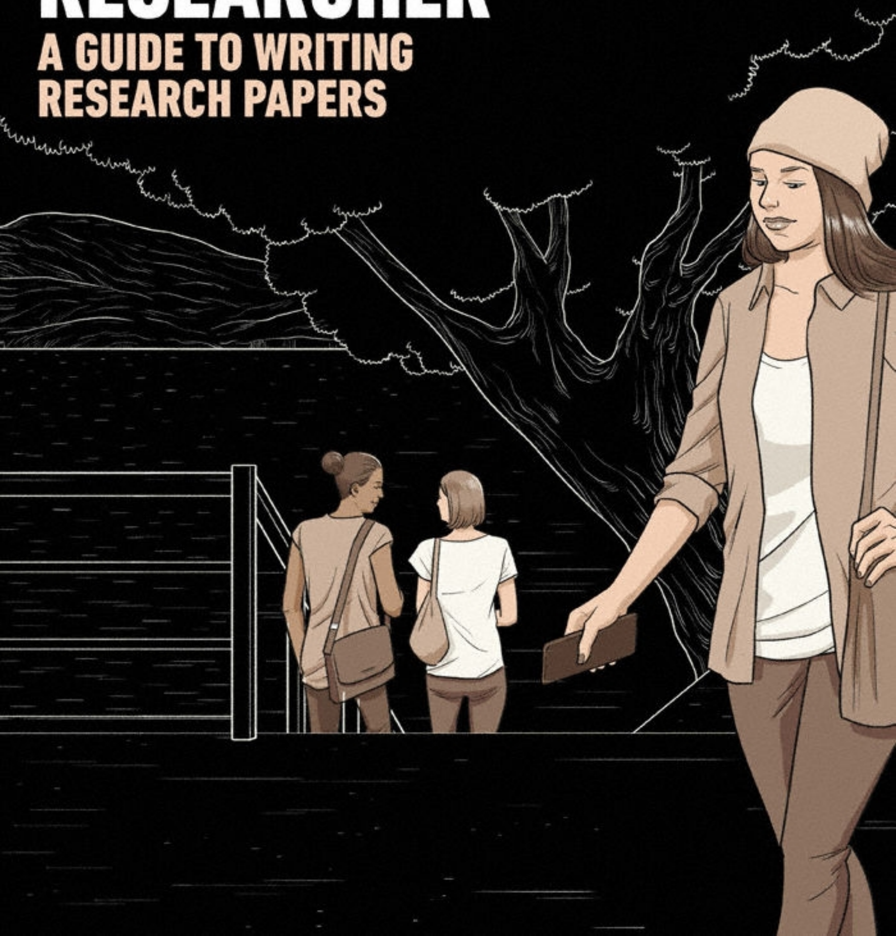
THE CURIOUS RESEARCHER

A GUIDE TO WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS

BRUCE
BALLENGER

NINTH EDITION



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A Guide to Writing Research Papers

NINTH EDITION

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For Rebecca, who reminds me to ask, Why?

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Preface

Features of the New Edition

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

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

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

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

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

Placing Inquiry at the Heart of the Course

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

The answer, in part, lies with the traditional research paper assignment itself. Despite our best intentions, students often see the assignment as a closed process: come up with a thesis quickly, hunt down evidence to support it, and wrap it up—all the while focusing less on learning something than on getting it right: the right number of pages, the right citations, the right margins. This isn't the way academics approach research at all, of course. We do research because we believe there is something to discover that we don't already know. How might I help my students understand that?

