

I-Search Paper Unit Plan

American Literature; Fall 2008

Shyla Anderson, Instructor

University High School, Normal, Illinois

- **Educational Objectives:**

1. To teach students to generate a research-quality question based on their growing interest in a topic
2. To teach students to investigate and research their chosen research question, once established
3. To teach students to identify the difference between authoritative and non-authoritative sources
4. To teach students to analyze, synthesize and evaluate research sources
5. To teach students the procedures and processes inherent in research-based writing through the practice of narrative-based personal writing; which in turn, scaffolds them to a deeper understanding of the traditional research process

Illinois State English Learning Standards:

5.A.4a Demonstrate a knowledge of strategies needed to prepare a credible research report (e.g., notes, planning sheets).

5.A.5a Develop a research plan using multiple forms of data.

5.B.5a Evaluate the usefulness of information, synthesize information to support a thesis, and present information in a logical manner in oral and written forms

5.B.3b identify, evaluate and cite primary sources.

3.8.5 Using contemporary technology, produce documents of publication quality for specific purposes and audiences; exhibit clarity of focus, logic of organization, appropriate elaboration and support and overall coherence.

3.C.5a Communicate information and ideas in narrative, informative and persuasive writing with clarity and effectiveness in a variety of written forms using appropriate traditional and/or electronic formats: adapt content, vocabulary, voice and tone to the audience, purpose and situation.

- **LESSON OVERVIEW:**

This lesson is designed to fit into a 3- week unit. The two units in which this inquiry, research project is based are the “Native American” and “Early Narratives” from student’s American Literature textbooks. In addition, students are given enrichment texts (*Keywords for Cultural Studies*) that discuss the definition and importance of these Key Words: “Civilization,” “Border,” and “Indian.” Through these readings, students generate questions of interest by way of large and small group instruction, in which the instructor leads students from subjects of general knowledge, to subjects of specificity and student

interest. For example, instead of being asked to give a general interpretation of John Smith’s “Of Plymouth Plantation,” students are asked to draw topics of interest from that narrative that may include ideas pertaining to the “real” relationship between John Smith and Pocahontas, hygienic and childbirth rituals within early native American cultures, or the burial practices used by the European settlers (Pilgrims).

(Note: All daily lessons are conducted in an inquiry-based, reading and writing workshop-based learning environment in a technology-rich classroom).

WEEK #1: Through pre-selected texts and class discussion, students develop research questions. Research questions are tested for research quality, complexity, and viability.

WEEK #2: Students are instructed on research procedures by both their instructor and the school media specialist. This preview to research involves accessing and understanding the University High School library homepage. From this homepage, students access public and private databases. In addition, they are given a lesson on how to access and use the *Library of Congress* website. Students test and eventually frame their research question through the on-going research. As students are working at their own pace, students are encouraged to begin drafting their narrative when they feel they have done sufficient research to fulfill the assignment criteria.

WEEK #3: Students work toward the draft of their I-Search narrative. At the end of week 3, students will present within small groups, arranged by commonalities in topic and/or cultures, to present their finding orally to the class. This research-based narrative should be considered a strategy that students will continue to develop as they gain mastery of the research process, to additionally be synthesized into a more traditional research-based assignment later in the semester. Students may also use this basis of research to develop technology-based visual presentations for later units.

(Note: What follows is a copy of the instruction guide given to students, as posted in Blackboard for American Literature).

American Literature

I-Search Paper Rubric/Guidelines for Success

Fall 2008

Anderson

Strategy #2: The “I-Search” Paper (Strategy #1: Reading Guides)

1. Explanation: WHAT IS AN “I-SEARCH” PAPER?

Developed by Ken McCrorie, the “I-Search” paper is designed to teach the writer and the reader something valuable about a chosen topic and about the nature of searching and discovery. As opposed to the standard research paper where the writer usually assumes a detached and objective stance, the I-

Search paper allows you to take an active role in your search, to experience some of the hunt for facts and truths first-hand, and to provide a step-by-step record of the discovery. Your final draft will **describe chronologically the process** you went through in investigating your chosen research question.

The “I” in I-Search means you **write in first person**, that you are an interactive and reactive participant in the I-Search writing process. In a more formal research paper, which you will probably be assigned in other courses, the use of “I” is not appropriate. In a formal research essay, a writer cannot say, for example, “I think” or “I feel.” In contrast, the I-Search paper invites you to tell about your research journey from your point of view, asking you to reflect and analyze using “I.” This essay belongs in the **personal narrative essay** genre (genre means kind, or in this case, kind of writing), not in the formal academic research, argumentative, or explanatory essay genres.

