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Hans P. Guth, General Editor  
and Senior Author.

Mr. Greg Rutt  
602 Peggy Lane  
White Bear Lake, Minnesota 55110  
(612) 426-3523



D. C. Heath and Company  
1550 Northwest Highway  
Park Ridge, Illinois 60068  
(312) 827-6450

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## TERM PAPERS--PRO AND CON

By Joseph W. Miller

College and university teachers do not agree on the reasons for requiring courses in freshman English for all students, although reference is frequently made to its service function, its civilizing function, and its aesthetic function.

### The Survey

In an effort to secure a wider set of views concerning this service function, in the spring of 1978 a survey was undertaken in the Moorhead, Minnesota--Fargo, North Dakota community. This two-county area has a total of about 120,000 inhabitants, and more than 15,000 students in the three institutions of higher education.

The survey was conducted by the writer under the auspices of the Prairie Writing Project, an affiliate of the Bay Area Writing Project of the University of California at Berkeley. The PWP operates under the Tri-College University, a degree granting consortium including Moorhead State University and Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, and North Dakota State University in Fargo, North Dakota. MSU has about 5500 students, Concordia about 2500, and NDSU about 7500.

A direct-contact survey was conducted with a questionnaire (copy of questionnaire with response summary follows article) delivered to each faculty mailbox in the three institutions. Of the forms distributed, 292 were returned. It is impossible to determine what percentage of faculty replied. There is no clear and specific count available from any of the three institutions, because of differential definitions of the term "faculty," the changing teacher population, and enrollments which vary widely from term to term and require frequent additions of temporary part-time instructors. A total of nearly 900 individuals designated "faculty" are employed in the three institutions. The return was 32% of this total, but at least some of those who received the questionnaires undoubtedly regard themselves as "administrators," while others such as part-time and temporary teachers simply ignored the questionnaire assuming that it related to only full-time or "regular" employees.

#### Broad Conclusions

1. More than nine out of ten (93%) of the respondents said that students must know how to write a term paper in order to do adequate or successful college or university work. (Item 4 on the questionnaire)

2. More than eight out of ten (86%) said they consider a term paper an important factor in determining a student's mark or grade in the course. (Item 5)

3. Nearly eight out of ten (78%) said they require term papers in their classes.

4. More than eight out of ten (86%) said they include writing quality and/or effectiveness as one determiner of the mark on a term paper. (Item 8)

5. More than seven out of ten (72%) said they include mechanics (punctuation, spelling, etc.) as one determiner of the mark on a term paper. (Item 9)

6. Nearly eight out of ten (79%) said they include rhetoric (sentence structure, organization, etc.) as one determiner of the mark on a term paper. (Item 10)

7. Nearly nine out of ten (89%) said they believe students should be required to write term papers in freshman English classes. (Item 14)

The evidence from this group of responses strongly supports a fairly widespread view that term papers play an important role in college and university classes, presumably as one means by which a student can demonstrate his knowledge and/or achievement.

A second obvious conclusion is that the writing quality of the term papers is important, in terms of both mechanics and rhetoric.

A third conclusion, an indirect one, is that somewhere the student needs to be taught to write a term paper. That conclusion is the main purpose of this study, a reminder that all freshman ought to have the opportunity and the requirement of writing a term paper at least once during their year in freshman English, if only as a part of their preparation for work in more advanced courses. In other words, teaching the student how to write a term paper is an important component of the service function of

freshman English, regardless of other components of literature, socialization, aesthetic development, humanism or sociology.

Such a conclusion might seem to be obvious, yet many teachers continue to disagree with it. Some faculty members, for instance, feel that their responsibility as teachers of freshman English lies in the general area of improving writing performance and improving the students' understanding of and response to various kinds of writing, including the literary genres. For some, this attitude may be an unconscious "cop-out," since term papers are difficult and time-consuming to grade effectively, and there is no quick and easy way to handle them. They are, also, seldom "interesting" to the teacher, unless they deal with literary subjects.

A secondary conclusion, a long-range prediction, is that if freshman English classes do not offer training in writing term papers, currently required English classes may come under increasing attack as not justifying their retention. The question will be asked, "Why should they continue to be required for a General Studies, Liberal Arts, or other basic program for degree completion?" Freshman English might become an elective, or a partial elective, as have courses in some academic disciplines, now often replaced by "area" requirements.

The most reassuring result of this study, for the writer, was the strong agreement on the important question. There were, of course, some anomalous replies. One respondent insisted that he did not know what a "term paper" is, and asked, "What in heaven's name would they do if they didn't write papers in freshman English?" The response indicates both ignorance and egotism, attitudes often held by practitioners in one academic area for those in another.

Another, in responding to the questions about the student's need to know how to write a term paper, and the term paper's importance in determining a student's grade, wrote, "Are these questions normative or empirical?" This question suggests a preoccupation the writer's own idiosyncratic vocabulary preferences and possibly a "scientific" orientation, as well as an argumentative nature.

