

Swales's "Moves" and the Research Paper Assignment

Exposure to Swales's "moves," local-interest newspaper articles, and field-research techniques helps students produce better research papers.

by Brian Sutton

Introduction

Near the end of the semester, if you walk down the hallway where the composition teachers' offices are located, you can hear it. Teachers muttering to themselves. Groaning. Choking back the occasional primal scream. And you know: it's once again that time in the semester for reading final drafts of students' research papers. The research paper assignment somehow transforms many students from competent to clueless. No other assignment produces such a discrepancy between what we hope for and what we get.

Part of the problem is that most first-year composition students do not define the research paper task the way we would like them to. After interviewing numerous college teachers and students, Robert Schwegler and Linda Shamon concluded that while "college instructors view the research paper as a means to [. . .] get students to think in the same critical, analytical, inquiring mode as instructors do—like a literary critic, a sociologist, an art historian, or a chemist," college students generally view the research paper as simply "an exercise in information gathering" (819-20). Or to rephrase the problem using Barbara Walvoord and Lucille McCarthy's terms, tension exists between teachers' desire that their students adopt

the role of "professional-in-training" and students' tendency to view their role as that of "text processor" (8-11). This discrepancy in task definition is particularly alarming because studies have repeatedly demonstrated that an ambitious interpretation of research-based writing assignments helps students complete the assignments more successfully (Flower and Hayes; Greene; Kantz). Thus, it makes sense to seek ways of encouraging students to define the research paper task more ambitiously.

But of course, simply telling students "I want you to approach this task as apprentice academics" does no good. Most first-year composition students don't *want* to become professional academics and thus have no intrinsic motivation to think like an academic, let alone to conduct research like one. Moreover, first-year composition students are generally unfamiliar with the conventions and expectations of academic discourse; thus, even those few who define their task ambitiously and who research thoroughly have no idea how to present their findings in a form experienced academic readers expect and can readily interpret. What is needed, then, is a bridge between the students' world and that of their teachers—a way to encourage students to think, research, and write in a reasonably academic fash-

ion while still being able to explore their own interests and draw from their knowledge about genres of writing already familiar to them.

I've gotten good results by introducing students to three seemingly disparate strands of knowledge: information about the "moves" commonly found in the introductory sections of journal articles written in experimental report form; information about the ways newspaper reporters localize a national or international story; and information about the uses of field research in academic discourse. These three strands have helped my students—some of them, anyway—to complete research papers in which they create new knowledge and correlate that knowledge with previously published studies, without leaving them intimidated or bored by too much forced exposure to the ways of the academy.

Swales's "Moves"

The first strand of information, which I'll refer to as Swales's "moves," is admittedly deeply rooted in academic discourse; but it's simple enough that students can grasp it after very little class time, before boredom can set in, especially if I encourage them to discover how the "moves" function in a sample article or two. Linguist John Swales has found that in journal articles written in experimental-report form, authors typically employ four moves during the introduction. First, they establish the significance and centrality of the research area. Second, they selectively summarize previous research. Third—the crucial step, separating most published academic discourse from most undergraduate research papers—they establish the need for their own study, perhaps by pointing out an area not yet covered by

previous research, highlighting a possible methodological limitation of that research, or suggesting a different interpretation of the results of that research. Finally, they suggest that their own study will rectify the problems they've just mentioned. Swales adds that the order of these four steps may vary and that the fourth step may be left implicit; but these are simply variations of the basic pattern.

This information helps the students recognize that academic discourse often takes relatively predictable forms, an insight which may help them to read that discourse with better comprehension. More important, it demonstrates to students that the research-based writing most highly valued in university settings doesn't merely summarize facts from other sources, but uses those other sources as springboards for original research to test previous findings and create new knowledge. Thus, the information implicitly encourages students to define their task more ambitiously.

But although they readily understand Swales's moves, most students don't at first see the moves as applicable to their own writing. After all, their research papers won't be written in experimental report form, nor will most of them write in that form on any other occasion. Moreover, they're not sophisticated enough to spot methodological limitations in or suggest alternative interpretations of results from previous studies, let alone to design an experimental study of their own. One student accurately summarized his classmates' initial response when he said, "You have to be scientists to be able to use that stuff, and we're not."

