

# Papers Happen:

What Students Really Do When They Write  
Research Papers

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## A Plan To Improve Our

- Facilities
- Web Services
- Reference Services

By Studying What  
Students Do

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## Data Gathering

- Retrospective interviews of student writers
- Reference desk interviews
- Ethnographic observations
- Students' photos from their daily lives

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## Tools



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# Retrospective Interviews

10 Students Who Wrote Research Papers

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## Students Wrote For:

- Required writing class where each section had its own theme (punk rock, *Fin de Siècle*, the good life & medical enhancement) (6)
- Upper level classes (industrial & organizational psychology, adolescent development, senior thesis in political science) (4)

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**Undergraduate Research Project  
Retrospective Interview Protocol**

- **Interviews:** Conducted by an anthropologist
- **Background:** Interested in what students really do when they write their papers
- **Establish Rapport**
- **Question:** How many research papers did you write last semester? (write on drawing paper)
- **Explain:** We'll be talking about one paper: the one you wrote for [preselected course]. I'd like you to draw a picture of the writing of this paper while we talk.
- **Question:** How did you receive the assignment? Draw or note yourself receiving the assignment right in the center of the paper.

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**Undergraduate Research Project  
Retrospective Interview Protocol (cont.)**

- **Question:** What was the very first thing you did?
- **Question:** What was the next thing you did?
- [Continue with this question until the paper is handed in]
- **Question:** How did you do on this paper? What was it that helped you do as well as you did? What would have helped you do better?
- **Question:** The next time you do a paper, will you try to do anything different?

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**Students Draw and Talk During  
Retrospective Interview**



This provides both a memory aid and a graphic history of the students' discovery process.

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### Preliminary Observations

- Students in the required writing courses are focused on the writing and not the research.
- Students tend to have personal goals for what grade they want and how much time they'll devote to a course.
- Students work to meet faculty expectations.
- It may be difficult to tell at the time how valuable a library instruction session was to a student.

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## Reference Survey

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### Survey Questions

- What print or online resources, if any, have you already checked?
- Did you ask anyone else for help before you came to the Reference Desk?
- What did you learn during our session that was new?
- Why did you come to talk to the Reference Desk at this particular time?
- What made it easy or hard for you to come to the Reference Desk?

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### Follow-up E-Mail I

- After our session what additional resources did you look at – who else to you speak to?
- Has another information question related to your paper/lab come up since we spoke and how did you go about seeking answers?

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### Follow-up E-mail II

- Over all how did the paper go?
- How did the help that I gave you help you with the paper?
- Do you think that your grade was/will be influenced by the help that I gave you?

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### Demographics

- 16 undergraduates
  - 3 from anthropology courses
  - 9 from required college writing courses
  - 1 from a history course
  - 2 from independent study/seminar courses
  - 1 from introductory biology course

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### Preliminary Observations

- All the students had already consulted one or more resources.
- The majority had already searched in at least one bibliographic database.
- The majority had had prior contact with one or more reference staff.
- Generally, during the reference interview, students learned details of getting the best results from a database.

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### Preliminary Observations

(Continued)

- Students use their own terminology
  - “Regular database” vs. “library catalog”
  - “Electronic reserve stuff ” vs. e-journals
- Students may be reluctant to leave their laptop to come to the desk

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## Cultural Probe

Students’ Photographs Reveal What Is Important to Them

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## One Use Cameras

- Students were asked to take pictures based on a list of themes.
- This provides us an insight into what they lives are like and what is important to them.
- We may discover needs that would not otherwise come out.

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## Requested Photos

1. The computer you use in the library, showing its surroundings.
2. All the stuff you take to class.
3. Something that you would call "high tech."
4. Something really weird.
5. *One* picture of the libraries to show to a new freshman.
6. Your favorite place to study.
7. The place you keep your books.
8. A person, any person.
9. Your favorite person or people to study with.
10. Something you've noticed that you think others don't notice.

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11. Your communication devices.
12. A picture of your dorm room, showing your computer.
13. Another view of your dorm room.
14. How you manage your time or keep track of your work.
15. Your favorite part of the day.
16. The tools you use for writing assignments.
17. The things you **always** carry with you.
18. A place in the library where you feel lost.
19. Something you can't live without.
20. The night before a big assignment is due.

**The rest.** Whatever you want!

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# Facilities

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## Preliminary Observations

- Students have favorite computers and study spaces.
- Students may define and teach others which areas are for quiet study and which are for group study.
- The “social/psychological distance” to ask for help from the reference desk may be too great even when the physical distance is not.

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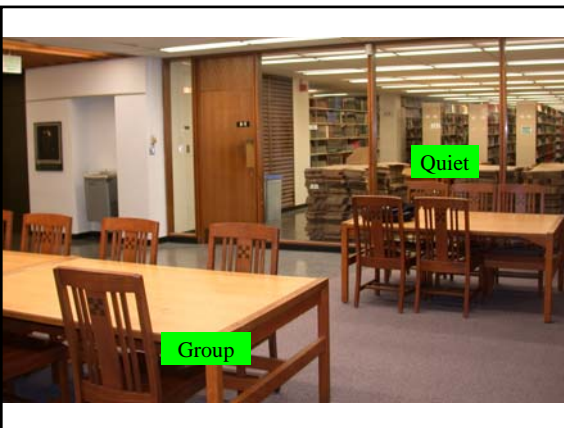
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