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# Archives Alive!: librarian-faculty collaboration and an alternative to the five-page paper

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# Archives Alive!: librarian-faculty collaboration and an alternative to the five-page paper

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**In brief:** The short research paper is ubiquitous in undergraduate liberal arts education. But is this assignment type an effective way to assess student learning or writing skills? We argue that it rarely is, and instead serves as an artifact maintained out of instructor familiarity with and unnecessary allegiance to timeworn conceptions of “academia.” As an alternative, we detail the Archives Alive! assignment developed by librarians and faculty at the University of Iowa and designed to bring Rhetoric students into contact with archival collections and digital skills. We also

discuss how librarians can collaborate with instructors on new assignment models that build meaningful skills for students, highlight library collections, and foster connections on campus and with the broader community.

## Introduction

Anyone who has spent much time working at an academic library reference desk has encountered students scrambling to find sources for research papers they have already written. These students just need to add a few quotes (preferably from 3–5 different sources) in support of their preformed arguments. And quickly, because the paper is due tomorrow...or perhaps in a couple of hours.

Anyone who has taught undergraduate rhetoric, composition, or English has likely slogged through grading those same papers: formulaic phrasing or overwrought syntax; patchwriting if not outright plagiarism; vagaries grounded in hyperbole such as, “Since the dawn of time...”

And of course, anyone who has ever written a five-page paper knows the score. On sites like Yahoo Answers, you can find helpful instructions for [how long it takes to write such a paper](#), [how many sources to include](#), and [how to tweak the margins/fonts to require as little actual writing as possible](#). Whether the page limit is five or fifteen, as an assignment format, the short research paper is pervasive, largely unloved by its participants, and deeply flawed.

We — an instruction librarian and an English Ph.D./rhetorician now a library department head — believe that another world is possible, where assignments can be deeply engaging for both students and instructors. We also believe that librarians can help make this change happen. We recently created the [Archives Alive! assignment](#) now used by many sections of a core required course at the University of Iowa (UI). The story of the assignment’s development is a story of risk and collaboration. In particular, it highlights the benefits of librarians approaching instructors to create assignments where students produce work for public audiences, and where student work can contribute to projects beyond their classrooms.

## The prevalence and weakness of short research paper assignments

The five-page (or n-page) paper lurks everywhere in academia. Its form privileges quantity, outmuscling quality and utterly preoccupying students with concerns about numbers. Although professors may intend these assignments to facilitate exploratory learning, students often focus on meeting the expectations of their professors.<sup>1</sup> Because assignments may be vague on the more qualitative aspects, students often fixate on the concrete word count or required number of references.<sup>2</sup> It’s the *mass* of text that preoccupies these students. Their arguments and the audiences for them are secondary considerations.

This quantification of thought sends the absolute wrong message to students. Good arguments are not necessarily quantifiable. We’re not suggesting that there’s categorically no difference between a one-page paper and a five-pager. Tom has had enterprising or lazy students ask if it would be possible to write a successful one-page paper. It would, but that would be a hell of a paper. And that’s the thing: the impressive, succinct, artful one-page paper is not what we tend to teach students. We tell them that in order to tease out an argument, in order to excavate the multiple facets of the topic being addressed, we need a particular number of paragraphs and pages. In prescribing these numbers, we remain silent on what other possible forms might better serve their arguments. And in doing so, are we adequately modeling our own enthusiasm for the subject being taught? If we love rhetoric or composition, what is it that we love about it? Are we, through our assignments, conveying that love? In a world where the relevant searches for “five-page paper” are expeditious rather than enlightening, we doubt it.

