

The State of the Term Paper January 16, 2002, pp. 35,37
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by Will Fitzhugh, Editor, *The Concord Review*

It seems likely that the history research paper at the high school level is now an endangered species. A focus on creative writing, fear of plagiarism, fascination with PowerPoint presentations, and too little time to meet with students to plan papers and to read them carefully when they are turned in, along with the absence of a concern with term papers in virtually all the work on state standards, means that too many students in high school in the United States do not get to do the reading or the writing that a serious history paper requires. As a result, students come to college with no experience in writing papers, to the continual frustration of their professors, and employers of college graduates, for instance at Ford Motor Company, have now had to institute writing classes for them before they can produce readable reports, memos, and the like.

A few years ago, the Fordham Foundation did a study of the state English and social studies standards across the country, and term papers were not included in any of them. The Pew Charitable Trusts have funded the Standards for Success program, which is working on high school/college articulation of standards and expectations and term papers are not included. The American Diploma Project in Washington, DC, now working to define academic expectations among high schools, colleges and employers, has also not found a place for history research papers yet in its deliberations. One problem, of course, is that serious term papers cannot be assessed in a one-hour objective test.

In the early 1980s, when I was teaching United States History to Sophomores at the high school in Concord, Massachusetts, each student had to write a biographical paper on one of the presidents. One boy managed to get JFK, and I loaned him a copy of Arthur Schlesinger's *One Thousand Days*. He took a look at that large book and told me, "I can't read this." I said, "Yes, you can," and for some reason he did it. Five or six years later, out of the blue, he called me when he was a Junior at Yale. He said he wanted to thank me for "making him" read that book, as it was the first serious nonfiction book he had ever read and it did something for his confidence that he was able to do it. Of course he had made himself read it, but it points up one of the advantages of the history term paper. Such an assignment is often the first time a high school student finds out she/he can read a nonfiction book on something important.

I used to be an alumni interviewer for Harvard College, and once I was asked to talk to a boy at one of the local suburban high schools. I interviewed him and asked him, among other things, what he thought he might major in. He said history. He did not know anything about me other than that I was an alum, and I had said nothing about my own interest in history. But when he said this, I asked him what was his favorite history

book. It became clear that while he had good grades, AP scores and the like, he had not read anything but the textbooks as he went along in history, and no one had ever handed him a history book and encouraged him to read it. It seems likely that he never had to do a serious history paper either, or he would have had to read a history book or two.

Victor Henningsen, head of the history department at Phillips Academy at Andover, said (quote from *Education Week* article “Respected Journal Rates Student History Papers” 3/14/2001)...“There’s no substitute for the thrill that comes from choosing a topic of your own, and wrestling with a mass of evidence to answer a question that you’ve posed to craft your own narrative and your own analysis. We’ve been teaching kids to write research papers here for a long time. Kids don’t remember the Advanced Placement exam, but they do remember the papers that they’ve written, and so do I.”

Since 1987, I have been the editor of *The Concord Review*, a quarterly journal of history research papers by high school students. We have published 528 [638 in 2004] papers (average 5,000 words with endnotes and bibliography) by students from 42 states and 33 other countries. During that time, out of some 22,000 public and private high schools in the United States we are sent about 600 essays a year from which we publish eleven in each of four quarterly issues. That means that more than 21,000 high schools do not send even one history essay for consideration. While this does not prove that good long history essays are not being written at those schools, which may not know about *The Concord Review*, it is not an encouraging sign, in my view.

I have only anecdotal evidence for what teachers are expecting in their high school history classes instead of research papers. I met once with the head of a history department at a public high school in New Jersey, who is very active in the National Council for History Education, and I asked him why he never sent in papers from his best students. His reply was that he didn’t have his students do history research papers any more. He had them do PowerPoint presentations and write historical fiction instead. I asked the now retired head of history at Scarsdale High School in New York why, when he had three subscriptions to *The Concord Review*, he still never sent any papers to be considered. He said that he didn’t assign history research papers any more, but after the AP History exam he held the Trial of James Buchanan for his part in the coming of the U.S. Civil War, and then had the students write their responses to that instead. A valedictorian (first in her class) at a high school on Long Island wrote me, when I published her essay on the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, to say that she felt weak in expository writing, because, in her words, “I attend a school where students are given few opportunities to develop their talents in this field (it is assumed students will learn how to write in college).”

I feel quite confident in saying that on the college side there is the expectation that students will learn at least the rudiments of a research paper while they are still in high

school, and college humanities professors are routinely surprised (slow learners) when they find that this has not happened for their students.

Creative writing now rules at the high school (and earlier) levels in many cases. The director of the Expository Writing Program at Harvard College has said she thinks in fact that high school students do not get *enough* chances to write about their feelings, relationships, anxieties, hopes and dreams and that they really shouldn't be pushed to work on history research papers until college. The National Writing Project at Berkeley, which reaches hundreds of teachers and thousands of students each year, teaches a postmodern approach to what they call "literatures" (their quotes) and never comes within a mile of considering that students could use some work on their research skills or their nonfiction expository writing.

I have actually seen what high school students can do, and it is more like the following excerpt from an essay published in the journal (more examples are at <http://www.tcr.org>):

This passage concluded an essay written by a Junior in high school. She went on to major in civil engineering at Princeton, got a Ph.D. in earthquake engineering at Stanford and is now an assistant professor of engineering at Cornell...

"As is usually the case in extended, deeply-held disagreements, no one person or group was the cause of the split in the woman suffrage movement. On both sides, a stubborn eagerness to enfranchise women hindered the effort to do so. Abolitionists and Republicans refused to unite equally with woman suffragists. Stanton and Anthony, blinded for a while by their desperation to succeed, turned to racism, pitting blacks and women against each other at a time when each needed the other's support most. The one thing that remains clear is that, while in some ways it helped women discover their own power, the division of forces weakened the overall strength of the movement. As a result of the disagreements within the woman suffrage movement, the 1860s turned out to be a missed opportunity for woman suffragists, just as Stanton had predicted. After the passage of the 15th Amendment, they were forced to wait another 50 years for the fulfillment of their dream."

The final point is that high school kids are fully capable of writing long serious history papers and they will get a lot out of doing so, both in reading nonfiction and in learning to write nonfiction. These days too many students are not being given the chance, and colleges continue to have to do what they see as remedial work in nonfiction expository writing.