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

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

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

Teaching the Spirit of Inquiry

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

1. **Students should have the experience of investigating a topic in an open-ended way, at least initially.** Whether their research projects are ultimately exploratory or argumentative, students should experience the power of suspending judgment. This goes completely against their instincts, which are to nail things down as quickly as possible. However, discovery depends on entertaining contradictions, tolerating ambiguities, and simply wondering about what you read and hear.
2. **Inquiry seeds argument.** Most research writing in college is argumentative. Yet in most cases, we develop arguments inductively, through inquiry. We discover our thesis either by exploring the evidence or by testing our thesis against the evidence, including evidence that is inconvenient or contrary to what we already think.
3. **One of the most useful—and difficult—things to teach and to learn is the power of questions.** Inquiry-based approaches rest on wonder. These investigations often begin with questions of fact—*What is known about the health effects of tanning booths?*—that later flower into a question, say, of policy—*What should be done to minimize the risks of tanning booths?* The power of questions fuels the critical mind and drives the research.
4. **Writing as a way of thinking is a vital tool in discovery and learning.** What students in any major can learn in a writing class is how to put language into the service of inquiry. As any composition instructor knows, writing isn't just a means of getting down what you already know. It's much more interesting than that. Writing can help writers *discover* what they think. In an inquiry-based classroom, this is invaluable, and we need to teach students how to use writing not only to report the results of their research but also to think about what they're discovering *as* they do research.

Ways of Using This Book

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

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

Alternatives to the Five-Week Plan

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

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

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

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sources rhetorically, which is one of the best new additions to the text.

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Bruce Ballenger

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About the Author

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Introduction
Thinking about—and Rethinking—the Research Paper

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you'll learn to . . .

- Recognize the differences between reporting information and using it to explore a question or make an argument.
- Reevaluate your assumptions about the research paper genre and ways of knowing.
- Distinguish between a research *essay* and a conventional research *paper*, and describe the similarities and differences between them.
  - Analyze what a research assignment is asking you to do, and apply that to how you approach tone, structure, narration, and evidence.

Unlike most textbooks, this one begins with your writing, not mine. Open a fresh page in your notebook, computer, or tablet and spend 10 minutes doing the following exercise.

Learning and Unlearning 101

By the time we get to college, most of us have written research papers, beginning as early as the eighth grade. Whenever we've done something for a long time—even if we don't think we're good at it—we have assumptions about how it's *supposed* to be done. For example,

> "Whenever you can, use big words in your school writing to sound smart."
>
> "The best research is in books."

Exercise 1

THIS I BELIEVE

Most of us were taught to think before we write, to have it all figured out in our heads before we compose. This exercise asks you to think *through* writing rather than *before,* letting the words on the page lead you to what you want to say. With practice, that's surprisingly easy using a technique called *fastwriting.* Basically, you just write down whatever comes into your head, not worrying about whether you're being eloquent, grammatically correct, or even very smart. If the writing stalls, write about that; or write about what you've already written until you find a new trail to follow. Just keep your fingers or pen moving.

STEP 1: Following is a series of statements about the research paper assignment. Choose one that you believe is true or one that you believe is false. Then, in your notebook or on your computer—wherever you can write faster—write for 3 minutes without stopping about the belief you chose. Why do you think it's true or false? Where did you get these ideas? Is there a logic behind your beliefs? What might that be? Whenever you feel moved to do so, tell a story.

- You have to know your thesis before you start.
- You have to be objective.
- You can't use the pronoun *I.*
- You can use your own experiences and observations as evidence.
- You can use your own writing voice.
- There is always a structure you must follow.
- You're supposed to use your own opinions.

STEP 2: Now consider the truth of the following statements. These statements have less to do with research papers than with how you see facts, information, and knowledge and how they're created. Choose one of these statements* to launch another 3-minute fastwrite. Don't worry if you end up thinking about more than one statement in your writing. Start by writing about whether you agree or disagree with the statement, and then explore why. Continually look for concrete connections between what you think about these statements and what you've seen or experienced in your own life.

- There is a big difference between facts and opinions.
- Pretty much everything you read in textbooks is true.
- People are entitled to their own opinions, and no one opinion is better than another.
- There's a big difference between a *fact* in the sciences and a *fact* in the humanities.
- When two experts disagree, one of them has to be wrong.