But in fact, Swales's moves can be applied to disciplines far removed from the experimental sciences. To demonstrate this point to the students, I sometimes

show them an introductory paragraph I wrote as part of a short literary-analysis essay a couple of years ago:

Many writers have noted the conflict between idealism and reality in Athol Fugard's "*Master Harold*" . . . and *the Boys*. Dennis Walder, for example, describes a "gap between the [. . .] harsh, even violent reality" the play's characters endure and the "ideal world imagined by Sam" with his "idea of dancing as a paradigm of universal harmony" (122). Others have noted a second, closely related conflict, that between self-esteem and self-loathing. Frank Rich observes, "Fugard's point is simple enough: before we can practice compassion [. . .] we must learn to respect ourselves" (C21). But no writer has pointed out that both conflicts are neatly summarized within the play by one more conflict: that between looking up and looking down. (120)

Although I wasn't consciously thinking about Swales's moves when I wrote the article, this introductory paragraph follows them exactly, with the fourth move left implicit. The first sentence establishes the centrality of the research area, the next three sentences summarize previous studies, and the fifth sentence points out an area left unexamined by previous research, thus justifying my own study. Of course, you could argue that my knowledge of the moves subconsciously influenced my approach; but in any event, the result was a fairly typical introduction to an essay of literary criticism, an introduction which "worked" in the sense that the article was published by the first journal to which I submitted it. Evidently, Swales has uncovered a rhetorical strategy applicable to a fairly wide range of academic discourse, not just to experimental reports.

But while this example convinces the students that the moves aren't just for *scientists*, it doesn't overcome their sense that the moves are just for *academics*. More-

over, most students lack the time, research sophistication, and inclination to search thoroughly enough to state confidently that a given area has not been explored by previous researchers, as I do in my "move three" sentence from the paragraph quoted above. So we still need a bridge to link the students' world with the world of academic discourse.

Local News and Field Research

This is where the localized news story comes in. You know the genre: along with a wire-service account of a major national or international event, a city newspaper adds an accompanying story, perhaps featuring person-on-the-street reactions to the event or interviews with local experts or local persons in some way connected to the national or international story. (Local television news stations typically do the same thing.) The newspaper's localized story typically begins with a lead connecting the larger story with the local angle. For example, in early May of 1998, *USA Weekend*, a weekend-supplement magazine which comes with my hometown newspaper and with many other American newspapers, devoted an entire issue to the results of its survey of over 272,000 teenagers nationwide. On the same day that this issue of the supplementary magazine appeared, my hometown newspaper ran a local-angle story with the following lead:

Sarah Thomson has a healthy image of herself, but the Wrightstown teen says she'd like to change a few things.

She's not alone. Teens across the country gave conflicting views about their self-image in a teen survey.

They generally feel good about themselves, but fewer than half believe they're attractive, and many want to change things about themselves to have a better self-image. (Higgins B2)

Although reporters who write stories like these probably have never heard of John Swales, their articles often exemplify Swales's moves, modified for a different (and nonacademic) setting, with move four again left implicit. The last two sentences of the lead quoted above not only summarize the previous study which the local-interest article will use as springboard (move two), but also establish the significance of that study (move one), since such a widespread feeling in teens of unattractiveness is a serious concern. The first two paragraphs, in turn, establish the area not examined by the previous study (move three): the relationship between the findings of the national survey and the situations of teens living in the newspaper's local area. Note, too, that this article, like many other local-angle pieces, shares one other strategy with much published academic writing: it tests someone else's large-scale generalization for its application to a particular population, thus creating a replication study with results of interest to a specialized group—in this case local readers.

Examples of these localized stories are easy to find and to adapt to current interests. (Lately, I've used one the hometown paper ran just before the 1998 Academy Awards, in which the local angle was that the downtown library holds personal documents from two local siblings who were on the *Titanic*, of whom the brother drowned and the sister lived, as Celine Dion puts it, on and on.) After examining a few of these localized stories, students can recognize that the principles we've been discussing aren't limited to academic discourse at all, but can be applied to rhetorical situations more familiar to them, and to writing they'd be willing to read purely for enjoyment.