In the run up to the 2013 annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, Tom and our colleague,

Matt Gilchrist — a lecturer in the UI Rhetoric Department and Director of [Iowa Digital Engagement and Learning](#) (IDEAL) — ran a call for papers for a panel titled “Beyond the Essay.” They were interested in what other kinds of assignments instructors were asking their students to undertake in service to their learning. We received a bunch of marvelous proposals that, to use the parlance of educational theory, described hybrid learning models. The panel drew interest from graduate students, non-tenure track lecturers, and the whole gamut of tenure track faculty. People read gardens as texts, mapped local narratives, created marketing campaigns for local non-profits. Tom also received a email from an incredulous think tank member who asked, “Do you really want to give this generation of college students relief from writing college essays?”

Years later, looking back on our work, we think: “yes, yes we do.” And “relief” is a fitting word. Those essays are needlessly stressful, arid work — for both writer and reader. There’s no texture, no hook; nothing animates them. They serve as stock exercises in a form that as one colleague of ours has noted, is not replicated anywhere outside of academia. And that is where we are sending many (if not most) of these students — beyond the bounds of academia. So what are we preparing them for? And how are we preparing them for it? Short essay assignments can still play a role but over-reliance on the form does not serve students or faculty best.<sup>3</sup>

## Why is this a librarian problem?

Although most librarians may not assign short research papers, we are often brought in to provide instruction or reference to assist students. As advocates for information literacy, we have a stake in whether these types of assignments help students build the skills we wish them to have. That is: does a short research paper help students learn to do research?

In short, not necessarily. Among the findings of [the Citation Project](#), sophomore students often cite the first page of a work, and rarely cite any source more than once in a paper, suggesting cursory engagement with texts.<sup>4</sup> The work of [Project Information Literacy](#) around employer satisfaction with recent college graduates further suggests that students don’t always get the skills required in the workplace. As one of their employer-participants explained, “They do well as long as the what, when, why, and how is clear in advance.”<sup>5</sup> Although we are wary of focusing on the interests of employers, this statement also raises questions about how students will handle other research and critical thinking outside the classroom. Whether making personal medical decisions, researching local ballot initiatives for an election, or flirting with a potential partner on an online dating site, an inquiry isn’t over simply because you found your three references or reached a word limit.

Unfortunately, librarians often find themselves simply reacting to assignments, rather than advocating for projects that will purposefully build student skills. The chapter titles of the popular *One-Shot Library Instruction Survival Guide* allude to common problems of faculty non-collaboration: “they never told me this in library school,” “the teaching faculty won’t/don’t...” “but how will I cover everything?”<sup>6</sup> Despite lamentations of the one-shot, many librarians cling to it as the only scrap of contact they can get with students in the classroom. Even embedded librarians well-integrated into a course may have very little role in assignment design.<sup>7</sup>

There may be a gap in perception between faculty and librarians. In an ethnographic study of faculty who were heavy users of library instruction, Manuel et al. found that library advocates sometimes had opposing motivations to librarians, for example showing little interest in lifelong learning or critical thinking as goals for library instruction.<sup>8</sup> As one of their informants explicitly stated, they bring students to the library because the research paper is “the basic goal of the course.”<sup>9</sup> Faculty may also assume that students will learn research skills simply by doing research, and leave out clear information literacy or research outcomes from assignments.<sup>10</sup>

The most successful librarian-faculty relationships occur when there are shared goals.<sup>11</sup> However, as in the case below, the common ground may not be immediately visible. Nalani Meulemans and Carr describe a program targeting new faculty members, with clear aims to shape their expectations for library instruction.<sup>12</sup> Creative thinking on the part of the librarian can help unearth potential for greater collaboration, but it also requires willingness to be flexible and make active suggestions. Combining clearly articulated learning needs with new and interesting library services can lead to fruitful adventures.

## What is the point? Developing successful assignment types

In our view, the most successful assignments meet two criteria. First, the assignment type fits the learning outcomes and skills being developed. Although this may seem obvious, we believe that archaic assignment types are often selected by rote. A new graduate instructor or junior faculty member is handed a stock syllabus for an introductory level course and is encouraged to maintain the status quo with respect to assignments because the clock is ticking on time to degree or tenure. The pressure to reach professional objectives outside of teaching become reason to cling to the “tried and true” assignments of the 20th century. Research paper assignments fit some learning outcomes and skills — for example, writing in an academic voice or learning a particular citation style — but certainly not all.

