the curriculum. A third perspective on the purpose and value of research assignments, specifically research paper assignment, comes from students. They tend to view this task as a way to please the teacher, or as one student described it, “dumb busy work” (Nelson & Hayes, 1988, p.
They seem confused about the actual role of academic research in a college and university curriculum.

Following an examination of these differing perspectives on the purpose of research assignments, the chapter then turns to critical issues related to the task of teaching research activities, including the role of the English department. The literature review then concludes with resulting pedagogical concerns that are further examined in this thesis.

Literature Review

Genre and the Purposes of Research Assignments

Writing pedagogy that calls for inclusion of cited research papers in a college curriculum is often debated by researchers. Much of this debate is tied to the role of common genres used for teaching academic writing. This section provides a brief definition of genre, along with a discussion of concerns surrounding the practice of teaching the cited research paper assignment and its role in the continuing effort to include writing in courses across the curriculum.

Finding an adequate and understandable definition of a genre of academic writing can be difficult. Perhaps the
definition that best fits this study is one based on the relevance of genre in an academic discourse community. According to Swales (1990), genres are, in most cases, "communicative vehicles for the achievement of goals" (p. 46). The communicative goals can be determined and accepted by a specific discourse community, such as an academic community. In other words, Swales (1990) says that:

Established members of discourse communities employ genres to realize communicatively the goals of their communities. The shared set of purposes of a genre are thus recognized—at some level of consciousness—by the established members of the parent discourse community. . . . Recognition of purposes provides the rationale, while the rationale gives rise to the constraining conventions (p. 52).

The traditional college and university is made up of many "parent discourse communities," one of which is the English Department, considered by many to be the primary center of instruction in academic research writing. Here, students are introduced, often for the first time, to academic forms of writing, including tasks such as creative writing, analysis, argumentation, and research, which is largely meant for a specific audience. The "shared" (Johns, 1997) purpose or goal for teaching these forms is,
in most cases, to prepare students for writing assignments they will encounter in multiple discourse communities.

In fact, Kotler (1989) expresses support for this "shared" goal, but with a hint of resentment:

We are, subtly or expressly, expected to teach students to master 'academic' writing—so all their history and psychology and economics professors... won't have to keep reading drivel. And, of course, for the history and psychology and economics professor, 'academic' writing is the research paper (p. 34).

The result is a long-standing tradition of methodically introducing new writers to the conventions of the traditional research assignment, known for its emphasis on topic selection, bibliography cards, notes, outlines, library visits, and strict formatting requirements (Ballenger, 1992; McDonald, 1990; MacDonald, 1992; Russell, 1991). This emphasis, as stated earlier, supports the traditional role of research in an academic community, which is to "familiarize [students] with the ways of gathering, interpreting, drawing upon, and acknowledging data from outside themselves in writing" (Larson, 1982, p. 813). Yet, how this is to be done has generally been open for debate, especially in light of recent efforts to increase writing opportunities across the curriculum.
Faculty Perspectives on the Purposes of Research Assignments

Although researchers may suggest the pedagogical value of teaching the cited research assignment as a genre and although most American instructors and students recognize it as an institutionalized assignment, faculty and students look at the cited research assignment from different perspectives.

One common perspective among faculty is that research assignments, such as the familiar research paper, do not achieve their most fundamental goal, to teach new university and college students how to be "better investigators, conceptualizers, critics [and] writers," a necessary prologue to acquiring "higher order thinking skills" (Fulwiler, 1987, p. 87). Early research by Schwegler & Shamoon (1982) describes the research paper assignment as simply "informative in aim . . . designed to show-off library skills and documentation procedures . . . an exercise in information gathering" (p. 819). Similarly, McDonald (1990) calls the cited research paper assignment "an exercise in researching and reporting what others have written to produce a paper that conforms to the course's conventions governing documentation" (p. 4).
The increasing emphasis on reporting and documentation is troubling for faculty who support notions of critical inquiry. According to Nelson (1994), the research paper assignment is intended to teach a sense of “discovery” that continually builds on knowledge in multiple disciplines along with the critical methods for finding and reporting this information. This sense of discovery, according to Bizzell & Herzberg (1987), is considered by most academics to be the basis for adding “to the world’s knowledge,” (p. 303), encouraging generations of scholars to discover “new information” that can be admired and cited by peers in similar academic discourse communities (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1987).

Despite the efforts to uphold this “ideal of unfettered inquiry . . . which sensible students [should] willingly, independently pursue . . .” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1987, p. 71), faculty tend to emphasize “acquiring and displaying factual knowledge,” with a persistent focus on “mechanical correctness of form, on the length of the text, and on the number of sources” (Russell, 1991, p. 91). This change from the pursuit of new information to the pursuit of the perfect form continues to be reflected in the way some faculty define and structure academic research.
writing assignments today. Bizzell & Herzberg (1987) explain that many composition instructors continue the focus on research as "recovery" by introducing new student writers to rigidly traditional forms and conventions of step-by-step academic research (p. 303).

Emphasis on recovery is partly blamed on students’ inability to understand the concept of research. Schwiegler & Shamoon (1982) show that even though faculty view writing research as a way "to get students to think in the same critical, analytical, inquiring mode as the instructors do," (p. 821) they remain pessimistic and frustrated with student performance on these papers. They echo the concern that "students are incapable of weaving the information they have gathered" (p. 817) —a necessary skill in common academic research (McDonald, 1990). The result is an over-emphasis on "information gathering" based strictly on argumentative topics, a reliance on "universal" (Jamieson, 1996) type models or "features of academic writing" that are easier to teach and evaluate (Schwegler & Shamoon, p. 818), or simply a refusal to teach a research paper (Schwegler & Shamoon, p. 818).
Although some researchers accept the cited research paper and similar forms of research writing as examples of a widely accepted genre, and even though faculty continue to view the role of cited research paper as a necessary although difficult assignment to teach, many students see little purpose or value in the task of researching for the purpose of discovering old information. This lack of interest in the ideals of research and discovery is a constant frustration for faculty across the curriculum. In fact, Nelson (1992) found that students often conceived the purpose of writing a research paper in ways other than those intended by the instructor. She explains that students view research more as a task of "information gathering, not an act of discovery" (p. 66). This information is then "packaged" and presented by students as honest research.

This unenthusiastic perspective toward academic research seems to be based largely on the fact that students are frequently expected "to demonstrate understanding of the assignment in ways that the teacher-reader already anticipates" (Reid & Kroll, 1995, p. 18).
Although not addressing research papers specifically, researchers believe that “writing tasks” become a form of “testing . . . [used] to demonstrate [student] knowledge and skills by composing and presenting written material” (p. 18). This focus on writing tasks as a form of evaluation thus encourages students to concentrate more on meeting the expectations of the teacher than on finding meaning and purpose in the task itself.

To more clearly understand how students “define the task” (p. 74) of writing a research paper, Nelson conducted an extensive student survey at one large university. Her investigation focused on 15 randomly chosen sections of first-year composition, resulting in 238 completed surveys. Her survey revealed that students take four common approaches to writing research paper assignments: compile information approach, premature thesis approach, linear research approach, or the recursive research approach (p. 68). The compiling of information, consisting of “getting a topic, collecting information, taking notes and/or writing an outline, and writing the paper,” stood out as the most common method used by the university students; while instructors preferred the recursive approach, one that demands a “learning process” (p. 67).
These findings support similar speculations made by Kleine (1987) that "students writing research papers see their purpose as one of lifting and transporting textual substance from one location, the library, to another, their teachers' briefcases" (p. 151, cited in Nelson, 1994, p. 71). Again, Nelson (1994) reports that students, in general, do not see research as a "learning process" using critical tasks. They are not interested in "doing" research. They are more focused on the finished product. While these finished products may meet the requirements of the assignment, they tend to cast a "veneer of scholarship" that is "virtually plagiarized" (Donovan & Carr, 1991) as shown in Nelson (1994).

Researchers have also speculated that the requirements of the research paper assignment are not always clear to students. In a detailed investigation into the writing required in four university courses (History, Human Sexuality, Biology, and Business), Walvoord & McCarthy (1990) looked at how undergraduate students interpret and complete writing assignments in courses that generally emphasize disciplinary content. One of the main problems for students in these four courses was the implicit nature of many of the assignments. Students could not glean from
the label and the assignment exactly what the teacher expected. For example, in these courses, the research paper component is described more commonly as a "term paper." The use of this "genre label" revealed some troubling concerns for Walvoord & McCarthy (p. 59). They found that instructors tend to use a variety of terms that imply the expectation for research, yet students easily became confused when they tried to meet these expectations.

