

Writing a History Research Paper

William Fitzhugh
fitzhugh@tcr.org

I understand that in medieval European universities, before Gutenberg had developed his movable type, the students had no books. Professors would read to students from their own books, which were composed of all the notes they had taken as students and later as scholars. These readings were called lectures, after the Latin word for reading. Students would write down the professors' readings into their own books, and when they were graduated they had books filled with the knowledge they had transcribed. Thanks to Gutenberg and libraries in the United States, even secondary school students have access to books introducing them to a wide range of knowledge.

McCullough (1992) writes that when Harry Truman was in the high school class of 1901 in Independence, Missouri, the town library of two-thousand volumes (a treasure beyond imagining for a medieval student) was connected to the high school. Truman and his friend Harry Ross had a competition to see which of them could read all the library's holdings first, including encyclopedias. Each claimed to have won.

"I don't know anybody in the world that ever read as much or as constantly as he did," remembered Ethel Noland. "He was what you call a 'book worm.'"

History became a passion, as Truman worked his way through a shelf of standard works on ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. "He had a real feeling for history," Ethel said, "that it wasn't something in a book, that it was part of life—a section of life or a former time, that it was of interest because it has to do with people." He himself later said it was "true facts" that he wanted. "Reading history, to me, was far more than a romantic adventure. It was solid instruction and wise teaching which I somehow felt I wanted and needed." He decided, he said, that men make history, otherwise there would be no history. History did not make the man, he was quite certain (McCullough 1992, 58).

While Harry Truman never went to college, he did quite a bit of reading as a United States Senator and, later, as President during his seven-year term.

Yet, in the current century, among those American students who do graduate from high school (fewer than 70 percent of those entering ninth grade) as many as 50 percent of those matriculating at a four-year institution need remedial reading and writing courses. Many do not return for their sophomore year.

Will Fitzhugh, a graduate of Harvard who founded the Concord Review <www.tcr.org> in 1987, taught for ten years at the high school in Concord, Mass.

I would be remiss if I did not thank you, on behalf of all students who have been called upon to attempt the seemingly insurmountable task of writing an in-depth history paper, for providing us with plentiful examples of good writing and good history. Your publication has helped us to see a way through the jungle.—Jesse Esch, University of Alberta, Class of 2001, published in *The Concord Review*, Summer 1997

What has happened in just over a century, since Harry Truman was reading those two thousand books in the local library? For one thing, now almost everyone goes to high school, which was not the case in Truman's day. For another, some educators have decided that we are in a "postliterate" era in which books and writing—and everything we associated with literacy in the past—is less important.

In their place students are assigned alternative products, such as skits and multimedia. They use portable computers, personal digital assistants, and the Internet, often obviating the need to visit a library or even read a book. Interestingly, *The Concord Review* recently received a history paper from a high school student who, in the bibliography, listed "online sources" and "offline sources." At least for this young high school author, books are now "offline sources." I grieve when I hear librarians espouse the idea that students need almost no knowledge, because they can always look it up, presumably online. And when teachers talk about moving beyond reading and writing to a more audiovisual, postliterate era, I think of hieroglyphics, the picture language par excellence. I wonder if they believe that instant messaging's emoticons are but a giant step toward the new day of picture-writing.

I do not believe just because almost a majority of our college freshmen arrive so postliterate that they need remedial reading and writing that literacy has been lost. *The Concord Review*, the only journal in the world for the academic papers of high school students, has published 693 (as of September 2005) history research papers from students in 44 states and 34 countries since 1987. These papers now average 5,500 words, with extensive endnotes and bibliography. You can judge for yourself the quality of fifty-five of these essays on the journal's Web site <www.tcr.org>.

You invited me to try my hand at history. I worked there—after not to complete my class assignment, but to achieve publication. I knew so little about convention, a fact made manifest by the text, but I was nonetheless rewarded by The Concord Review.—Alec Barker, Georgetown University, Class of 2001, published in *The Concord Review*, Summer 1997

I wrote this paper independently, during my own time out of school. My motives for doing so were both academic and personal. Although history has always been my favorite subject, I had never written a paper with this extensive research before. After reading the high quality of essays in The Concord Review, I was very inspired to try to write one myself. I thought it was a significant opportunity to challenge and expand my academic horizons. Thus during the summer before my Senior year, I began doing the research for my own paper.—Shounan Ho, Columbia University, Class of 2007, published in *The Concord Review*, Summer 2003

My paper originally began as a 1,500-word assignment. Like many public high school students, I had never written a paper over 1,000 words, so I was initially overwhelmed by the task. However, as I began to delve into the primary and secondary source documents that I had borrowed from the library at the University of California in Berkeley, I became fascinated with the topic. I decided to expand my paper into a full-length research paper and submit it to The Concord Review. The excellent quality of all the research papers in the journal inspired me to work extremely hard to achieve this same high standard. If it had not been for the Review, I never would have invested as much time and effort as I did in writing my paper. Through this process, I immensely improved my writing skills, and deepened my love for history.—Kevin Zhou, Monte Vista High School, California, Class of 2005, published in *The Concord Review*, Winter 2004

These students and others like them still read books, and most do not think of them as offline resources. They take advantage of the knowledge and counsel of their school librarians to produce a serious research paper. They join the ranks of the scholars who have gone before them, certainly at the apprentice level, some with even greater mastery.

