

THE TERM PAPER: THE ACT OF LABELLING NOTES

By Robert Pender

One major problem of students faced with the task of writing a coherent research paper is organizing into some logical order the mass of information collected on the one or two hundred note cards stacked in front of them. Many textbooks present the method of labelling with a key word or phrase to facilitate this task. Some advise students to assign a descriptive label after the notes are taken, but before they are ready to arrange the note cards; some make the use of key word headings optional; others urge indexing the note cards at the time the notes are taken. But not all of these texts indicate why labelling should be done. Labelling requires student researchers to come to grips with the thesis by determining the issues or subtopics needed to support the idea, and forcing the students to exercise judgment when taking notes so that they are conscious of their contents.

Labelling eventually reduces the utter chaos of notes to a more manageable order. Cognizant of the benefits of organization the device provides to make their labor easier, students willingly adopt the method, dutifully writing a key word or phrase in the margin of the note cards. Though this device, by itself, does not provide a foolproof method that automatically guarantees effortless organization, even when the labels are done well, thoughtlessly written labels actually interfere with a systematic arrangement of research materials since they are practically useless. Their effectiveness depends on the quality of the label.

Observation of the captions heading the research notes done in my Freshman Composition classes by students assigned to write a report arguing the guilt or innocence of Lizzie Borden in the case of the Andrew & Abby Borden suggests an explanation for inadequate labelling, which is, that the captions fail to capture the import of the notes, sometimes because the notes are not always confined to a single idea, but even when they are the captions appear to be wanting,

for several reasons. One is a failure to determine the issues necessary to advance the validity of the argument. Given a murder, one of the primary issues is motive. Yet one sample set of student's notes reads, (the slugs appearing in CAPS);

LIZZIE & EMMA GET PROPERTY FROM ANDREW BORDEN

Lizzie talked to many people about how Mr. Borden treated her and her sister unfairly by buying the house for their step mother, someone of no relation to them. Because of this Andrew gave the sisters 3000 worth of property.

BORDEN HOUSE DOORS LOCKED

From the beginning of the Borden dispute in 1887, doors were always kept locked and this habit began to spread throughout the whole house. Family members even triple locked doors.

INQUEST: LIZZIE TALKS OF NO TROUBLE WITH STEP MOTHER

At the inquest Lizzie replied that she had no trouble with her step mother, but she shortly after tells that she had not spoken to her for five years perhaps and had refused to call her 'mother'.

Because the notes address themselves to a possible motive Lizzie might have had for allegedly killing her parents, the captions should have so read, and, since more than one possible motive emerges for the crime, a secondary caption would not be out of order, so that it should read something like this: MOTIVE: ANTAGONISM AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS.

This failure to attend to issues relevant to the subject might not be unrelated to other problems apparent in unsatisfactory headings, one of which is that the slug may be misleading because it doesn't capture the message. It does not capture the message because the student does not read for the central idea and this shortcoming may have been caused by the student's failure to come to grips with the issues. For example, a note card reading

The government's final argument claimed that it

shouldn't be believed that Lizzie was really up in the barn because of the extreme heat there and also because there were no footprints found on the dust-coated floor

is captioned FINAL ARGUMENT: LIZZIE'S GUILT. Though the government was indeed trying to establish Lizzie's guilt, the essence of the passage is neither her guilt nor the area of courtroom proceedings in which the government was making its claim but her credibility, an issue of some significance in determining Lizzie's guilt. Another example is a note card reading

A drug clerk said that a young woman wanting to buy arsenic approached him. She was willing to pay any price for it. The clerk told her that he could not sell her any because the druggist was not there. The woman left disappointed,

which is headed YOUNG LADY SEEN BY DRUG CLERK. Though it is true the drug clerk saw the lady, the essential message is the existence of a witness to testify to a lady's attempt to buy poison and to identify that lady as Lizzie Borden and the caption should so read. The caption, however, would be more revealing if it were prefaced with a major heading to signal yet another motive, DESIGN TO COMMIT MURDER.