In one business course, the writing assignment was described in the syllabus as an "analytical assignment" (p. 60). The students were also required to do research in the library. After speaking to students in this class, Walvoord & McCarthy found that "Students did not pick up on this term: No student referred to these papers as 'analytical assignments'" (p. 60). In fact, one student described this paper as more of a "reflection paper." Apparently this student had used a "reflection" model in another course and found it similar to the analytical writing assignment. Furthermore, Walvoord & McCarthy discovered that students in the business course more clearly identified library use with the traditional term paper, not with a process of analysis or reflection.
Conceptual goals for research assignments, such as analysis, reflection, critical thinking and discovery, are valued by instructors, but these goals may not be clear, meaningful, and/or important to students. Instructors expect and hope that students approach the research assignment as a "purposeful, recursive process in which they actively construct a perspective on a topic" (Nelson, 1994, p. 77). Instead, the research assignment often results in a "rehash" of what has been previously discovered (Donovan & Carr, 1991), or as one student put it, "dumb busy work" (Nelson & Hayes, 1988, p. 16). This casual attitude toward what is considered by instructors to be teaching genuine inquiry has led Nelson (1992) and others to continually question the value of the cited research paper as an institutionalized form of college student writing.

Issues in the Teaching of Research Assignments

Questions about the value and role of research assignments have also lead to an examination of pedagogical issues surrounding the teaching of research-related skills and writing. One concern is that the general use of the term 'research' is misleading and problematic. Larson
(1982) believes that "equating the teaching of research with the generic term 'research paper' is for all practical purposes meaningless—a non-form of writing" (p. 815). He feels that using the term "research paper" tends to "mislead students about the activities of both research and writing" (p. 812). Thus, he calls for research to be defined as "an activity in which one engages" and not be limited to a certain form or method (p. 812). In other words, research itself is the "subject—the substance—of no distinctively identifiable kind of writing," (p. 813) and it is thus problematic as a legitimate academic writing assignment (p. 813).

A related concern is that it is difficult to identify a clear procedure for doing this research. Larson points out that the research paper lacks a "procedural identity" because the term itself does not specify "a preferred procedure for gathering data" (p. 813). Instead, the procedures for conducting research remain implicit, often equated with "looking up books in the library and taking down information from those books" (p. 813).

In contrast to this hesitancy to identify (for pedagogical purposes) a specific genre for writing research, others feel that discussing and labeling common
academic writing assignments is necessary in writing classrooms (Horowitz, 1986; Johns, 1997; Leki & Carson, 1997; Reppen, 1994/95). Although not addressing the research paper directly, these researchers feel that raising awareness of "text features" and helping students "realize the different purposes of writing" (Reppen, 1994/95) can be beneficial for inexperienced writers, especially non-native speakers of English. They believe that students need to be aware of what some refer to as the "privileged" genres, especially those found in English departments (Leki & Carson, 1997).

Because the terminology used to identify or label genres can be meaningless for students, Johns (1997) believes that students should be taught how to recognize the features of common academic genre forms. One important and recognizable feature is the "communicative purpose" of texts (Johns, 1997). She supports the claim made by Australian researchers that "purpose interacts with features of text at every discourse level. If a writer's purposes are to be accomplished, then he or she should be aware of the forms, argumentation, and content that have become conventional in the tradition of a genre" (p. 25). She further believes that explicitly teaching these forms
“provides a shortcut for the initiated to the processing and production of familiar written texts” (p. 21), bringing students into a “broader genre knowledge” (p. 22). Similarly, Reppen (1994/95) claims that “many writing conventions will remain a mystery unless teachers are able to bring these forms and patterns of language use to conscious awareness” (p. 32).

Introducing students to a “broader genre knowledge” is the first step in assuring that these genres will be both useful and transferable. Horowitz (1986) calls for providing “usable models” that demonstrate “appropriate [academic] discourse structures” (p. 447). In this way, students can be prepared for multiple academic writing tasks and transfer this knowledge into other disciplines. In a broader sense, Leki & Carson (1997) believe that “no matter what content students write about and what genre they practice in writing classes, they will absorb some sort of underlying academic writing skill and transfer it to the writing for other classes” if it’s made explicit (p. 62).

In the case of what are sometimes called term paper assignments, Walvoord & McCarthy (1990) agree that students do tend to “transfer” familiar models and tasks from “one
classroom to another" (p. 233). They conclude that although these models were not always "appropriate," they seemed to have a "powerful influence on students' writing and thinking strategies, overriding other instructions from the teacher" (p. 85). Walvoord & McCarthy imply that the "model" stems from the label, thus eliciting a preconceived set of skills associated with "doing" research. It appears from this research that the models commonly "transferred" may come from exposure to common genres found, for example, in English departments, including familiar labels, such as the research paper.

On the other hand, some researchers question this idea of transferable models of writing. Some argue that because research papers may vary across disciplines, these popular assignments are problematic in teaching and transferability. In fact, Larson (1982) suggests that

In each academic field the term 'research paper' may have some meaning—quite probably a meaning different from its meaning in other fields . . . We in English have no business claiming to teach research when research in different academic disciplines works from distinctive assumptions and follows distinctive patterns of inquiry (p. 815).

Similarly, Jamison (1996) suggests that "universal" models taught in English classes are quietly adapted by other
disciplines is limiting and ineffective (p. 4). She complains that because of the emphasis on particular forms taught in English departments, instructors in other fields attempt to "fit" their writing requirements into these "universal" models, even though "questions are asked and answered differently in each discipline" (p. 5). In fact, other studies reveal that important academic writing forms and methods do not always translate well or crossover into somewhat similar writing assignments across the curriculum (Jamieson, 1996; McDonald, 1990).

Continuing Concerns

This review suggests that research assignments are widely accepted by researchers and faculty as an important form of academic writing, yet it also points to important disparities that affect the teaching of research writing. First, faculty and students have different perspectives on both the purpose and value of this popular assignment. Secondly, many faculty assume that students will encounter similar research-related tasks and writing activities in all their courses, even though there does not appear to be a clear, meaningful, and transferable research paper genre that easily crosses academic boundaries.
Although these problems have been considered in previous research, there has been limited in-depth analysis into the nature of research assignment tasks, how they should be taught, and why students may fail to understand the purpose and value of this assignment. This study looks at research assignments in English classes and a variety of other disciplines at one community college. The assignments were analyzed in order to identify variation in the purposes and conventions of research assignments across the curriculum. The results of this study show that although research assignments continue to be widely used by faculty, there is very little consistency in identifying a purpose for writing, clarifying the approach for the assignment, or offering guidance about the method of presentation. This study also looks at the implications of these findings and suggests ways for better understanding and communicating the purposes for teaching academic research.
CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

The approach used in this study involved collecting and analyzing examples of common research paper assignments given to students at San Bernardino Valley College, a mid-size community college in Southern California. This college was selected because of its location in a middle to lower-middle class community, diverse student population, wide selection of course offerings, and accessibility to the researcher (a college employee). Approximately 300 faculty members serve 8,000-10,000 students during the academic year. Two-year associate degree and vocational certificate programs are offered.

Student Population

San Bernardino Valley College is one of the largest community colleges serving the culturally diverse metropolitan areas in western San Bernardino County. It is typical of the community college system in California, which admits students with many levels of academic preparation and provides them access to a wide range of transfer-level college coursework.
The students served are ethnically diverse and non-traditional, primarily older working adults with widely-varied levels of educational preparation. Over half of the students are ethnic minorities and primarily first-generation college students. Furthermore, these students, along with other students attending college and universities for the first time, are new to the academic standards required for reading and writing at the college level.