Dig a little deeper, and you'll discover that these assumptions are often based on beliefs about how things work in the world. For example, the importance of using "big words" and relying on "book facts" both arise from beliefs about authority in academic writing—where it comes from, who has it, and who doesn't. This might seem like overthinking things, but it *really matters* what implicit beliefs are at work whenever someone is trying to learn to do new things. Our assumptions, frankly, are often misleading, incomplete, or downright unhelpful. But how do you know that? By flushing those birds from the underbrush and taking a good look at them from time to time. That was the

*Part of this list is from Marlene Schommer, "Effects of Beliefs about the Nature of Knowledge on Comprehension." *Journal of Educational Psychology,* vol. 82, 1990, pp. 498–504.

purpose of Exercise 1. The first part of Exercise 1 focused on a few beliefs you might have about writing academic research papers. Maybe you had a discussion in class about it. From my own research on common beliefs about research writing, I once discovered that one of the most common assumptions first-year college students share is this one: You have to know your thesis before you start a research paper—which obviously implies the belief that discovery is not the point of research.

The second part of Exercise 1 might have gotten you thinking about some beliefs and attitudes you hadn't thought much about—what a "fact" is, the nature and value of "opinions," and how you view experts and authorities.

Both sets of assumptions—one about the research paper genre and the other about how we come to know things—have a huge effect on how you approach the assignment. No doubt many beliefs have some truth to them. Other beliefs, however, may need to be *unlearned* if you're going to take your research writing to the next level. Keep these beliefs out in the open, where you can see and evaluate them to determine if you have some unlearning to do.

Using This Book

The Exercises

Throughout *The Curious Researcher*, you'll be asked to do exercises that either help you prepare your research paper or actually help you write it. You'll need a research notebook in which you'll do the exercises and perhaps compile your notes for the paper. Any notebook will do, as long as there are sufficient pages and left margins. Your instructor may ask you to hand in the work you do in response to the exercises, so it might be useful to use a notebook with detachable pages. You may also choose to do these exercises on a computer rather than in a notebook. If you do, just make sure that it feels good to write fast and write badly.

Write badly? Well, not on purpose. But if the notebook is going to be useful, it has to be a place where you don't mind lowering your standards, getting writing down even if it's awkward and unfocused. The notebook is where you have conversations with yourself, and what's important is not the beauty of a sentence or airtight reasoning but breathlessly chasing after language that threatens to run away from you. Many of the exercises in this book, including the one that started it, invite you to write badly because in doing so, you can use writing to discover what you think.

The Five-Week Plan

If you're excited about your research project, that's great. You probably already know that it can be interesting work. But if you're dreading the work ahead of you, then your instinct might be to procrastinate, to put it off until the week it's due.

That would be a mistake, of course. It's likely that the paper won't be very good. Because procrastination is the enemy, this book was designed to help you budget your time and move through the research and writing process in five weeks. But there's another reason, too, that you should think about how your research project will develop over time: You will start out not knowing much about your topic, and how much you know impacts how much you can do. You will not, for example, be able to come up with a strong research question until you have some working knowledge of your topic. Behind the five-week plan is the idea that research is developmental—your abilities will develop over time.

It may take you a little longer, or you may be able to finish your paper a little more quickly. But at least initially, use the book sequentially, unless your instructor gives you other advice.

Alternatives to the Five-Week Plan

Though *The Curious Researcher* is structured by weeks, you can easily ignore that plan and use the book to solve problems as they arise. (See the alternate Contents on page xviii.) Use it when you need to find or narrow a topic, refine a thesis, do advanced searching on the Internet, organize your paper, take useful notes, and so on. The overviews of Modern Language Association (MLA) and American Psychological Association (APA) research paper conventions in Appendixes A and B, respectively, provide complete guides to both formats and make it easier to find answers to your specific technical questions at any point in the process of writing your paper.

