Writing in Black and White

Research Paper / Prospectus

• Final paper will be around ten pages (or so), and should include substantial consultation of at least three reliable sources (“reliable,” generally = NOT WEBSITES!) besides your primary texts
• Research prospectus due Friday, November 10
• First draft of research paper due (in my office) Wednesday, November 29
• Second draft of research paper due Friday, December 8
• Writing portfolios due to the English Committee Thursday, December 14

The first thing to remember about a research paper is that it’s not really substantively different from the kind of papers you’ve already been writing. It’s longer, usually. And it involves the voices and ideas of other people. But the same basic gestures are involved as in your earlier papers: you’ll still do close readings of texts, you’ll still make critical comparisons, you’ll still structure the paper in sections. The only thing that makes a research paper really different is that in your earlier papers you were only trying to say what you thought: in a research paper, you’re trying to place what you think into a conversation going on among experts. The research paper is the place where you actually join into that larger academic conversation.

Prospectus – due Friday

You will define your research project yourself. But a good way to start is simply by defining what you’re interested in, why you’re interested in it, why you think it matters, and how you want to go about studying it. That’s what the prospectus is for.

To write the prospectus, start by reading the excerpt from The Craft of Research I handed out in class: these chapters will help you think about the kinds of questions to ask to motivate research, and how to ask them so they yield the most fruit. Read the whole packet – then, pay special attention to the rubric on page 63, the three questions you need to answer in order to define your project initially.

Then, write your prospectus. It doesn’t have to be long – after all, you haven’t done the research yet – but it should contain three sections:

1. In the first section, define your research question following the guidelines on page 63 of Craft. What are you studying, what questions are you asking about it, and why? What do you expect to find out? The harder you push here, now, the easier the research will be later, so think about this for a while.

2. In the second section, try to say, briefly, what you already know about the research question. If you’re going to focus on literature, what primary texts will you be studying – what stories, what books, what chapters, what characters? If you’re going to focus on history, or political theory, or law, what will form the backbone of your research? What sources do you already have in hand? What ideas do you already think are applicable to this project?

3. In the third section, try to define what you need to know in order to answer your research question completely. What other sources do you need to consider? What kinds of research do you need to do? Where do you expect to find those sources? It might be a good idea to do a little preliminary research before you write this part. Get on InfoTrac, use the library catalog, check the MLA and JStor databases (all accessible through the library page of the website). Find out what’s out there.
Bring your prospectus with you on Friday. Then – and this is crucial – start doing your research. Start finding articles. Start reading books. Start taking notes. The sooner you start gathering materials, the better. Don’t wait for me to tell you to start.

**Some thoughts on topics**

I’ll consider just about anything if you can make a case for it – what I’m really interested in is that you care about it, although it will be easier for me to help you with it if it has some connection to some aspect of race in America: then at least I can be sure you’ll have access to texts that will help you. But you might consider some things as you ponder your topic:

1. You can choose to do a literary paper like the ones you’ve written thus far, either on texts you haven’t written about, or texts we haven’t read for the class. (Consider Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, for instance, a passing novel written by a white man. Or Wright’s *Native Son*. Or some of Faulkner’s other books centering on race, like *Go Down, Moses or Absalom, Absalom!* The key to a paper like this is to (a) define the primary texts, and then (b) find everything you can that anybody’s ever written about those texts. In a research paper, your questions are shaped by your research – so when you finish reading five articles about, say, *The Human Stain*, you will almost surely have different questions about it than when you started. This is a good thing.

2. In order to keep the reading list for this course down to six or seven books, I focused on “race” only as a “black/white” phenomenon. You might now consider, though, any of the other dimensions of race in America: whiteness (there’s a burgeoning field called “whiteness studies” now), Asian-American experience, Latino/a experience, etc. If you’re interested in Latino/a issues, you might read *Days of Obligation: an Argument with My Mexican Father*, by Richard Rodriguez. If you’re interested in the Asian-American thing, try Frank Wu’s *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*. If you’re interested in the South-Asian postcolonial experience, try Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*. If you’re interested in how flexible the category of “whiteness” actually is, try Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White*. These are just starting points. The key to such a paper, though, is to define its center – to have a book, an issue, a person or an event at the center of it. If you don’t, if you try to write just generally about “experience,” you’ll get very, very lost.

3. You might consider a historical event or phenomenon as the center of your research. You might consider the issue of school desegregation, and you might ask whether or not (and why or why not) American schools are desegregated today. You might consider the experiment with busing/Metco in Boston between 1975 and 1995. You might consider the racial dimensions of immigration. You might consider the phenomenon of lynching. You might examine “white flight,” and the way it changed the racial makeup of American cities in the sixties and seventies. You might think about real estate practices and banking practices like “redlining,” and the role they have played in shaping the world you live in. You might enter into the current debate about affirmative action. You might examine the role of supreme court decisions (from *Plessy v. Ferguson* to *Brown v. Board of Education*) in shaping the American racial landscape. The list is endless. Again, though, the key is to have a discrete, solid center: one event, one phenomenon, one thing to ask questions about. The bigger questions will be raised by a focus on the smaller issue.

4. You might consider the issue of diversity at Marlboro. This will be hard, because it will involve primary research – interviews, chiefly, which are hard to do well and hard to write about afterwards. But the issue is an interesting one. And it’s close to home.

There are others, of course . . . the list goes on and on. What’s important, though, is that you choose a something to look at that you can ask focused, specific questions about. And, of course, that you care about it. When both of those things come together, you’re ready to start.