MacDonald (1982) shares a special concern for beginning college students. In one study, she describes them as "inexperienced" readers and writers (p. 3). She explains that the "inexperienced writer may be an eighteen-year old admitted in an open admissions policy, a returning veteran, a retired serviceman, a mother returned to school after raising children, or a highly ambitious and capable minority student whose schooling has been somewhat deficient" (p. 3). An important addition to this list is the second language student, or non-native speaker (NNS) of English who is not only acquiring English as a new language but also struggling, along with other inexperienced writers, to acquire the "culture" of the academic community. In most cases, these students do not lack
ability, only "experience with the conventions of academic" discourse communities (p. 3). At San Bernardino Valley College, the majority of non-native speakers of English come from Mexico and Central America. Also included in this Spanish speaking population are students who were born and raised in the United States but reside predominately in Spanish-speaking communities with limited exposure to non-Spanish speaking cultures. Other groups of non-native speakers include students from Southeast Asia and a growing number of Russian immigrants.

Of importance to the researcher is the fact that many of these culturally and linguistically diverse students have never written an extended academic paper and are unfamiliar with the expectations of these texts. Moreover, in many cases, these students do not intend to pursue a higher academic degree beyond the community college; therefore, the ideals of academic research may seem irrelevant to their educational goals.

Faculty Population

Although the student population is widely diverse, both culturally and linguistically, the faculty population is predominately Caucasian and highly educated, having at least a Master's degree in their instructional area. Full-
time instructors teach a minimum load of four courses. Class size averages approximately 30 students.

Data Elicitation

This project involved collecting and examining research assignments from across the curriculum. The purpose of this research was to explore the purposes and formal expectations of research writing in both English and other disciplines.

Prior to the data elicitation, a memo was sent to each division dean. This memo explained the study and informed them that faculty members would be contacted. Deans were asked to contact the researcher with any concerns about the nature of this study. A copy was also sent to the vice president of instruction.

Letters requesting research paper handouts were then sent to 150 full-time faculty in seven divisional areas: Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural and Physical Science, Physical Education, Nursing and Health Sciences, Business, and Technical Studies. Besides requesting copies of research paper assignments and related supplemental materials, these letters explained the nature of the study and the possible benefits of this research (see Appendix). The letter requested copies of assignments that require
their students to cite sources. By keeping the request open and fairly general, it allowed faculty to submit a wider selection of what they, in their own disciplines, considered to be research paper assignments. Faculty were also informed that the submitted materials would remain confidential and would not be available to students.

**Data Collection**

Out of the 150 request letters sent out, 13 English department faculty and 23 faculty from other disciplines returned copies of assignments and supporting materials. Some instructors sent multiple assignments, especially if they were teaching a variety of courses in the division. A total of 62 assignments were received from the following courses:

- Biology 6
- Child Development 2
- Communications 3
- Computer Graphics 1
- Computer Science 1
- Economics 1
- Nursing 3
- Philosophy 4
- Psychology 6
- English 21
- Health 1
- History 4
- Human Services 1
- Life Science 1
- Speech 2
- Religious Studies 2
- Sociology 3
- Total 62

The 62 assignments presented a general overview of writing across the curriculum at San Bernardino Valley College. Of these 62 research-oriented assignments, 8
English composition and 17 other discipline assignments were usable for the purpose of this study. Because "research" may be defined differently across disciplines, only those assignments requiring a works cited component were considered.

Analysis

The 25 assignments selected for this study represented examples of research assignments from ten community college disciplines: Biology, Child Development, Communications, English, Health, History, Human Services, Nursing, Psychology, and Speech. Although the assignments shared some of the same generic characteristics commonly found in the task of writing research (e.g., documentation of sources), there was evidence of variation in both purpose and approach to completing these tasks.

In order to more closely examine this variation, the assignments were sorted by academic discipline and compared. Drawing on frameworks from Horowitz (1986), Currie (1993), and Johns (1997), they were then analyzed for a number of functional and formal features. The analysis is based partly on Horowitz's (1986) study of the "range and nature" (p. 447) of writing task demands across the curriculum at Western Illinois University, and Currie's
examination of the "range and nature of conceptual activities and writing tasks" (p. 107) in a Management and Organizational Behavior course at Carleton University. In both cases, researchers were concerned with demystifying the nature of the writing assignments given to inexperienced writers in the early years of higher education (Currie, 1993).

To examine the range and nature of specific writing demands, the researcher used Johns' (1997) criteria for identifying genre characteristics. In particular, three of Johns' (1997) characteristics were used: shared name, shared communicative purpose, and shared formal text features; these formal features were framed in this study as approach (Horowitz, 1986) and instructions for format and source requirements. Thus, the assignments were analyzed along the following six dimensions:

1. Assignment title. What did the instructor call the research assignment?
2. Purpose. What was the purpose of the assignment and how was it communicated either explicitly or implicitly?
3. Topic selection. Was the research topic open for selection by the student, limited to course content
and relevant course materials, or completely restricted by the instructor? As shown in Horowitz (1986), topic selection is an important feature in assignments requiring a synthesis of multiple sources.

(4) Approach. How did the assignment address the writing and organization of the paper (e.g., answer a question, complete a form, respond to a reading)? Approach is another important feature in synthesis assignments Horowitz (1986).

(5) Format. Did the instructor specify the length of the paper, style (e.g., MLA, APA), or other format requirements to be used for presentation; was the choice of format left open for students to decide, or was this requirement not specified?

(6) Source requirements. How many sources were required and what type? Was this decision left open for students to decide, or were the number and type of sources specified?

After each assignment was analyzed according to the above criteria, the researcher examined patterns in the ways the assignments varied across and within the disciplines. These findings are reported in the following chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

Data Results

Previous research has shown that researchers, faculty, and students have different views about the purpose and value of cited research paper assignments in lower division college and university courses. This chapter takes a closer look at actual assignments across the two-year college curriculum which ask students to report on research and cite sources. The most common feature in the assignments is what Johns best describes as "intertextuality" (1997, p. 35), or the use of multiple sources to support or build on claims made by a writer. For students, this means learning to synthesize multiple sources by bringing "a number of different things [they] have read together into a coherent pattern" (Bazerman, 1989). Although a limited number of research assignments were received from the community college instructors participating in this study, there were enough to show some of the "range and nature" (Horowitz, 1996) of writing activities requiring a synthesis of multiple sources.

The remainder of this chapter reports on the types of research assignment activities assigned in ten different
academic disciplines, focusing on six key dimensions of the assignments as described at the end of the previous chapter. The key features were analyzed within each discipline in order to show assignment variation, not only across disciplines, but also between instructors and assignments in the same discipline. In several categories, such as topic selection, number and type of sources, page length and format requirements, faculty did not always give specific directions. In these instances, the results are coded NS, or not specified. In addition, the category for approach is not included in the table due to space limitations. It is, however, analyzed in the assignments and discussed below.

Research Assignments Across the Curriculum

Biology. Out of the 25 usable assignments selected for this study, four were from the biology department. The details of these assignments are shown in Table 1. In each of these biology courses, the titles of the assignments varied widely and did not specifically refer to a "research" requirement.
Table 1.  
Research Assignments in Biology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Assignment Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Topic Selection</th>
<th># Sources/Type</th>
<th>Length/Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biol. 100</td>
<td>Supplemental Reading Assignment</td>
<td>Display thinking and writing; explore</td>
<td>Limited to Biology</td>
<td>1/ Essay style</td>
<td>1/ Essay style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biol. 108</td>
<td>Readings from Journals</td>
<td>Display thinking and writing; explore</td>
<td>Limited to Biology</td>
<td>1/ Essay style</td>
<td>1/ Essay style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biol. 201</td>
<td>Semester Project</td>
<td>Design and write-up scientific experiment</td>
<td>Limited to Biology</td>
<td>NS/ Biology outline</td>
<td>NS/ Biology outline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NS = Not Specified

In each of the four assignments, the purposes were embedded in the directions. For example, the instructors for Biology 100 and Biology 108 gave similar assignments using the same core directions for both. In each case, they provided generic statements of purpose, as follows:

1. Display your thinking, writing skills, and organizational abilities in the best possible light.

2. Explore some aspect of the history of life.

The instructions for the Biology 201 and 270 were narrower in purpose and more discipline oriented. For example, students in Biology 201 were expected to "become
proficient" in designing and writing up a scientific experiment as explained below:

(3) Asking a specific question so that it is answerable by experiment, designing an experiment to answer the question, using the professional journals, and writing a paper in the clear, concise style found in most biological journals.

In terms of topic selection, Table 1 shows that students in Biology 100, 108, and 201 were limited by the requirement that the topic be selected from Biological journals. In Biology 100 and 108 it was also important that the topic be relevant to the course and interesting, while in Biology 201, the topic needed to be both interesting and workable, as shown in the examples below:

(4) Explore some aspect of the history of life that you are interested in.