Understanding Your Assignment

One of the things I hear most often from my students who have research assignments in other classes is that the instructor "doesn't want my opinion in the paper." Frankly, I'm often skeptical of this. College writing assignments typically are about what or how you think. But because research papers involve considerable time collecting and considering the ideas of others, it's easy to assume that you're supposed to be a bystander.

What these instructors are at pains to point out is that, contrary to what you might believe, they are actively interested in what you think. They want students to *do* something with the information they collect.

Discovering Your Purpose

In high school, I wrote a research "paper" on existentialism for my philosophy class. I understood the task as skimming a book or two on the topic, reading the entry on "existentialism" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, putting notes on some notecards, and writing down everything I learned. That took about six pages. Did I start with a question? No. Was I expressing an opinion of some kind about existentialism? Not really. Did I organize the information with some idea about

existentialism that I wanted to relay to readers? Nope. Was I motivated by a question about the philosophy that I hoped to explore? Certainly not. What I wrote was a research *report,* and that is a quite different assignment than almost any research paper you'll be asked to write in college.

If college research assignments don't simply report information on a topic, what do they do? They are organized around what you think—what you believe is important to say about your topic—and there are three ways you can arrive at these ideas:

1. *You can know* what you think from the start and write a paper that begins with a thesis and provides evidence that proves it.
2. You can *have a hunch* about what you think and test that hunch against the evidence you collect.
3. You can begin by *not knowing* what you think—only that you have questions that really interest you about a topic.

Academic inquiry rarely begins with item 1. After all, if you already know the answer, why would you do the research? It's much more likely that what inspires research would be a hunch or a question or both. The motive, as I've said before, is discovery. *The Curious Researcher* promotes a method of discovery that probably isn't familiar to you: essaying.

Writing to Find Out and Writing to Prove

Essay is a term used so widely to describe school writing that it often doesn't seem to carry much particular meaning. But I have something particular in mind.

The term *essai* was coined by Michel Montaigne, a sixteenth-century Frenchman; in French, it means "to attempt" or "to try." For Montaigne and the essayists who follow his tradition, the essay is less an opportunity to *prove* something than an attempt to *find out.* An essay, at least initially, is often exploratory rather than argumentative, testing the truth of an idea or attempting to discover what might be true. (Montaigne even once had coins minted that said *Que sais-je?*—"What do I know?") The essay is often openly subjective and frequently takes a conversational, even intimate, form.

Now, this probably sounds nothing like any research paper you've ever written. Certainly, the dominant mode of the academic research paper is impersonal and argumentative. The purpose is to prove something rather than find something out. But if you consider writing a *research essay* instead of the usual *research paper*, four things might happen.

- **You'll discover that your choice of possible topics suddenly expands.** If you're not limited to arguing a position on a topic, then you can explore any topic that you find puzzling in interesting ways, and you can risk asking questions that might complicate your point of view.
- **You'll find that you'll approach your topics differently.** You'll be more open to conflicting points of view and perhaps more willing to change your

mind about what you think. As one of my students once told me, this is a more honest kind of objectivity.

- **You'll see a stronger connection between this assignment and the writing you've done all semester.** Research is something all writers do, not a separate activity or genre that exists only on demand. You may discover that research can be a revision strategy for improving essays you wrote previously in the semester.
- **You'll find that you can't hide.** The research report often encourages the writer to play a passive role; the research essay doesn't easily tolerate passivity. You'll probably find this both liberating and frustrating. Although you may likely welcome the chance to incorporate your opinions, you may find it difficult to add your voice to those of your sources.

My argument in *The Curious Researcher* is that this more exploratory, possibly less formal researched piece is the best way to introduce you to the spirit of inquiry that drives most academic research. The habits of mind that come from essaying, along with the research and writing skills that essaying develops, should help you whenever you're asked to write a paper that involves research. Put another way, exploration *seeds* argument, and although the argumentative research paper is more common than the exploratory essay, exploration is fundamental to all academic inquiry. Why not take the opportunity to experience what exploration is like?