An I-Search paper calls for you to tell, in the **form of a story**, virtually every step of the search which led to the answer to your question, including the dead-ends and failures, which means that **you can be drafting your paper as you proceed with the search rather** than waiting until you have all the information you need before deciding upon what you will actually write. It also means that you can tell your readers of your frustrations as you underwent your search. Even if you have not found the answer to your question, you can still write your paper, explaining to your readers at the end of your paper that your question remains unanswered and describing what you did learn that was worthwhile or how you would amend your search on a future attempt.

Ideas to keep in mind when writing an “I-Search” paper:

- Topic is private but the language must be public and appropriately academic, but not pretentious (more on language below)
- Citation procedures must be followed as though writing a research paper
- The paper must be appealing to a general academic audience

2. Your “I-Search” Question

For this assignment, your research question should center on some aspect of life in the early American colonies, such as Jamestown or Plymouth. You should spend some time formulating your question/s. You may take your questions from the list we brainstormed and generated together during our class discussions. Do some personal brainstorming to come up with a list of several possible questions perhaps not addressed in class. The question you ultimately choose must be, first and foremost, of interest to you, and must be researchable. That means it must have many different aspects to it, it must be complex, NOT a “yes” or “no” type question.

General questions will require a broader base of research. Specific questions will require a more intense look at certain details. For most questions, the more specific you can be; the better.

General Question Sample:

Why were women an important part of the early colonization of America?

More Specific Question Sample:

What roles did women hold in the early colonization of America?

Very Specific Question Sample:

What roles were expected of/fulfilled by women in the early Plymouth colony?

Note: For some questions, it is not necessarily better or worse to have a more specific question over a general one. However, for our research purposes for this class, it helps to be as specific as possible.

3. PAPER COMPONENTS: ORGANIZING YOUR "I-SEARCH" PAPER**Part I--The Lead: (Introduction)****Where My Question Came From and What I Already Know (Prior Knowledge)**

All I-Search papers must begin with an interesting lead, something which pulls your reader into your paper. Most leads take the form of a narrative, a story relating where in your life your question came from and what you already know, assume, or imagine about your topic.

Sample Lead:

I've always been interested in technology, and when I learned that the early colonists possessed certain tools that they could not adapt to the terrain of the "new world," I thought it would be interesting to research that aspect of the colonies. I know that today technology has a totally different connotation to it, but since technology has something to do with the branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of certain tools in connection with some aspect of our human environment, the tools that they used when building and establishing the colonies was as important to them then as our modern technology is important to us now...

Part II—What I Want to Find Out: (Thesis)

In this section you write a few paragraphs which include your initial questions (2-4) about your topic, questions you want to have answered. These questions will lead you to those sources that will answer your questions. Although this is primarily an internet resource-based project, (You should plan on accessing the U-High library home page) -- you may also want to include any books you've previously read, including your American lit book or any school history or library book, or if you know someone (or can contact someone via the internet from the global learning community), you can question them on your topic, as well. Mrs. Beaman is available to answer questions about the U-High data base or point you in the right direction to the right kind of data base for your research if you are unsure of where to go...

Ultimately, you may decide to focus on just one question if you find a lot of information on it, or you may stick with several questions as long as they are inter-related/connected to the same topic in a strong way.

Part III—The Story of My Search: (BODY)

In this section, you will write up your search in a narrative or storytelling form, relating the story of:

(A) What steps you took in your research and

(B) What you learned in the process. **THIS SECTION IS IN ESSENCE THE BODY OF YOUR PAPER.** Not only do you report on what other sources said about your topic; but also your reactions and reflections on those perspectives. Do not feel obligated to tell the reader everything, but highlight the information you uncovered that was crucial to your hunt and contributed to your understanding of the information.

4. Part IV—What I Discovered: (CONCLUSION)

After concluding your search, compare what you thought you knew, assumed, or imagined to what you actually discovered. Assess your overall learning experience, and offer some personal commentary about the value of your discoveries and/or draw some conclusions. In this section you reflect on the entire experience, not only what you got out of it, not only what you've learned, but how this search affects your long range life plan and goals. Sometimes your conclusion might express your feelings of satisfaction, but also might express your disappointment or frustration. You may have discovered that you want to explore a different goal. You can explain how this experience has helped you to make this discovery, and what your new questions might be.