(5) It is important that your topic be of interest to you. Serious consideration of feasibility must influence your decision.

Students in Biology 270 were given very brief instructions asking them to write a report that included a title.

The approach to be used by the students differed somewhat in the four assignments. Just as the instructors gave students the freedom to select a topic of personal interest (generally within biology), some also allowed students a somewhat open approach to organizing their
writing, as reflected in the statements from Biology 100 and Biology 108 below:

(6) Write an essay inspired by what you have read. Make your remarks reflective, argumentative, analytical, reactive, or whatever.

(7) Approach the article by thinking about how you think it relates to our understanding of the past.

The other two biology instructors were less interested in personal reflection and exploration, instructing students to take a more direct approach as shown in the examples taken from Biology 201 and Biology 270 below:

(8) Become proficient in asking a specific question so that it is answerable by experiment.

(9) Each student must individually write a report.

In terms of source requirements, the instructors for Biology 100, 108, and 201 provided a list of relevant and acceptable biology publications available at the SBVC library. The Biol. 270 assignment required students to use only the textbooks and reference materials used in their courses.

In terms of format, the biology assignments required very little writing, 1 to 3 pages at the most, although in Biology 201, the length was not specified. The Biology 100
and 108 instructors provided a model for documenting references but only general guidelines for writing an essay. The Biology 201 instructor, on the other hand, provided general guidelines, plus outline headings and a timeline. The Biology 270 assignment asked students to follow the scientific report format for both documentation and organization. The instructor provided outline headings used for scientific reports and a model showing how to document sources.

Child Development. Two research assignments submitted for this analysis were from the department of child development. A summary of assignment requirements is shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Assignment Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Topic Selection</th>
<th># Sources/Type</th>
<th>Length/format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD 105</td>
<td>Oral Report</td>
<td>Explore a topic in depth</td>
<td>Limited to CD topic</td>
<td>3/recent CD sources</td>
<td>2/outline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD 126</td>
<td>Research Paper</td>
<td>Research an area of interest related to CD</td>
<td>Restricted to topic list</td>
<td>3-4/books and magazines</td>
<td>5-6/guide provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only one of the two assignments provided by child development instructors mentioned a requirement for
research in its title. The other assignment, referred to as an oral presentation, required students to provide a written outline with supporting documentation.

The stated assignment purposes involved exploring an "area" or "topic." In each case, this information was embedded in the directions using statements such as the following:

1. This is the student's chance to explore a topic of his/her choice.
2. Research an area of interest to you, related to Early Childhood Development.

As indicated, the students were allowed to select their own topic. The only limitation for the oral report in CD 105 was that it be a topic relevant to child and adolescent development, while the CD 126 instructor restricted the topic to a list attached to the assignment.

In terms of approach, the students in CD 105 were asked to talk about what they had learned through their research using their two-page written outlines as a guide. The instructor for CD 126 provided several pages of very detailed guidelines called "Phases," which could be used for organizing the process of doing a research paper. These guidelines included instructions for doing "biblio" cards, writing a thesis, writing an outline, and taking
notes. A timeline was also provided, giving step by step instructions.

Source and format requirements for these assignments varied. The CD 105 oral presentation required a two-page outline including citations for three current sources. A library visit was not mentioned. The CD 126 guidelines were more specific, requiring 5-6 pages including an endnote page and a bibliography page. Three to four book and magazine sources were required, along with a scheduled class visit to the college library. The instructor focused directly on students learning the process of research, as shown in the following example:

(3) Besides wanting you to gather information, I want you to know the basics of compiling a research paper.

Even though guidelines were provided for preparing the outline in CD 105 and writing the paper in CD 126, neither assignment provided students with a model for documenting sources.

Communications. Four research assignments were received from an instructor of a radio and television course in the department of communications. A brief summary of writing requirements for Communications 206 is shown in Table 3.
The Communication 206 instructor did not give the writing assignment a formal title. Instead, the students were given a choice of four “papers” to write.

The purposes shown in the Table were gleaned directly from the wording of the assignment. Like the CD papers, these assignments also seemed to focus on exploring topic(s) or issues, outside of paper #4, which focused on a textual analysis. An additional implied purpose seemed to be the accumulation of points based on length. In other words, the number of points earned toward the grade depended on the length of the paper. Furthermore, these
papers were not referred to as research papers, yet the students were required to include two references per page.

In terms of topic selection, the students were limited to subject matter related to digital television. For each paper assignment, the instructor gave a one-sentence explanation of suggested topical guidelines, allowing the students to choose within those guidelines, as in the example below:

1. 4 page papers should examine one issue (e.g., Compare the history of HDTV to the history of color television).

In terms of approach, the main concern was that the students examine the information. In each case, examination was suggested as a step towards comparison or further discussion. However, this was not always clear. Depending on the paper and topic selected, students were told, for example, that they:

2. Must examine one issue (e.g., compare the history of HDTV to the history of color television).

3. Should examine current issues in the news regarding digital television, and discuss their impact on computers.

Further instructions for writing the paper were very limited. Format requirements included page length and number of sources required. Although the page length
determined the number of sources, no instructions were
given as to the kind of sources to use or preferred style
of documentation.

English. Eight composition assignments were received
from instructors in the English department and are
summarized in Table 4. The writing assignments submitted
by the English 101 and 102 instructors showed a wide range
of labels and purposes. Although the term "research" was
used rather consistently in identifying these assignments,
they varied in purpose, an important feature in these
assignments. In fact, in five out of the six papers that
stated a purpose, it was placed in the first paragraph of
the assignment. In these eight assignments, students were
given a variety of purposes, including argumentation,
problem-solution, and knowledge construction. For example,
the English 102 students were to identify an issue for the
purpose of convincing the reader, as shown below:

(1) Your purpose is to convince us of your views
    on the issue.
Table 4.

Research Assignments in English Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Assignment Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Topic Selection</th>
<th># Sources/ type*</th>
<th>Length /format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engl. 101</td>
<td>I-Search Paper</td>
<td>Teach reader and writer something valuable</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>NS/ Open</td>
<td>NS/ MLA or APA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engl. 101</td>
<td>Research Paper</td>
<td>Become an Authority on the topic</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>8/ 4 book</td>
<td>7-10/ MLA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engl. 101</td>
<td>Research Project</td>
<td>Research an area to no novel</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>6-8/ no</td>
<td>8-10/ MLA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engl. 101</td>
<td>Research Paper</td>
<td>Persuasive/ Argumentative</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>NS/open</td>
<td>5-8/ MLA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engl. 101</td>
<td>Research Project</td>
<td>Familiarize you with the steps required to identify a problem</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>6/ 1 interview</td>
<td>8-10/ MLA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engl. 101</td>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>Identify a problem</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>4/ research</td>
<td>8/ MLA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engl. 101</td>
<td>Research Project</td>
<td>Add to the body of knowledge</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>3-5/NS</td>
<td>6-10/ MLA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engl. 102</td>
<td>Position Research Paper</td>
<td>Convince us of your views on the issue</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>10/no encycl.</td>
<td>8-10/ MLA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NS = Not Specified

A similar purpose was for students to identify a problem and come up with a possible solution, as in example 2 from the an English 101 research project:

(2) The purpose of this project is to familiarize you with the steps required to identify a problem, analyze its history and causes, evaluate possible solutions, and, finally propose the best solution available.

A third type of assignment explained the purpose of the assignment by focusing on the overall purpose of academic
research, as shown in example 3 from another English 101 research project:

(3) The purpose of academic research is to add to the body of knowledge in the field being examined.

In terms of topic selection, most of the instructors were open to topics of interest and relevance to the course, as shown in Table 4. Only one assignment limited the students to topics based on a novel assigned as required reading in the course. Three instructors included a formal section on topic selection at the beginning of the assignment; however, the choice remained with the student, as seen in the samples below:

(4) Begin by picking a topic of interest and relevance to you. Consider what you already know about it and what you wish to explore.

(5) Any topic you choose must meet these three qualifications: it must examine a significant issue, it must address a knowledgeable audience, and have a serious purpose that demands analysis of key issues.

In terms of approach, most of the English department assignments used instruction verbs, (e.g., identify, explain, discuss, support) as guidelines, as shown in the three examples below (these examples have been edited for length):
(6) Identify a significant problem, discuss the current issues, propose a solution, consider alternative solutions, acknowledge and refute objections.