These responses were not, however, typical of the majority of

the responses to the open-ended items, which asked for "relevant comments." Many of those are worth quoting, and the following groups are selected illustrative examples.

#### The Value of Term Papers

One reply to the question concerning the need for students to know how to write a term paper was:

I use term papers primarily to force students to use or develop writing skills, which are essential to success in virtually any professional endeavor.

This comment seems to reflect the common-sense attitude, or possibly the maturity, of many college/university teachers.

Another felt that

It would be a sad day when term papers are abolished. The process of producing one has long-term significance for a person's effective functioning as a citizen and a professional person. That they are unpopular and are purchasable doesn't alter the fact of their value.

Another teacher quoted from a letter from a student:

"Another big item which I remember you emphasizing was being able to write a paper . . . Well, so far I have been assigned two proposals, one of which involves about \$300,000 and is of some importance to our institution. So, I think it is still valid to keep on teaching how to write papers."

Some respondents, on the other hand, felt that term papers achieve little:

My first quarter at . . . I assigned term papers in one class. From the students' own comments, and from the quality of the papers I could see that most were thrown together overnight. As a result I no longer require term papers.

This response to the situation seems oversimplified and inadequate. Perhaps the teacher should have re-examined the way the term paper was presented and assigned, and revised the approach in such a way as to preclude this kind of student behavior.

Others doubted the relevance of term papers written in an English class:

I suspect that a term paper assigned in an English composition class has a minimal relationship to the type of paper a student should be able to write for his/her major subject matter area.

Such a response may or may not be accurate, or relevant. Quite possibly the fact that the student has written a term paper may, of itself, be helpful, regardless of the academic area in which he/she writes later papers.

Another went still further:

I honestly believe that the concept of the term paper is outmoded except for the best students who are oriented to graduate or professional schools.

One wonders if this instructor is totally committed to computer-scored and/or standardized examinations.

Another reply suggests the "cop-out" mentioned earlier:

I prefer . . . two modes . . . (of) prepared papers; I do not necessarily require the full panoply (sic) of library research.

Since the "modes" were not specified, nor how a prepared paper differs from an unprepared one, it is probably just as well that this instructor does not insist on the comparison.

Respondents frequently commented on the large enrollments in some classes, and the resultant difficulty of having to read a large number of term papers within a short period. At one of the three institutions, for example, 50 is not an unusual number of students in a freshman English class, and the instructor is allowed to have a reader to assist in grading papers if there are more than 100 students in a given section. Thus, one respondent said:

I do not use term papers for classes with enrollments greater than 30 students.

Another said:

In my lower-division class the large number of students prevents me from assigning a paper or giving essay examinations.

Another expressed a currently popular view, which may possibly be a "cop-out":

My personal feeling is to move away from the "term paper" projects towards competency evaluations.

#### Student Competency in Writing

Deeper than the need for the term paper, per se, was the frequently expressed concern about the poor quality of student

writing. Comments included:

I find most students can't phrase a topic sentence, let alone supply adequate supporting information.

Some quarters it takes 3-4 weeks just to get students to write in complete sentences (some it takes longer). Hopefully (sic) a solid background in writing skills could be developed in a freshman English course.

Most students indicate they have never been taught procedures for footnoting or other citations. They are virtually unfamiliar with the more sophisticated literature . . . or the availability of such information. I am also finding many problems with basic grammar.

I have found that I must spend time correcting simple punctuation (sic), spelling, and sentence structure for graduate students.

Although organization of a term paper is difficult for many students, there are some important deficiencies we should be concerned about: spelling and sentence structure. Even some of the brightest students engage in "creative spelling."

Many other respondents made similar criticisms:

I believe that a majority of students are unable to write understandable English sentences and essays.

In writing exams, many students seem unaware of sentence structure, spelling, etc.

One gave a coup de grace:

It is difficult, almost impossible, to get students to write with any significant degree of clarity and order. Papers usually look like chicken scratching.

#### Cheating

Two questions dealt with the problem of cheating on term papers; the first, Item 16, asked whether or not the respondent believed that the student actually did his own work on the term papers he, the respondent, received. The other, Item 17, asked if the

teacher was aware that students can purchase ready-made term papers to fit almost any assignment. Open-end responses to these questions varied widely:

My term papers can not be "purchased" as topics are not repeated. . . . But the wages of death is death (sic) and they know that.

I now have "In-Class Essays" instead of out-of-class papers because of the increasingly derivative nature of the essays done outside of class.

I have dropped term papers from most of my classes, despite the importance I attach to them as a learning tool. My reasons for no longer stressing term papers are: (1) the frequency with which I have detected and confronted documentable plagiarism; (2) the terrible products I often receive (a result of lack of preparation for the task and motivation).

My system is not conducive to outside help and I maintain (and check) files on all previous work so that I can catch anything that gets turned in twice.