In essence, in this section you summarize your journey, whatever your experience, good or bad. Here are some questions that you might consider at this stage:

- How accurate were your original assumptions?
- What new information did you acquire?
- What did you learn that surprised you?
- Overall, what value did you derive from the process of searching and discovery?
- What connections did you make, specifically, to what we've discussed previously in class? (This may be a good place to make connections to key words, key concepts or key points of class discussions).

Don't just do a question and answer conclusion. Go back to the main point you want to make with this essay. What final message do you want to leave your readers?

5. What Your Portfolio Must Include:

Note: Please keep an electronic portfolio with everything listed here:

- An informal documentation sheet that keeps a list of all sources that you refer to during your search; including internet sites, data bases, authoritative sources such as teachers, parents and the school librarians, library books, text books, etc. (This may be typed or neatly hand-written). This will help you keep track of the sources that you will eventually use for citation. **Remember: Not all sources you refer to will be used for citation purposes unless you found it helpful in understanding and applying what you learned from that source in your paper. This list will be longer than your bibliography.**
- Your “I-Search” Paper (no set page numbers, but should show evidence of critical thinking, research, research result and documentation).
- A formal Bibliography (MLA) of the sources. This should be attached as the last page of your “I-Search” paper

6. WRITING THE I-SEARCH PAPER

- **Title**

A good I-Search paper will provide the reader a title that crystallizes the purpose or main idea of the essay. You are invited to be creative, composing a focusing title that captures a reader’s attention.

- **Headings**

You might find that using headings will help you with your presentation and make your I-Search Essay reader-friendly. **After your lead or introductory section**, the headings might be:

1. What I Want to Find Out
2. The Story of my Search
3. What I Discovered

- **Format**
 - a) Single spaced/12 font/Times New Roman
 - b) Relatively free of errors and common problems associated with academic writing

You are also welcome to be creative with these headings, adapting them to your particular search. But it should be clear to any reader that these sections are evident in the paper.

Some Pointers: (You could easily use this as a check-off list when editing your paper)

- The paper should begin with an interesting **lead**.

- Show evidence of all required components
- The “I-Search” **question** should be explicitly stated following the lead.
- The information should be selected for a **general audience of academic readers**. Any information which might be too technical should be explained and any lengthy tables, pictures or technical lists should be avoided.
- May optionally include **actual dialogue or actual words spoken, in quotation marks**, where you feel it would be appropriate. (This would require the addition of a Works Cited page in addition to your Bibliography)
- Include **rich descriptions** of the places and people you researched where you feel such description would interest your readers and contribute to the answer of your question/s.
- After each piece of information, let your readers know how this information contributes to the answer to your question by providing **analysis and reflection**.
- Follow the **MLA citation guidelines**. Follow the **documentation rules** exactly as though you were writing a conventional research paper. **Remember your tools: MLA HANDBOOK, NOODLE TOOLS, etc.**

7. Honest Writing

The first step to writing this I-Search paper is finding your own voice. This does not mean that you should write like your talk, use a lot of cliché, cursing, or slang. This means you do not have to adopt a pretentious voice to write well. Here are some tips:

- Write clearly—edit out the extra words you don’t need, that repeat, or distract from your points
- Avoid fragments, run-ons and “stringy” (over long or wordy) sentences
- Don’t write pretentiously
- Don’t write below your grade level
- Reading your work aloud, or at the very least, in hard copy as opposed to reading from the computer screen, can help you catch mistakes you don’t catch by reading silently to yourself.
- Remember your audience: you are writing to the whole group. In other words, here is what I would want my classmates to understand if I were to present my findings in class... (hint, hint):)

8. Use Classmates as Tutors

Professional writers know that good writing is not done in isolation. They have discovered that testing out ideas and writing with others, having conversations about ideas, and sharing drafts with others helps them to advance their writing and work toward excellence. They know that revising with feedback is a key to good writing. Even though a peer edit is not a requirement for this paper, consider having another person give you feedback on your style, format and content.

References

This document incorporates several sources that are based on Ken McCrorie's *The I-Search Paper*. Information from the following educational resources was also incorporated into this document:

"The I-Search Paper." Delta College. 1 Dec. 2006. < <http://www.delta.edu/sgrobins/I-Search.html>>.

"English 52 I-Search Paper." Cerritos College. 1 Dec. 2006.
<<http://www.cerritos.edu/fquaas/assignments/English52/I-Search.htm>>.

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<http://depts.gallaudet.edu/englishworks/writing/formatsheet.html>>.

Gosslee, Amber. "The I-Search Paper." 1 Dec. 2006. <<http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/isearch2.htm>>

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