(7) Your goal is to construct an informative, organized, and persuasive argument, clearly state your position on your issue, support your argument, anticipate, discuss, and refute your opponents' major objections to your argument.

(8) Explain your links to that community, and identify its characteristics and how they influence your behavior and attitudes. Expand your essay by analyzing the benefits and drawbacks. Discuss its causes and effects.

This series of instructional verbs appeared to serve as an outline of tasks. For example, statement 8 asks students to explain, then identify, then expand, analyze, and discuss. In addition, on several assignments, the instructors provided a checklist of tasks as an approach to writing the paper. Others provided a series of questions to help students expand on the topic, such as:

(9) What solutions have already been tried?

(10) What solutions have been proposed for related problems?

Another approach was to address the organization of the paper using instructions for formatting and documentation of sources. For example, students were told in one assignment to:
Write five handwritten pages in which you identify yourself as a member of a certain community. Write another three handwritten pages in which you propose a solution.

The English instructors were also varied in the number and kinds of sources to be used. Five instructors asked students to use multiple sources, often suggesting academic sources, such as journals and books, and popular sources, such as magazines and newspapers; one required a personal interview as a source. This instructor also provided an outline for conducting personal interviews. Two instructors gave instructions on what not to use as a source. Neither instructor wanted encyclopedia references, and one did not allow the use of the Bible as a source. In addition, one English instructor provided an in-depth two-page research guideline sheet to help students with taking notes and evaluating sources.

As shown in Table 4, the required number of pages varied from instructor to instructor and were sometimes unspecified. All required a works cited and/or a bibliography page. MLA format was the standard requirement for style; however, one instructor allowed students to select between APA and MLA. None of the English instructors included models of page format or citation
style. Two instructors advised students to visit the library; only one of these required participation in a class tour of the library.

Health and Physical Education. One of the 25 research assignments came from the department of Health and Physical Education. In this class students were required to give a presentation accompanied by a documented report. A summary of this assignment is given in Table 5.

Table 5.

Research Assignments in Health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Assignment Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Topic Selection</th>
<th># Sources/ Type</th>
<th>Length/ format*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health 102</td>
<td>Group Presentation</td>
<td>Become knowledgeable about a specific area of interest</td>
<td>Limited to course content</td>
<td>2/NS</td>
<td>2/NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NS = Not Specified

The label for this assignment did not identify the assignment as research-oriented; instead the instructor defined it as a group presentation on a relevant health issue. The purpose was similar to the purpose of several assignments in biology, English, and child development, encouraging students to become knowledgeable in an area of interest, as described as follows:
Each student will be responsible for becoming as knowledgeable as possible about a specific area of interest within the main subject.

The only limit on topic selection was that the topic be relevant to the course and approved by the instructor. The main topic was to be selected by the group.

The approach was based on the topic and subtopic. After selecting the main topic, the students within each group were to then individually present a report on a related subtopics. These students also had to submit a written report on their subtopic, including history, current trends and future outlook. The instructor provided a brief sample outline to guide students through the process.

Format and source requirements were brief. The instructor did not specify format beyond the two page minimum requirement. In addition, a minimum of two sources was required; however, the instructor did not specify a particular kind of source or the style to be used for documentation. No library visit was recommended or required.
History. Two assignments were submitted from one history instructor. A summary of the assignments are shown in Table 6.

Table 6.

Research Assignments in History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Assignment Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Topic Selection</th>
<th># Sources/Type</th>
<th>Length/Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hist. 107</td>
<td>Final paper</td>
<td>Respond to readings, compare and contrast</td>
<td>Restricted to questions in assign.</td>
<td>Restricted to course materials</td>
<td>5-7/NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hist. 153</td>
<td>Final paper</td>
<td>Respond to readings, and discuss</td>
<td>Restricted to questions in assign</td>
<td>Restricted to course materials</td>
<td>5-7/NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The history instructor used the title "Final" for these assignments. The purpose was gleaned from the wording of the assignment, which required students to respond to readings, videos and notes used in the course, write a compare and contrast paper for the History 107 course, and write a discussion for the History 153 course.

As shown in Table 6, the topic was restricted to the questions provided for each assignment. The students had to respond to the designated prompts in the form of a research paper, as shown in the sample below:

1. Briefly discuss pre-revolution land conditions and how these set up the war.
In terms of approach, for both assignment, the students were told to answer one of the two questions. These questions introduced the topic and provided brief instructions for the response, as shown in example (1) above and example (2) below:

(2) Take three of the regions and compare and contrast the current data on the various aspects of their past and present experience.

Instructions for form and source requirements were brief. As shown in Table 6, the papers were to be no more than 5-7 pages in length, properly cited, and annotated. Sources were restricted to the materials used in class as illustrated below:

(3) Using Kehoe, articles assigned to the course, video presentations, lectures and oral presentations, answer the following question in its entirety.

Even though the two assignments were not referred to as research papers, the instructor required students to include references to multiple sources in their writing. Students were not provided with guidelines or models for citing sources or annotating.

Human Services. One assignment was submitted from the human services department. Courses in this department focus on training counselors for social and community
service. A summary of this assignment’s requirements is provided in Table 7.

Table 7.

Research Assignments in Human Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Assignment Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Topic Selection</th>
<th># Sources/Type</th>
<th>Length/Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>Term paper or project</td>
<td>Read, interpret, evaluate and draw inferences</td>
<td>Limited to course content</td>
<td>5-6/ Medical</td>
<td>5-6 Chicago Manual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This was the only assignment that identified research with the task of writing a "term paper." Although the use of research was not specified in the title, it was embedded in the instructions, which asked students to consult and work from multiple sources.

Although not clearly specified, one purpose of the human services assignment appeared to be the final for the course; however, a more explicit purpose could be found in the wording of the task as shown below:

(1) Read, interpret, critically evaluate and draw inferences from multiple published sources.

Thus, the focus of this paper seemed to be a critical analysis of written texts. Like the English assignments, this assignment included instructional verbs (e.g., read,
interpret, critically evaluate, draw inferences) that suggested the approach students were to take in writing the paper. Other than these, little guidance was given as to the how this paper should be written.

In terms of topic selection, students were limited only by the requirement that the topic be biological and related to the course content. The instructor gave a few examples of previously used topic.

In contrast to the fairly brief instructions as to the assignment’s purpose and approach, students were given lengthy and specific instructions for page format, sources, and documentation. The instructor recommended that students use medical/addiction treatment journals as sources for the paper. Students were also instructed to use the Chicago Manual of Style as a model for writing their bibliography. Several bibliographic samples were provided. Students were not referred to the library as a source for research.

Nursing. Three out of the 25 assignments submitted for this study were from the nursing department. A summary of assignments is shown in Table 8.
The titles used in the Nursing assignments focused on observation. The "culture study" in Nursing 112, for example, required students to observe the health practices of a large community or group of individuals, while the "care plans" in Nursing 116 and 200 implied the monitoring and observation of individuals in a clinical setting.

In terms of purpose, the nursing assignments were somewhat varied. In Nursing 112, the assignment had a more general focus, asking students to select and analyze a culture and relate specific cultural practices to health. This assignment was very similar to an assignment used for Speech 174 (discussed below), which also asked student to select and research another culture. The purposes of the
Nursing 116 and 200 assignments were tied closely to clinical nursing practice, particularly the processes of diagnosing problems and proposing interventions. The Nursing 116 assignment used a series of instructions requiring students to read a fetal monitor strip, identify possible problems, and give interventions, as explained in the following example:

(1) List problems identified on the strip. Give interventions a nurse would do for each problem and give rationale based on theory.

The Nursing 200 assignment used a series of instructional verbs, similar to the English assignments, as a way to focus in on a purpose, as shown in example below:

(2) Select one nursing diagnosis from your prioritized list. Develop the nursing diagnosis to include goal with expected outcomes. . . identify each nursing intervention [and] develop the scientific rational in depth at the cellular level

In general, the purpose in these assignments was to learn to identify the problem and come up with a solution based on theories learned in the course of their program.

In terms of topic selection, only Nursing 112 allowed students to choose. The assignment asked student to:

(3) Select one ethnic or cultural group that you would like to research and submit name of selected culture to the instructor by the third week.
The other two courses based their topics on clinical observations, requiring students to work from the results of these observations; for example, the Nursing 116 students were given a fetal monitoring strip to analyze and evaluate.