Furthermore, because these localized stories often rely on personal interviews,

unpublished documents, or small-scale local surveys, they introduce field research techniques to students within a familiar, nonthreatening context. Admittedly, serious academic field research is more complex than are the person-on-the-street surveys and local expert interviews conducted by newspaper and television journalists; still, examples from local media can demonstrate many of the basic techniques and issues involved with field research. Teachers who wish to prepare their students for field research more thoroughly may wish to rely on a text such as Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein's *FieldWorking*, a book focused on shaping a first-year composition class around this kind of research.

Student Examples

By this point, the students are ready to begin their research projects. Ideally, they should begin by conducting library and Internet research to build their expertise on an issue which interests them. They should then seek a local angle regarding that issue and write a brief proposal, summarizing what they have found and explaining how their original research will extend their findings. Finally, after we have discussed the proposal and I have approved it, they should conduct appropriate field research. While they don't have to use Swales's moves in their introductions, those moves can help them face the blank page or computer screen when they begin their first drafts and also help them structure their essays and link their findings to the findings of others. For those students who wish to employ Swales's moves, a checklist (see appendix) can help them as they work.

As an example of how all this works, consider a research paper I received not long ago. The student began by describ-

ing the importance of the news media in influencing public perception of certain groups of people (move one); next, she summarized the published results of a study of ways teenagers are portrayed by the news media, as well as the published findings of a national survey of teenagers regarding their perceptions of their image in the media (move two); then she questioned whether in northeast Wisconsin, where she lives and attends college, local news portrayals and teen attitudes toward media images would mirror those described in the national publications, given that those publications largely reflect the concerns of urbanites on the East and West Coasts (move three); and finally she introduced her own study, which supplemented a modest amount of library research with three strands of field research: examination of local television and newspaper coverage over a one-week period, an interview with a friend who worked at a local television station, and a small-scale local replication of the national survey.

Other students in my classes have adopted similar approaches to produce papers on a variety of topics. Some students begin with an interest in a local situation and must find corresponding national or international material, eventually producing papers on topics such as the local near-worship of the Green Bay Packers and America's tendency to aggrandize elite athletes; the local population's handling of a recent influx of Hmong and Latino immigrants and standard theories regarding Americans' reactions to new immigrants; and the issue of PCB's in northeast Wisconsin's Fox River and the national tension between environmental and economic concerns. Others begin with a broader issue which interests them and find a local corollary, eventually creating papers such as those supplement-

ing library research on American attitudes toward the elderly with interviews with residents and employees of local nursing homes; supplementing print sources dealing with public attitudes toward President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky with surveys of students and interviews with political science professors at my school; and in one memorable instance, supplementing published studies of bar culture and the effects of alcohol on male-female behavior with material based on "field notes" derived from the student's observations in local bars on a series of Friday and Saturday nights over the month before the paper was due.

Conclusion

The students don't necessarily produce papers overwhelmingly superior to their previous essays and worthy of publication in a scholarly journal. But they do learn to view themselves as original researchers, creating new knowledge; they learn to evaluate previous researchers' claims and test those claims' applicability to their own world, thus approaching previously published works not as literally unquestionable authorities but as products of other rhetorical situations, an approach composition researchers have described as crucial to successful research-based writing (Brent; Kantz); they learn to situate their own findings within an ongoing written conversation; and they learn to limit their field of investigation and to avoid overgeneralization from limited data. These lessons should serve them well as they move on to assignments in other disciplines.

I don't require that all students adopt the localized-field-research approach, let alone that they all use Swales's moves in their introductions. But I encourage them to do so, and having been shown a clear

process for completing the assignment this way, many do adopt the approach. The results have been encouraging. I won't claim that I can't wait to read another set

of students' research papers; but I will say that when I do read them, you can pass my office without hearing mutterings, groans, and choked-back primal screams.

APPENDIX:

CHECKLIST FOR USING SWALES'S MOVES IN A RESEARCH PAPER INTRODUCTION

1. Do you begin by establishing the significance of your research area?
2. Do you summarize previous relevant research in the area?
3. Do you point out a "gap" in that previous research—perhaps an area the research has overlooked (such as whether or not its conclusions apply to the local situation), or possibly a question as to whether the research methods or interpretations of results in previous studies are completely reliable?
4. Do you make clear (whether or not you state it explicitly) that in the rest of your paper you will present your own original research to fill the "gap" pointed out in #3?

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