Yet it seems hard for some librarians to retain their faith in the literate age when it comes to working with students. Witness a talk in December 2004 to people interested in civics in Washington, D.C., by James Billington, Librarian of Congress. He spoke at length of his efforts to produce a wonderful and hugely expensive DVD full of exciting images and sounds, which he said would be more relevant and exciting, and might gradually help to lead students back to reading books one day. In contrast David McCullough,

who never tires of recommending the joys and benefits of reading books, spoke at the same conference about the importance of libraries and rejoiced at the fact that there are still more libraries than McDonald's eateries in the United States.

It seems clear to me that, if librarians feel defensive about reading and writing, and high school teachers no longer assign research papers, then students will read fewer books and write less. We will send them to college with serious deficits.

In 2002, with a grant from the Albert Shanker Institute, *The Concord Review* commissioned a national study on the state of the history term paper in United States high schools <www.tcr.org/tcr/institute.htm>. Of the four hundred teachers interviewed, 95 percent said term papers were important or very important, but 81 percent never assign a five-thousand-word paper (such as those published in the *Review*), and 62 percent never assign a three-thousand-word research paper. Taken together with other studies that have found that most high school students spend fewer than three hours a week on homework, it appears to me that the majority of United States high school students leave school without having done a serious research paper, and perhaps without having read one nonfiction book.

Nor does this happen only in low-achieving schools. In fact, the head of the history department at the Boston Latin School, the oldest (1635) public school in the country and

the premier exam school in Boston, wrote me a couple of years ago to say that they have not assigned the traditional history term paper for more than a decade.

The preponderance of teachers in the study report they do not have enough time to assign, coach, and evaluate research papers, so they don't ask students to write them. If serious academic writing is not valued by schools, teachers will not be given the time to work with students. Instead students spend time on activities that *are* supported. In a suburban public high school near Boston, a sophomore recently estimated for me that she spent twenty-one hours a week on swimming, counting practices and meets but not travel time.

Nor do the consequences of postliteracy end with schooling. There are long-term implications for democracy, business, and the professions. *The New York Times* reports that some major newspapers are giving away as many as 12 percent of the copies they claim in their circulation figures. "Without them, many newspapers would be losing circulation at a far higher rate. In the industry as a whole, circulation has been falling for a decade or more

. . . media companies are fighting a steady decline in readership" (Steinberg and Torok 2005). A Business Roundtable survey uncovered the fact that companies are spending more than three billion dollars a year for courses in remedial writing for their employees, both salaried and hourly workers (National Commission on Writing 2004). Lawyers tell me that they must set up remedial writing courses for their new associates, many of whom arrive from law school unable to write well enough to do the work of the firm.

It is not too hard to imagine the reaction of the medieval scholar faced with the vast array of books available but unopened by most students today. Or the response of students in other parts of the world who are grateful for the chance to share one book with other students. *Business*

I wrote my paper on John Adams for my end-of-the-year paper. I received a B on the paper, mainly because I had over-cited some sources, but with the encouragement of my teacher I researched and revised during my summer break so that I could send it in to The Concord Review. I thoroughly enjoyed reading through letters written by John Adams and journal entries from Benjamin Rush. This whole experience has led me to appreciate history more and value the research process. Thanks again for creating such an outstanding journal and for raising the academic standard.—Rachael Dean, Pulaski Academy, Class of 2005, published in *The Concord Review*, Spring 2005

Yet of all my assignments in high school, none has been so academically and intellectually rewarding as my research papers for history. As young mathematicians and scientists, we cannot hope to comprehend any material that approaches the cutting edge. As young literary scholars, we know that our interpretations will almost never be original. But as young historians, we see a scope of inquiry so vast that somewhere, we must be able to find an idea all our own. In writing this paper, I read almanacs until my head hurt. I read journal articles and books. I thought and debated and analyzed my notes. And finally, I had a synthesis that I could call my own. That experience—extracting a polished, original work from a heap of history—is one without which no student should leave high school.

—Daniel Winik, Yale 2006, published in *The Concord Review*, Summer 2002

In the end, working on that history paper, inspired by the high standard set by The Concord Review, reinvigorated my interest not only in history, but also in writing, reading and the rest of the humanities. I am now more confident in my writing ability, and I do not shy from difficult academic challenges. My academic and intellectual life was truly altered by my experience with that paper, and the Review played no small role! Without the Review, I would not have put so much work into the paper. I would not have had the heart to revise so thoroughly; instead I would have altered my paper only slightly, enough to make the final paper a low 'A', but nothing very great. Your Concord Review set forth a goal towards which I toiled, and it was a very fulfilling, life-changing experience.—Eric Suh, Harvard 2006, published in *The Concord Review*, Summer 2002

Week tells a story about a student from the rigorous India Institutes of Technology who, upon beginning his Ph.D. at Stanford, was thrilled to have a book that he did not have to share with others ("Whiz Kids" 1998).

The Concord Review is preparing a companion study to determine the number of nonfiction books our high school students now read for their classes. While some students, encouraged by their parents and helped by their librarian, read nonfiction books on their own, we want to discover the state of expectations for the reading of nonfiction books in high school.

Librarians are essential to reading and writing nonfiction in schools—a role I urge you to advocate, not abandon. ●

References

- McCullough, David. 1992. *Truman*. New York: Touchstone.
- National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges. 2004. *Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . or a Ticket Out*. New York: College Board.
- Steinberg, Jacques, and Tom Torok. 2005. "Your Daily Newspaper, Courtesy of a Sponsor." *The New York Times*, Jan. 10.
- "Whiz Kids: Inside the India Institutes of Technology's Star Factory." 1998. *Business Week*, Dec. 7.

Copyright of Knowledge Quest is the property of American Library Association. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.