In terms of approach, the assignment for Nursing 112 provided guidelines, which included a series of instructional verbs to explain the process. These objectives asked them to identify values, beliefs and practices, describe nursing intervention, and compare their findings to their own personal heritage.

The approach used for the Nursing 116 and 200 assignments was a prepared form that provided directions and a place to write a response. Students were instructed as to what information they should provide under each heading, as explained in the following examples:

1. List problems identified on this strip.
2. Give interventions a nurse would do for each problem and give rationale based on theory.

As shown in Table 8, format and source requirements were varied. The Nursing 112 culture study did not specify a page length but did require the APA format for the reference list. Furthermore, references were to be from
nursing and social science literature. In Nursing 116, an outline provided the format. Students had to fill in the required information on the outline form, including bibliographical references. No model for citing sources was shown, and recommended sources and page length were not specified. In Nursing 200, a similar outline form with headings was provided for students to complete the required information. Furthermore, a reference list using the APA format was required. Guidelines explaining how to cite different kinds of sources were provided, along with a model citation using the APA format.

Psychology. Two assignments were from the Psychology department. A summary of the assignment details is shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9.
Research Assignments in Psychology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Assignment Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Topic Selection</th>
<th># Sources/ type</th>
<th>Length/ Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psych. 100</td>
<td>Semester Project</td>
<td>Prepare a project directly related to both you and this course</td>
<td>Open for student choice</td>
<td>Outside sources/ NS</td>
<td>No min. or max.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psych. 105</td>
<td>Topic Analysis Research Paper</td>
<td>Conduct a topic analysis</td>
<td>Limited to list provided</td>
<td>NS/ NS</td>
<td>NS/NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The assignment titles show two different goals for these assignments. The Psychology 100 assignment is designated as a Project, while the Psychology 105 assignment uses the more traditional title of Research Paper.

Although not explicitly stated, the purposes of the two assignments in psychology appear to be embedded in both the titles and topic selection. The purpose of the Psychology 100 assignment is to develop a project related to the personal interests of the student. The purpose of the assignment in Psychology 105 is to analyze any topic from the list provided by the instructor. Thus, as seen in some of the other courses, these research assignments involve topic analysis and/or exploration.

In terms of topic selection, the Psychology 100 instructor allowed the students a wide range of choices for the semester project. A list of previous projects was provided to help students in the selection. The instructor for Psychology 105 restricted students to a specific list of topic choices.

The approach in Psychology 100 is also varied. The organization of the semester project is left to the student, as explained below:
Both the topic of the project and the form that it takes are entirely your choice, as long as it is directly related to both you and the course.

On the other hand, the Psychology 105 instructor provides step by step guidelines for researching the topic and organizing the paper as summarized below:

Start by researching the issue in the library, examine what other groups and individuals have said, figure out the basic point, make an outline, write your first draft.

In terms of format and source requirements, the instructors took a similar approach. As shown in Table 9, the Psychology 100 instructor recommended outside reading but did not recommend specific sources. There was also no minimum or maximum number of pages. The Psychology 105 instructor did not mention specific sources; instead, students were asked to go to the library to "examine the thinking behind each of the claims" and "examine what other groups and individual have said" about their topic. These task descriptions appeared to be very similar to task assignments in English 101, which called for topic analysis.

In terms of page length and style requirements students were not given an minimum number of pages, and no
style was specified. The Psychology 100 instructor required that students use in-text footnotes, along with a reference page, yet no examples or instructions were provided for doing this. The Psychology 105 teacher required the inclusion of a reference list at the end of the paper, but again, no models or instructions were provided.

Speech. One example of research-oriented writing was submitted from the Speech department. The details of this assignment are shown in Table 10 below.

Table 10.
Research Assignments in Speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Assignment Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Topic Selection</th>
<th># Sources/ type</th>
<th>Length/ Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech 174</td>
<td>Culture Research Paper</td>
<td>Research a culture</td>
<td>Select any culture</td>
<td>4/academic sources</td>
<td>4-6/APA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The assignment in Speech 174 is identified as a research paper. Although not addressed specifically as a purpose or topic, the students were simply told to:

1. Select a culture you wish to research.

In terms of approach, the instructor offered a long list of suggested questions for the students to use in
doing their research; a few of the examples are shown below:

1. What are some of the value differences between this culture and your own?

2. What are the predominate religious beliefs espoused by the members of this culture, and how do you think these beliefs influence their behaviors?

Students were told to use these questions as guidelines for exploration, though the specific structure for presenting the information was not stated.

In terms of format and reference requirements, the instructor specified both a page length and style requirement, as shown in Table 10. As guidance for the in-text citations and reference list, the instructor provided a sample page in the APA style. Although specific sources were not mentioned by title, the instructor recommended that the students use four sources from academic journals, published ethnographies, interviews, or encyclopedias. The library was not mentioned as a resource for conducting research.

Summary of Findings

Although a small sampling of assignments was used for this study, it was possible to identify some similarities
and differences across the courses in terms of assignment titles, purposes, topic selection, guidelines to approach, and format and source requirements.

First, in terms of assignment titles, there was wide variation. Only six out of the 25 assignments used the traditional term "research paper" as a way of describing an assignment that required a synthesis of multiple sources. Some titles were variations on this focus; for example, three used the term "research project," while one used the term "I-Search paper." In other disciplines the titles were more specific to the subject area; for example, in nursing, the title of two assignments was "care plan," and in biology the term "unknown report" was used for a species identification project.

The differences in the assignments appeared most noticeably in the area of purpose. Even though many of the purposes seemed to be similar, there were interesting variations in instructor expectations. This was evident not only across disciplines, but also across instructors within the same discipline. For example, in English, the purposes fell into five categories: exploration, discovery, causal analysis, topic analysis, and problem/solution.
Students in communications were to examine issues, while in health they were to report on a topic.

Even though there seemed to be no clear disciplinary pattern, there were some overarching purposes that crossed disciplinary boundaries. For example, the research purpose described as topic analysis was popular in English, psychology, child development, human services, communication, and health. Researching a culture was a purpose for the writing assignment in both speech and nursing. Two of the biology courses shared a similar purpose of exploring some aspect of the history of life, yet only one mentioned the importance of thinking and writing skills as a purpose. These crossover assignments appeared similar; however, each discipline approached these tasks differently.

Even though there seemed to be a variety of purposes for research assignments, these purposes were often implicitly stated. The analysis shows, for example, that few of the research assignments actually identified research as a focus of the assignment. This task, although key to the completion of the assignment, was often embedded or implicitly stated in the text of the assignment. This lack of a clear reference to research occurred most often
in the other disciplines. As a result, students in these disciplines had to glean the research purpose from the text of the assignment. For example, in biology, an assignment asking students to respond to articles in biological journals and document sources seemed more concerned with giving students experience in using a scientific report genre than in improving writing skills. In the communications course, the purpose appeared to be an examination of literature related to digital television, yet the embedded purpose was to allow students to accumulate points based on the number of pages written.

The English department took a more explicit approach to including purpose in their assignments. All of the English assignments included some kind of statement of purpose or objectives in the text. In each case, the instructors used a heading to highlight the purpose of the paper or project; yet, even within the same discipline, the instructors differed in their explanations of purpose. In three different English 101 courses, for example, students were given separate purposes: to “add to the body of knowledge,” to “become an authority” on a subject, and “to teach the reader something valuable.” Even though these
broad purposes were stated in the wording of the assignments, they varied in focus.

The third dimension examined was topic selection. In most of the assignments outside of English, students were allowed to choose their own topics, though they may have been limited in scope to those related to the course content. In several courses, mainly biology, history, and nursing, topics were more narrowly restricted by the instructor. In these assignments, the research also came from restricted sources. The English department assignments, on the other hand, were very open in terms of topic selection. In seven out of the eight assignments, students were allowed to use any topic of interest; the only restriction in each of these cases was that the topic be approved by the instructor.

Fourth, the approach, often identified by features used to guide students through the process of writing and organizing the paper, seemed to vary noticeably among the courses. In the assignments outside of English, some instructors gave detailed organizational guidelines; for example, some assignments in biology, nursing, psychology, and speech, included guidelines using numbers and indentations and questions to guide the student through
writing process. Similarly, the child development assignment gave specific guidance for doing a research paper, including timelines, instructions for note cards, and examples of citations. On the other hand, some faculty gave only brief instructions at the beginning of the assignments, providing little direction as to how to approach the task; for example, students were simply told to write a report, talk about what they had learned, or answer a question. Consequently, the approach tended to focus less on the process of writing and more on demonstrating knowledge of course content.