Analyzing a Research Assignment

Will you be asked to write exploratory research essays in other classes? Probably not often (see "Creative Research Papers?" on p. 17). Although you can apply the research skills and reasoning strategies you gain from essaying your research question to most any research assignment, it's important to know how to *read* what a research paper assignment is asking you to do. Apparently, this analysis can pose a huge problem for students. In one study, for example, 92 percent

Presenting Research in Alternative Genres

Beginning in the 1920s, it was just the College Research Paper, and this mostly meant one thing: a multipage typed document that uses outside sources. This is still a common format for researched writing, and no doubt will be for many years to come. But as we consume more and more information in digital formats—things like Web pages and infographics—and in other modes—especially sound and images—there are new ways to present research that go beyond the printed page. Throughout *The Curious Researcher,* I'll offer suggestions about how to present your research in alternative genres and tips about how novices can learn the basics of multimedia formats. In particular, we'll look at some alternative genres that are particularly well-suited for research projects, including infographics, posters, slide presentations, and photographic essays. Watch for these features in every chapter.

of students said that the most frustrating part of doing research is figuring out what their professor wants.*

Instructors aren't trying to be obtuse. They want you to understand the assignment, and most have made an effort to be clear. Although there's not much you can do about *how* the assignment is conceived or described, you can be savvy at analyzing the assignment's purpose and guidelines.

One thing that you'll almost always see in a research assignment is that it must contain a thesis. That's true of an exploratory research essay, too. But what may not be immediately obvious is where that thesis is supposed to come from, and *when.* An inquiry-based assignment like the one you'll do in *The Curious Researcher* begins with a question. The thesis often comes pretty late to the party. But that isn't always the case in research papers that focus on argument.

A Thesis: Where and When?

The language that research assignments use to emphasize argument is quite often explicit: "You are to write a research paper in which you make an argument related to some aspect of life in Southeast Asia." Not much ambiguity there. Similarly, some assignments ask that you "take a position" on a topic. Argumentative research papers are most often organized around a thesis, and some assignment descriptions go to great lengths to explain what makes a strong thesis (usually, sufficiently narrow, addressing a significant question, and explicitly stated).

What may not be obvious, however, is how much latitude you have in letting your research revise your thesis or even dramatically change your initial point of view. Most often, instructors *expect* the research to change your thinking, and they often use the term *working thesis* to describe your initial position. These are the more open-ended assignments that might specify that the crafting of a final thesis can occur late rather than early in the research process.

More rarely, an assignment will imply a closed approach: First identify a thesis, and then seek evidence from your research that will support it. This is the conventional thesis-support model in which the expectation is that you will use your thesis, and not your research question, to dictate not just the structure of your paper but also the goal of your research. These kinds of assignments tend not to mention that a thesis might be revised and are silent on how it arises from a research question or problem. Always ask your instructor whether your reading of the assignment as more closed-ended is accurate. The key questions are these:

- Should I know my thesis before I start?
- If not, should I have at least a hunch (hypothesis) that I'm expected to test through the research?
- Or should I begin with a research question and search for my thesis as part of my investigation?

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*Head, Alison, "Beyond Google: How Do Students Conduct Academic Research?" *First Monday*, vol. 12, no. 8, 6 August 2007, no pages.

In the inquiry-based approach of *The Curious Researcher*, researchers typically begin with a question, and as you work through the book, you'll learn the methods of discovery that will help you *to discover* a thesis. Both exploratory research essays and argumentative research papers will have a thesis. But where? Typically, argumentative writing puts the thesis front and center, sometimes in the first or second paragraph. There writers are explicit about their purpose: "I will argue that the proposal to ban Sharia law in Idaho is a solution looking for a problem." On the other hand, exploratory essays often first emphasize the research question. Writers then follow their thinking at it evolves through encounters with evidence, arriving at a conclusion *at the end of the essay*.