Second, successful assignments are placed within a context broader than the course. Students, like anyone else, shape their work to fit their audience. Although not every quickwrite or draft must be shared broadly, when students understand that their work contributes to a larger project or could be seen a wider audience, they tend to take it more seriously. At worst, it’s a vanity concern in which students don’t want to look bad; at best, it imbues them with a sense of relevance that extends beyond the bounds of the classroom.

Of course, there are research paper assignments that meet these two criteria. A research paper can be a part of a broader scholarly conversation on a topic, or at least a stepping stone to a student’s contribution to such scholarship. But few of our students will go on to become academics, and so the question arises: what do they get out of this “academic” practice? We found that the answer was little that cannot be replicated in assignment formats more relevant to students’ future professional lives.

## Case study: Archives Alive!

So that’s where we were in 2013: tired, bored with our assignments, suspicious that we were not fully delivering the course objectives, and worried that we were merely reinscribing old methods onto our students who were poised to be citizens of the 21st century and needed, badly, to be able to move nimbly amidst its various forms of communication.

**Tom:** I was a non-tenure track lecturer in the Rhetoric Department, and co-directing a Provost-funded student success initiative with my friend and colleague Matt Gilchrist. Called Iowa Digital Engagement and Learning (IDEAL), the program was designed, in part, to help instructors rethink existing assignments and make them more digitally and publicly-inclined. Our thinking was that students needed to be honing digital composition and public engagement skills. Part of the departmental mission was to train students in writing, public speaking, and research.

**Kelly:** The library’s crowdsourcing transcription project, [DIY History](#), had huge success with the broader public, thanks in part to [a viral post on Reddit](#). People from all over the world were transcribing digitized archival collections, but the materials weren’t necessarily getting used on campus, let alone in the classroom. My colleague Jen Wolfe approached me to see if I had ideas about departments that might be open to developing something new using the pioneer letters in DIY History. Rhetoric seemed like a natural fit because their assignments often involved analysis of a text, and because I had strong relationships with several of their lead instructors, including both Tom and Matt. It helped that the two of them were known to

be open to quirky suggestions, so we asked if they wanted to pilot...something.

**Tom:** And of course, Matt and I said yes.

**Kelly:** The first few planning meetings had an open-endedness that was both refreshing and intimidating. For the usual one-shot, it is very rare to have any say in what an assignment looks like, since the syllabus is generally set long before the librarian is asked to come in. I think library instruction is often brought in as the clean-up crew when an early assignment goes wrong — *yikes, my students don't know how to research, please help!*

**Tom:** In my teaching at the time, research remained the last of the skills I introduced to my students. We grappled with reading, writing, public speaking, analysis....and research. And this after-the-fact approach irked me. Research became a sort of window dressing for students rather than the foundation of their work. They were seeking sources to hang on their arguments, rather than building those arguments on the sources they had read and analyzed. For a long time, I had been thinking about ways to better thread these skills together. The letters in DIY History presented a different way to engage students in research. The letters themselves were not necessarily making pre-formed arguments, and I chose not to introduce them with much more context than: let's look at these intimate writings from other people in history. The approach relieved (or robbed) students of the impulse to tie their arguments to ready-made contexts. Much of the curriculum at the time encouraged instructors to use controversies as a means of getting students to understand the complexity of making an argument, to recognize the myth of argumentative dichotomies, the need to evaluate sources, etc. I was prepared to set that approach aside in favor of simply letting students dig into primary sources that they *might* find engaging. I asked my students to do the following things:

1. Transcribe the letter.
2. Rhetorically analyze its content (why did the letter writers choose the words they did?) in a 400-word blog post.
3. Historically contextualize the letter (what historical content is present in the letter, or barring that: what was going on globally at the time) in the same blog post for another 400 words. The intent here was to locate this letter in a real moment and possibly juxtapose the local with the global.
4. Create a two minute or so “Ken Burns” style video that walked the viewer through any aspect of the letter that the student found interesting.
5. Live present their findings to the class using any visual medium they found appealing (PowerPoint, prezi, etc.) but not simply show their videos.

