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Research with a Twist: Writing Historical Fiction

By Carol Jago

No English teacher I know is keen to see the return of the dreaded *Termpapersaurus Rex*. You know the beast — 10 double-spaced pages including title page, outline, bibliography, and note cards. Even putting aside the fact that most of the outlines and cards were written after the paper and the problems with plagiarism, the term paper process could gobble up weeks of instructional time. What then is a teacher to do about the Common Core mandate for research? According to CCSS Anchor Standard #7 for Writing, students should, “Conduct short as well as more substantial research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.”

One approach for meeting this standard is to invite students to research an important person at a particular moment or time in history and then ask the question, “What if ...?”


- What if you could eavesdrop on a conversation between John Adams and his son John Quincy Adams?
- What if you were privy to Jane Goodall’s thoughts as she observed chimpanzees in Gombe?
- What if Franklin Delano Roosevelt had taken action on Albert Einstein’s 1939 letter warning the President about Germany’s pursuit of uranium?
- What if you had ridden the busses with the Freedom Riders?

The goal of this research project is to build students’ background knowledge about a historical figure and time period, and to have students write a narrative that while

based on actual events takes liberty with the facts in order to create a compelling story. Their product will be a piece of historical fiction. Not only did my students find this assignment more engaging than traditional research papers, their products were enormously more interesting to assess. The assignment also meets Common Core Anchor Standard #3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

I always begin by reading students examples of the kind of research and writing I am asking them to emulate. Pam Munoz Ryan’s picture book *Amelia and Eleanor Go for A Ride* describing the evening of April 20, 1933 when Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt went up in an airplane over Washington, D.C. is a perfect model. As Ryan explains in her Author’s Note, “Although Amelia did take the controls for part of the flight, the plane was also flown by two of Eastern Air Transport’s pilots, due to regulations. For this fictionalized book, though, it seemed much more exciting to have these two good friends and brave women alone on this wonderful adventure.” Ryan goes on to explain that though she took liberties with events, almost all of Amelia and Eleanor’s dialogue came from newspaper accounts, book transcripts, and diaries.

My challenge to students is to research sources for their historical figure looking for a moment they would like to “fictionalize” while staying true to the character or characters. Another fine example of this kind of writing is Sue Stauffacher’s *Bessie Smith and the Night Riders*. In her Author’s Note Stauffacher explains, “While this story is dressed up a little for dramatic effect, it is based on a true event that occurred in July 1927.” On this night the Ku Klux Klan tried to intimidate Bessie Smith’s band and chase them out of town. According to eyewitnesses, the great lady stood up to them



hollering, “You just pick up them sheets and run.” After a few stunned moments the men left, and the show went on. In real life it was a member of her band who warned Bessie Smith of the approaching riders. In the fictional version it was a little girl. I ask students what affect this change has on the story and what the writer hoped to achieve with this alteration of historical detail. Of particular importance is the intended audience for the book.

Along with their “story,” students must produce an author’s note explaining where they took liberty with historical events and citing the sources they employed in the construction of their story. Given that CCSS Anchor Standard #8 for Writing asks that students, “Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism,” it makes sense that students’ final products should include primary documents, photographs, and/or video links. The days of one-dimensional research projects are over. What if students performed their stories and all you had to read were their author’s notes and works cited pages? We need to think outside the box when it comes to handling the paper load. It is not possible for teachers to work harder. We need to work smarter.

Older students interested in historical fiction might enjoy reading Larissa MacFarquhar’s October 12, 2012 *New Yorker* profile on Hilary Mantel, author of the Booker Prize winning novels about the life of Thomas Cromwell, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. MacFarquhar asserts that historical fiction is “in some ways, a humble form. There are limits to the writer’s authority. She cannot know her character completely. She has no power to alter his world or postpone his death. But in other ways it is not humble at all: she presumes to know the secrets of the dead and the mechanics of history.” Ask students to reflect upon the acts of imagination writing historical fiction requires. What did they learn from the process of turning fact into fiction? What is gained and what is lost in terms of how the real-life character is remembered?

As with any class assignment, things sometimes go awry. Inevitably students will want to research a person in the news or a prominent figure in popular culture. Here’s how I learned to answer this request. If students can make the case that their individual is likely to figure in history books (loosely defined) 50 years from now, they can research him or her. So, for example, Michelle Obama or Lance Armstrong would receive a go ahead. Lindsay Lohan or Justin Bieber, on the other hand, would not. You will want to establish your own criteria for approving student research topics, but it’s important to save students from their own first instinct to turn to individuals they already know quite a lot about. I want to push students outside their comfort zone. To my mind, the goal of education is to broaden students’ worlds, to help them become interested in people and events they never imagined would intrigue them, individuals whose influence could possibly shape their lives forever.

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