The English department assignments relied less on structured guidelines and more on detailed explanations of each writing task. These explanations were usually one or two paragraphs long, often using instructional verbs as a way of guiding students through the writing process. These verbs and phrases were placed so that they formed a pattern; for example, in one assignment students were told to identify, explain, expand on, and discuss an issue related to their topic. Although this technique was used in some other disciplines' assignments, such as human services, it was most widely used in English department assignments.
Fifth, for sources, all of the assignments included some type of instruction about sources, even if the writing to be done was very brief, as in the 1-page response to a biological article. In fact, the one unifying characteristic of these assignments was that they all required students to perform some kind of research. The sources required for this research varied most between English and other disciplines assignments. Faculty outside of English required anywhere from one to four sources, except for the communications assignment that allowed students to use up to 16 sources. In most of these assignments, students were told to use materials related to course content, such as class materials. The English department assignments required anywhere from 3-10 sources and were less restrictive. In most cases, students were required to use a variety of sources such as journals, books, newspapers, and interviews.

Finally, in terms of format requirements, the assignments again varied between English and other department assignments. Most non-English department assignments were relatively short, requiring anywhere from one to six pages, with no restrictions on style. One nursing course, however, required APA style for citations
only, and the speech course required students to use APA for both paper format and citations. In general, these instructors required only that students type their papers and use reasonable margins.

The English department assignments were more specific in terms of format requirements. Most required a typed, double-spaced, paper at least 5 to 10 pages long. All of the English assignments required students to use an academic style format, mainly MLA, although one English instructor gave students a choice between APA or MLA.

It is clear from this examination of writing assignments from across the community college curriculum that there is no single genre of research writing. It is also apparent that much variation exists in the way faculty approach this popular assignment and that the genre identified with academic research seemed to lack both a shared name and a shared purpose (Johns, 1997). Variations also existed in the amount and type of guidance students received as to approach, topic, sources and format. The following chapter considers what such variation may entail for students as they try to interpret the implicit directions found in many of the assignments used in this study.
CHAPTER FOUR

Implications of Findings

Previous research has shown that research assignments, mainly in the form of the traditional research paper, have become a common method for introducing new college and university students to the forms and functions of academic writing (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Horowitz, 1986; Russell, 1991). It has also been shown that many instructors tend to accept this popular assignment as a useful genre of academic writing. Because this wide acceptance is rarely questioned, it tends to perpetuate the assumption that the purposes for academic research are the same across the disciplines, courses and instructors.

The study found, however, that research assignments varied along a number of dimensions. Although some of the differences fell along disciplinary lines, (e.g., the scientific report in biology and the topic analysis in English), assignments also varied within a single field, (e.g., I-Search papers and the argumentative essays in English), creating a kind of inconsistency that can be confusing to inexperienced student writers.
Also potentially challenging to students is the fact that some assignments in this study give students little to work with in terms of clear purpose and direction. Even in terms of assignment name, Larson (1982), and more recently, Johns (1997), for example, were concerned that the tendency to label writing assignments with the term research does not fully describe this task. As the current study shows, instructors did use a variety of labels for their assignments, often neglecting to even mention the word "research" even though students were expected to consult and document multiple sources as part of the assignment. Moreover, some instructors seemed to assume that students would be able to recognize and process research related features of the assignment (e.g., procedures for topic selection, paper organization, and documentation requirements) in order to complete the assignment successfully. In other words, the vague language and lack of a clear direction and purpose in some of the assignments may force students to infer the instructor expectations for the assignment, a process that often disables students by placing them in processing modes rather than confident writer modes.
Addressing concerns such as making research assignments more meaningful, increasing awareness of genre knowledge, expanding students' conceptual knowledge of research assignments, and making research writing more relevant to content will require that faculty reconsider their approach, expectations and goals for research assignments in their courses. Furthermore, if instructors want to teach research writing skills that are transferable from one academic discipline to another, they may need to identify those skills and work toward establishing a consistent and explicit approach that includes these skills in their syllabi.

The remainder of this chapter explores suggestions for improvements in research writing pedagogy. Becoming aware of the variation found in this present study and taking into consideration the observations and findings of previous researchers (Currie, 1993; Horowitz, 1986; Johns, 1997), will help both English teachers and other disciplinary instructors to address particular challenges in the teaching of research writing across the curriculum.
Suggestions for Pedagogy

The importance of teaching the skills associated with research during the early stages of students' academic careers cannot be minimized. It seems, however, that the desire to teach new university and college students how to be "better investigators, conceptualizers, critics, [and] writers" (Fulwiler, p. 87) often becomes lost in more reductive concerns about the "mechanical correctness of form" (Russell, 1991). This apparent criticism of placing an emphasis on form over content points to important concerns about how academic research activities should be taught and how these skills can be applied across the curriculum.

Focus on Topic Development

Keeping the focus on meaning, rather than form, is a continuing challenge for instructors. One suggestion is to focus more attention on how students select topics. MacDonald (1982) felt that much of what is considered meaningless in the writing of academic research stems from the impersonal nature of the subject matter. As shown in the present study, most assignments allowed students to select any topic of interest, as long as it related to the course in some way. MacDonald (1982) found that students
in similar situations often ended up selecting topics that had little or no meaning to them personally, thus encouraging them to produce, and often replicate, a report that followed a weak research style format (p. 6). In other words, they became chiefly concerned with following the steps for producing a research paper, leaving little room for careful and practical topic selection.

Nelson (1994) points to critical tasks outlined by Stotsky (1991) as an example of what should be the ideal process for topic development in the process of doing research:

Selecting a topic of interest, generating questions to pursue about the topic, locating seemingly relevant information and then generating a working hypothesis, controlling idea, or point of view to govern the rest of the search and the final organization of information (p. 68).

Teaching these steps requires instructors to “look closely at the rhetorical situations in which research paper assignments are embedded” (p. 72). Specifically, by allowing students to research “issues or problems that matter to them personally . . .” they find real and purposeful meaning in the task of “doing” research (p. 73).
Increasing Awareness of Genre Knowledge

Another suggestion for instructors is to explicitly introduce inexperienced student writers to common writing genres such as the research paper, although this suggestion is somewhat controversial. Incorporated in this instruction is what Haneda & Wells (2000) describe as the “analytic study of models, the learning of genre elements and their sequencing, and the collaborative then solo production of exemplars” (p. 435). This procedural definition describes how many instructors seem to view genres. The call is to make these forms more explicit and accessible to writers. Some even go so far as to stress that the explicit nature of this approach is, or should be, designed to further assure that the “powerless and the disadvantaged in society will gain their rightful access to power” (Martin, 1993). The nature of this somewhat politically-charged claim seems idealistic and open for criticism.

Opponents to genre-based instruction do not criticize the value placed on genre instruction, only the "disjuncture between the claim that meaning is encapsulated in textual objects, [or] genres as autonomous systems, and
the avowel of a social constructionist functional model of language” (Freedman & Richardson, 1997, p. 142). In other words, the focus on teaching particular genre forms as a method of composition instruction seems for some researchers to be too formulaic. Spellmeyer describes this method as a type of “cookie cutter” approach to composition instruction (cited in Russell, 1991, p. 294). Haneda & Wells (2000) believe that consistent “overemphasis” on the formal features of a text results in a “downplaying of the socially situated nature of writing, with its dynamic selection and deployment of a range of generic features [used] to meet the demands of the particular rhetorical context” (p. 435).

Criticisms about teaching the formal features of academic genres tend to overshadow the importance of making these forms, such as the popular, yet vaguely defined cited research paper, more explicit for inexperienced writers. Ballenger (1992), for example, believes that academic institutions should “downgrade the research paper as a separate genre,” making it “more integral” to other forms of academic writing (p. 5). Horowitz (1986) claims that “the form in which a writer expresses meaning owes just as much to the constraints of the writing situation—the genre
and the specific demands of the task at hand—as it does to the writer’s mental processes” (p. 447). He recognizes, and accepts, the notion that texts are often “recurrent” and not isolated forms—a “rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence . . .” (Miller, 1984, p. 163). Similarly, the current study suggests that even though there does not appear to be one common genre form for research writing, there are identifiable features, such as ways of documenting sources, that occur in similar writing assignments across the curriculum. Therefore, it is important that students be able to recognize how different academic genre features and forms are applied in particular tasks and contexts, whether it be in English or other courses.