The intent was to get them conversant in rhetorical analysis, writing, research, public speaking, and digital composition – all in the same assignment (while also helping create a searchable index of these texts for scholars).

**Kelly:** During the very first pilot, my own assumptions about one-shots limited what we did. Students had already looked at a few of the letters, and seemed really excited about the project. I had prepared [a research guide](#) for the assignment, and we used that to navigate to the finding aid for the archival collections the letters came from. It was a total buzzkill! Students were confused by the format, and suddenly felt intimidated by the formality. We moved on to explore historical newspaper collections, and asked students to try to find an article from the date of the letter they were looking at, and their joy started to come back.

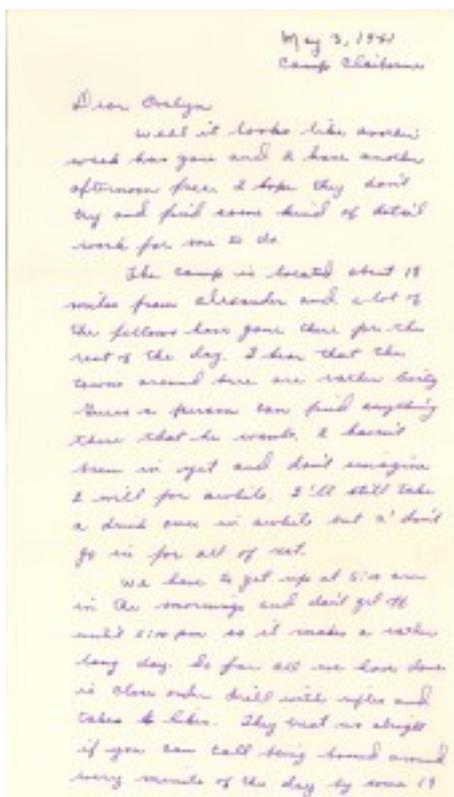
**Tom:** We should point out here that one of the reasons for the return of their joy was reading old newspaper advertisements. Students were intrigued by the fact that people a hundred years earlier advertised and purchased things like hats. Hats became a simple hook to the past.

**Kelly:** But, it was a good challenge to my assumption: did they *really* need to understand how to use the finding aid to complete the assignment? No, as much as my archival studies profs would hate to hear it, they really didn't. The purpose of the assignment was to do a rhetorical analysis of the letter, with very minor historical context. Some students would come back and use the contextual information later, but it was secondary. Overwhelming students with the arcane form of the finding aid did not serve them well. These weren't history students, and our goal wasn't to make them into historians — or even to make them feel like historians.

**Tom:** Right. We wanted to use the primary source material to foreground the work of rhetorical analysis against the backdrop of historical research. After all, I was expected to be teaching them rhetoric — the art of persuasion. In many cases, analyzing the rhetoric of the letter also required researching contemporary idioms and terminology. I should also point out that the letters fostered remarkable collaboration. Cursive, for example, brought out the cooperative spirit in them. We worked on transcription in class and when students had difficulty reading a word, we would put it to the class to essentially crowdsource an answer about what was written there. Was this scribble an “s” or an “f”? I was impressed by the problem-solving groupthink that possessed them.

**Kelly:** By the second term we ran the assignment, we had expanded to three sections. That term, students in all sections looked at letters from [a single scrapbook collection](#). This approach had a serendipitous peer-evaluation factor where several students in each section read letters from the same group of half a dozen American men serving in WWII. The students' curiosity about filling in the gaps in these narratives or between references and words they understood and those they didn't, led them to connect their work with that of their peers.