Audience

For whom are you writing? So much hinges on the answer to this question: the tone of the paper, how specialized its language might be, the emphasis you give on providing background information on the research question, and the degree to which you stress reader interest. Despite the importance of audience, research paper assignments frequently fail to mention it at all. This omission can often mean that you are writing for your instructor. But it actually might surprise you how often this isn't intended to be the case. Particularly if your assignment includes peer review of drafts or class presentations, you may be writing for a more general audience. Sometimes this is explicit: "Your paper should be able to be understood by a broader audience than scholars in your field. You will have to explain concepts and not expect your audience to understand in-house jargon." If the audience for your paper isn't clear, ask your instructor this simple question: *Who is the audience for this assignment—readers like the instructor who are knowledgeable about the topic and/or readers who are not?*

Structure

In a few pages you'll encounter a research *essay*, "Theories of Intelligence," which models the exploratory approach *The Curious Researcher* celebrates. It's casual in tone, has a strong individual voice, and is structured to explore a question—*to find out* rather than *to prove*. It certainly has a thesis, but it is a delayed thesis, appearing not in the beginning but toward the end of the essay. The essay is organized around the writer's questions, not around making a point and logically providing evidence to support it. It does, however, have some formal qualities, including careful citation and attribution, the marshalling of appropriate evidence to explore the topic, and a sensible organization (hopefully!) that moves from question to answers. Later in this book, you'll be introduced to a three-act structure for organizing an essay like that (see page 118).

Research paper assignments in other classes are likely to put considerably more emphasis on a structure based on logic and reasoning. Put another way, these papers differ from an exploratory essay like "Theories of Intelligence" in that they report the *products* of the process of thinking about and researching

the question, rather than describe the *process* of thinking and researching the question. The chief product, of course, is your thesis. The thesis—rather than the question—provides the organizing principle for your paper (see page 7). Instead of three acts, an argumentative research paper is structured a little more deductively. Every section loops back to the thesis, directly or indirectly, either providing reasons and evidence it is true, or providing context for understanding where that central claim comes from and why it's significant.

Narrator

"Call me Ishmael." These are, of course, the famous first words of Melville's classic *Moby Dick*, and they signal the arrival of the narrator of the tale. Though we usually associate narration with stories, I think nearly *all* writing has a narrator, a seen or unseen guide who leads us through the material, focusing our attention on this and not that, making inferences, asking questions, offering insights. Even the most formal academic writing is narrated in this way, though in the absence of that slender "I," the narrator's presence can seem ghostly. Academic researchers work within *discourse communities* that may limit their movements somewhat but do not ever bind their feet. *Discourse community* is a term academics use to describe certain identifiable ways in which people with expertise talk to each other, ask questions, or evaluate evidence they consider convincing. We all belong to discourse communities; any time you have a feeling that there are certain things that might be said and certain ways to say them, you're probably thinking of a particular discourse community.

One of the conventions of many academic discourse communities is that you don't use the first person. You may think that this is to make sure the writing is "objective," but that isn't really it at all. Scientists try to manage the influence of bias through careful methodologies, but no one thinks that writing is ever objective. It can't be because language is an inherently social commodity, influenced by changing conventions, cultural practices, and writers' own experiences with it. No, the missing "I" in some academic research isn't about objectivity but focusing readers' attention on the data, not the narrator.

On the other hand, some research is explicitly narrated in the first person. There are a lot of reasons for this. In the exploratory essay, for example, the focus is on how writers *think through* an inquiry question. In some qualitative research like ethnography, writers may be not only observers but participants, and examining their biases is an essential part of validating their research. The rhetorical situation plays a role, too. If you're writing for a general audience (or peers), first person is often more natural and more persuasive. In other words, whether you are an explicit narrator or an implicit one is a *choice*, not a requirement for academic writing. The exploratory research essays I emphasize in *The Curious Writer* are almost always in first person, but some assignments focused on argument may not be. Make sure you clarify the preferred method of narration with your instructor.