Teaching the Conceptual Skills for Writing Research

Because it is not possible to teach students all the forms of research writing in different academic situations, instructors can help students find other ways of dealing with these differences. Currie (1993) argues that instead of highlighting the task itself, students must understand the “conceptual activities” that form a basis for most types of academic writing (p. 101). In this sense, she
believes that students not only require a knowledge of particular genres of writing, but also become "pragmatically competent" (Mehan, 1980, p. 130) and flexible in their ability to resolve complex writing assignments. In other words, specific conceptual activities related to writing and reporting can be transferred from one academic community to another—even more so than basic task knowledge.

In the same way that Horowitz (1986) attempted to identify the range and nature of critical writing tasks, Currie looked deeper into the "nature of the intellectual skills required to complete the [writing] task" (p. 102). These "intellectual skills" are believed by Currie to provide common links for connecting various forms of academic writing tasks across the curriculum. Even though students may not be familiar with a particular task, such as performing a synthesis of multiple texts, they should be taught to adapt the intellectual skills necessary for completing the task.

With NNSs of English in mind, Currie's study focused attention on one particular university course in the business studies department. By selecting this arena for writing, Currie was able to highlight a type of writing
assignment university students often encounter. Her analysis revealed eight categories of "conceptual activities" required to complete the assignment, including comparing/contrasting, resolving issues, finding and recording information, using a concept to analyze data, and speculating. In this assignment, the most critical activity was using a concept to analyze data (p. 112). This activity was difficult for her student participants to acquire, perhaps because of the implicit nature of this task.

Currie claims that "explicit instruction in conceptual activities" is vital for NNSs and others who lack familiarity with the ways of academic writing (p. 115). If English teachers were to apply Currie's approach to dealing with the variety of research assignments students will encounter, they might focus on "conceptual activities" related to the writing of research, such as critical analysis, classification, and speculation (Currie, p. 197), rather than on a particular form or forms of research papers. Students might then be able to adapt these concepts to similar assignments, which may vary in content.
Integrating Content Into English Courses

English instructors can also make research assignments more content-relevant by integrating course-related content within particular formal constraints. As shown in the current study, much of the research writing was restricted to course materials and disciplinary forms, such as in biology, history, and nursing. As a result, students may not be familiar with other resources and academic genres of research writing. Reppen (1994/95) used a lesson from a social science course to "cycle content material through different writing tasks" (p. 32). Her intention was to introduce her students to some familiar genre forms: narrative, descriptive, persuasive and expository (p. 33). Reppen's goal was to bring the "forms and patterns of language use to conscious awareness" (p. 32) and still maintain a focus on content. Reppen describes this as "a functional approach to language" that proves to be a way of encouraging students to "realize the different purposes of writing" (p. 32). She also wanted her students to have a more realistic perspective of academic writing as a set of tasks that have value and meaning. As shown in the current study, students in English composition courses were often
allowed to pick any topic of interest as long as the topic met the approval of the instructor. Perhaps this process of selecting research topics could instead be related to course themes, thus allowing students to “cycle” related research through different writing tasks, such as topic analysis, persuasive essays, and narratives.

Integrating Writing Instruction Into Courses Outside of English Departments

Acceptance of this traditional approach to academic research writing tends to support the idea that writing instruction is, and should be, a “service” provided by the English department (Russell, 1991; Ford & Perry, 1982; Larson, 1992). And, English departments in many colleges and universities have willingly accepted this role. Yet, some critics have complained that “English is not performing its assigned task” (Braine, 1988). Braine quotes Rose (1983) as claiming that English composition courses have become “self contained” with “little conceptual or practical connection to the larger academic writing environment” (p. 109).

The “service course ideology” (Fox, 1990) raises questions as to whether or not English departments are or should be solely responsible for “teaching research
techniques for fields outside the humanities" (Ford & Perry, 1982 p. 830; Spack, 1988). As the current study shows, most of the non-English assignments analyzed, with the exception of Communications, required only limited research and even more limited writing. It seems that the task of conducting research in such assignments was used to develop specific disciplinary content, not to develop writing skills. In the English composition assignments, the task of conducting research was used as a way to teach an academic form of writing; however, in many cases, here to, students were given little guidance as to the purpose and value of this task, and its relationship to research writing they might be asked to do in other courses.

Even if instructors outside of English departments do not want to be responsible for teaching writing, they can work at making their research assignments more explicit and purposeful. If the goal is to teach content material by requiring students to conduct academic research and writing, instructors from all areas need to carefully consider what they are asking students to do as researchers and writers. How do the instructors identify or label their research assignments? Are the purposes of the assignments clear? Are there discipline-specific
conventions of writing research that students need to understand before they write? These questions are ones that instructors can ask themselves based on important characteristics of academic writing genres, thus helping students to successfully process their writing assignments, regardless of discipline (Johns, 1997). In this way, perhaps instructors from across the disciplines can help inexperienced student writers to recognize and more easily learn the concepts and tasks associated with academic research.

Conclusions

By giving inexperienced writers the information needed to be better academic writers and researchers in all their courses, instructors will help these students to be more successful in reaching their college goals. Because research writing, as shown in the current study, is so common in higher education courses, it is likely that students will encounter research assignments multiple times as they progress further into their major areas of study. Giving these students a good foundation at the beginning stages of their college career will “demystify” (Currie,
1993) those unfamiliar ways of writing in an academic culture.

In one sense, research assignments can serve as a "point of contact" (Pratt, 1991, p. 443) for student writers as they cross from one discipline border to another. Although the idea of encountering "points of contact" was originally explained by Pratt (1991) in conjunction with conflict, it can also be seen as a description for places of intersection. The cited research paper, considered by many to be "entrenched" (Ballenger, 1992) in every college curriculum, is an assignment that seems to be adjustable and easily transformed as needed by the instructor. Yet, instructors do not seem to recognize the potential of this assignment to serve as a link between disciplines.

The link can be strengthened in the continuing struggle to encourage writing across the curriculum. As an intersecting assignment, the cited research paper not only has features of genre (Johns, 1997) that allow it to become more than just a "weaving of prior texts" (Neel, p. 128); it also reveals shared purposes for introducing writers to the ideals of research. If instructors from multiple disciplines become more aware of their mutual goals and
purposes for using research assignments, they may focus their assignments less on form, and more on purpose.
APPENDIX

LETTER TO INSTRUCTORS
APPENDIX

Study Title: Research Paper Assignments Across the Curriculum
As part of M.A. thesis in English Composition, TESOL track
Researcher: Pat Hadjibabaie, Teaching Asst.
Reading Dept., San Bernardino Valley College, x1119
Advisor: Dr. Sunny Hyon
Department of English
California State University, San Bernardino

As part of my thesis project I am collecting examples of writing assignments given to community college students both in composition classes and in content area disciplines. I will also be looking at related supporting materials, such as course syllabi and supplemental assignment sheets. I am especially interested in writing assignments that require students to apply research skills.

Would it be possible for you to send me a copy of a writing assignment in your course? If you have an assignment that requires students to cite sources, I would be very interested in seeing it. If possible, I would also appreciate a copy of your course syllabus and any supplemental materials or directions related to this assignment. An envelope is attached for your convenience. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to give me a call at ext. 1119.

My purpose is twofold. First, I want to see what student writers are being asked to do as "researchers" in their courses. Secondly, I am interested in seeing if there are specific skills developing writers, especially non-native speakers, are expected to know when writing for content area instructors. The findings of this study may offer useful information about how English composition instructors can effectively prepare students for writing across the curriculum.

Please be assured that all materials will remain confidential. No one in this study will be identified by name, and the assignments and syllabi you submit will not be made available to students. Any identifying markings will be removed and in my thesis, the materials will only be identified by content area and course level.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. At the conclusion of this research a copy of my findings will be made available for your review in the Reading Department, LA-105. Thank you very much for your assistance in this project.
REFERENCES


Kleine, M. (1987). What is it we do when we write articles like this one—and how can we get students to join us? The Writing Instructor, 6, 151-61.