Because the . . . administration is so unwilling to support faculty who catch plagiarists and other cheaters I have taken the easy way out and drastically reduced the number of term papers and restricted the range of topics to those I can personally police.

And, finally one self-righteous respondent said:

I have written my Dean and President . . . regarding (school newspaper) ads for paper-writing and have been assured the practice will be discontinued.

#### Conclusions

In a survey of nearly 300 teachers in three institutions of higher education in one Upper Midwest community, more than nine out of ten reported that they felt that every college or university student needs to know how to write an acceptable term paper. Nearly the same number indicated that they felt that writing term papers should be taught in freshman English classes. A very large number, as well, expressed concern over the low quality of student

writing in general.

A fairly large number expressed concern about the cheating on term papers which is possible via plagiarism or the purchase of ready-made papers.

The overall conclusion is that the writing of term papers should be taught in freshman level English classes at colleges and universities.

QUESTIONNAIRE/Percentage Summary of Relevant Responses to Specific Items

1. I teach at \_\_\_\_\_ of TCU.

2. (Optional) My name is \_\_\_\_\_.

3. I teach in the \_\_\_\_\_ department (program, etc.) at \_\_\_\_\_ Concordia \_\_\_\_\_ MSU \_\_\_\_\_ NDSU.

4. I do 93% do not 5% believe students must know how to write a term paper to do adequate or successful college/university work.

5. I do 86% do not 8% consider a term paper an important factor in determining a student's mark or grade for a course.

6. I do 78% do not 17% require a term paper in my classes.

7. If you answered "I do" to #6, please fill in below:

I require a term paper in

- (a) \_\_\_\_\_ every class I teach.
- (b) \_\_\_\_\_ 2 classes per quarter-semester
- (c) \_\_\_\_\_ 1 class only per quarter-semester
- (d) \_\_\_\_\_ only occasionally\*

\*Please explain \_\_\_\_\_

8. When I grade a term paper I do 86% do not 4% include writing quality and/or effectiveness as one determiner of the mark or grade on the paper.

9. When I grade a term paper I do 72% do not 17% include mechanics (i.e., punctuation, spelling, etc.) as one determiner of the mark or grade on the paper.

10. When I grade a term paper I do 79% do not 10% include rhetoric (i.e., sentence structure, organization, etc.) as one determiner of the mark or grade on the paper.

Questionnaire (continued)

11. When I grade a term paper I base my assignment of its mark or grade on: (Use approximate percentages)

Accuracy \_\_\_\_\_ Content \_\_\_\_\_ Precision of Statement \_\_\_\_\_

Adequacy of research \_\_\_\_\_ Originality \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_\*

\*Please explain \_\_\_\_\_

12. I do 13% do not 73% assign the same term paper topic each quarter, or repeatedly.

13. I do 79% do not 8% offer students an option in selecting a term paper topic.

14. I do 89% do not 7% believe that students should be required to write term papers in freshman English classes.

15. If you answered "I do" to #14, please fill in below:

I believe students should be required to write a term paper in

- (a) \_\_\_\_\_ every quarter/semester of freshman English (MSU requires 3 quarters of freshman English).
- (b) \_\_\_\_\_ only two out of three quarters/semesters of freshman English.
- (c) \_\_\_\_\_ only one quarter/semester of freshman English.
- (d) \_\_\_\_\_ other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_.

16. I do 85% do not 3% believe that the typical paper turned in, in my classes, is the actual and original work of the student whose name is on it.

17. I am 84% was not 10% aware that students can purchase "ready-made" term papers, to fit almost any assignment, for a relatively low price.

Please add any relevant comments below; for example, what learning exercises (e.g., short-answer tests, essay examination, critiques, oral reports, etc.) do you use in addition to, or instead of, term papers in your class(es)?

## SURVEY OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS TERM PAPERS

Item #	N = 50				N = 101				N = 141				N = 292			
	Concordia College				Moorhead State University				North Dakota State University				TOTALS			
	Do	Not	Both	NR	Do	Not	Both	NR	Do	Not	Both	NR	Do	Not	Both	NR
4	48	2	0	0	92	5	0	4	132	7	0	2	272	14	0	6
5	45	2	1	2	89	5	0	7	118	18	2	3	252	25	3	12
6	39	9	2	0	77	16	2	6	111	27	2	1	227	52	6	7
8	45	2	0	3	87	0	0	14	120	10	1	10	252	12	1	27
9	37	9	0	4	73	13	1	14	101	29	0	11	211	51	1	29
10	40	6	0	4	86	1	0	14	105	24	0	12	231	31	0	30
12	3	42	0	5	15	70	1	15	20	101	1	19	38	213	2	39
13	41	4	0	5	82	4	2	13	108	15	2	16	231	23	4	34
14	49	0	1	0	89	8	0	4	121	11	0	9	259	19	1	13
16	47	0	0	3	85	1	0	15	117	8	0	16	249	9	0	34
17	47	2	0	1	76	16	0	9	121	12	0	8	244	30	0	18