Another reason why slugs are not satisfactory is that though the captions may be a fair summary of the note's contents, they nevertheless reflect the failure of the student to recognize that notes may pertain to the same category. One student turned in these note cards:

MAN SEEN SITTING ON BORDEN FENCE

Mrs. Chace, a neighbor to the Borden's, said that she saw a man at the Borden's sitting on their fence eating pears at about 11:00 AM.

LIZZIE PUTS BLAME ON FARM HELPER

Lizzie repeatedly put the blame for the murders on the farm help.

MAN SEEN BY BOY JUMPING BORDEN FENCE

A boy who was passing by the vicinity of the Borden house said that he saw a man jumping the fence dividing the Borden and Chagnon properties between 10:00 and 11:00 AM Thursday morning.

A more appropriate heading for these would be POSSIBLE SUSPECTS, with the slugs as they appear allowed to remain but relegated to a subheading since note card captions with both major and minor headings will have more explanatory power than those with only a single heading.

A fourth reason why labels aren't helpful in organizing research material is the absence of consistent headings on note cards. These captions clearly reflect an awareness of Lizzie's whereabouts, a primary issue in the murder case, but the headings vary:

INQUEST: LIZZIE IN BARN

Lizzie was not sure how long her father had been dead before she found him because she said that she was out in the barn.

HEARING: BRIDGET'S TESTIMONY OF LIZZIE'S WHEREABOUTS

Bridget said that Lizzie was upstairs when she had let Mr. Borden in. Bridget thought that she might have been in the hall because she heard her laugh. Five or ten minutes later Bridget saw her come downstairs from the front hall. She then went into the sitting room where Bridget was, then proceeded on into the dining room where Mr. Borden was.

LIZZIE TELLS POLICE OF HER WHEREABOUTS

Lizzie Told the police that she had been ironing in the dining room while Bridget went upstairs and then she went in the barn upstairs and stayed there for half an hour. When she got back inside the house she said she found her father dead on the lounge.

All the note cards dealing with this issue should have been labelled WHEREABOUTS or OPPORTUNITY TO COMMIT MURDER, with

subheadings where appropriate. Like things should be put in like ways.

The final shortcoming in inadequate labelling of notes is that facts may frequently be categorized under more than one heading, warrant more than one note card, so that Lizzie's testimony placing her in the barn or immediately outside the house at the time of her parents' murder or placing herself in the kitchen or some other area of the house when her father returned home before his death could very well require two-- or even three--note cards, one headed WHEREABOUTS, one INCONSISTENCIES IN LIZZIE'S TESTIMONY or LIZZIE'S CREDIBILITY, and the other labelled with the time of day if the student is interested in establishing a chronology of events. The point inadequate labelling misses is that one fact may address itself to more than one issue.

Thus following a textbook's advice that note cards should carry slugs does not necessarily guarantee useful labels classifying information under productive categories.

Such advice may very well give students the false security that notes that are labelled automatically solve problems in organizing research material into an effective paper. The mere recommendation to label notes is about as effective as the admonition enjoining plagiarism unaccompanied by demonstrations showing how to avoid it. In other words, students need more than advice, prescription or warning; they need to be instructed, in very explicit terms, about the pitfalls of mechanically, thoughtlessly produced captions belying informative headings that can be used to organize facts.

Such instruction has its benefits. The immediate one is that students will eventually learn how to write appropriate captions, though writing appropriate captions for their own sake is not an end in itself as much as it is an indication of a thinking process. Granted, students will enter inappropriate captions, but these can be changed later to reflect accurately the content of the note or the issue the addresses, or both. Another benefit is that teachers also

learn. Labels missing the mark offer clues about the problems students may have in thinking the paper through to its logical conclusion. The student needs help, not after the fact, but during the actual process of research. And the problems with organization which students inevitably have are revealed through the labels they use. And the problematic labelling may reveal a lack of mastery of principles and tactics taught earlier.