**Tom:** I will admit to being deeply suspicious about using such a small set of letter writers. I thought I'd be hearing the same names and the same stories and views over and over again. I was sure we were running the risk of replicating an assignment along the lines of asking students to weigh in with their views on the drinking age or the legalization of recreational marijuana use. I couldn't have been more wrong. In class and during their final presentations students questioned one another about their shared letter writers. They asked things like: “When was that letter written?” or “Had he already said this to Evelyn?” as they pieced together a larger narrative.



May 3, 1942  
Camp Christmas

Dear Evelyn  
well it looks like another  
week has gone and I have another  
afternoon free. I hope they don't  
try and put some kind of detail  
work for me to do.

The camp is located about 15  
miles from Alexandria and a lot of  
the fellows have gone there for the  
rest of the day. I hear that the  
tents around here are rather big  
- even a person can find anything  
there that he wants. I haven't  
been in yet and don't imagine  
I will for awhile. I'll still take  
a drink once in awhile but I don't  
go in for all of that.

We have to get up at 5:00 am  
in the mornings and don't get till  
until 1:00 pm so it makes a rather  
long day. So far all we have done  
is blow our shells with rifles and  
take a hike. They treat us alright  
if you can call being around  
every minute of the day by some 13

**Kelly:** Evelyn Birkby, the woman who had donated the scrapbooks, ended up agreeing to do a phone call with one section, which I sat in on. It was truly an experience in rhetoric as these students carefully tried to ask this 94-year-old woman about the nature of her relationships with all these men 70-plus years ago. She later expressed to the curator of the [Iowa Women's Archive](#) that she was delighted to know that her materials were being used, not just sitting in storage somewhere.

**Tom:** These letters also introduce some content that is more immediately graspable for our students. The soldiers mention films, music, and plays. The students can relate to those things — but they often don't know the works being referenced. So, boom: there's a research question. And they love it. Pop culture references, military lingo, idioms all become portals for analysis and with it: research. Tellingly their [blog posts](#) (a form that I think produces a more compelling and earnest *voice* than formal papers which often encourage stilted language and overwrought syntax) improve. They *care* about what they are writing and about the people writing the letters. As one student commented, "This project taught me that when something interests you, it never really feels like research as much as it feels like learning more about an old friend or uncovering hidden, exciting secrets." Another student talked about wanting to read the letters of their deceased grandfather as "good bonding experience for us." And while our students have chafed against the videos, they do admit to enjoying the sense of accomplishment upon [seeing their arguments in documentary style](#). Their presentations are also a delight to watch. They interrupt one another, they go over time with questions, they carry on conversations after class about the letters and Evelyn's connection to these men. They consider themselves (mild) experts on their letters. And they feel they have contributed to the scholarly enterprise. At the very least, they have transcribed letters for other scholars, making those handwritten texts searchable. I'll note here that one question I often get when discussing this assignment is: "Isn't this just student labor?" To which I often reply that nothing is more laborious for students and instructors than the rote five-pager. And why adhere to an assignment model that pretends to include students in the experience (that Dewey objective) of scholarly work, when we can use one that actually does?

**Kelly:** It definitely requires ongoing maintenance. Once a collection is fully transcribed, it can't be reused for the assignment. It has taken conversations each term with the library staff who really know the collections to identify good fits for the assignment, and then the assignment gets tweaked to fit as well.

## Other examples

Lately, we in the UI Libraries have been working on calling attention to little used or little seen collections. We've commenced a Collections to Courses initiative that tries to bring the holdings of the Libraries into broader circulation in the classroom. For instance, like our colleagues at [Notre Dame University](#) and [The University of Pennsylvania](#), we are identifying and promoting public domain holdings that can be openly remixed by students. And, in turn, we are encouraging students to archive their remixes with the library for future remixing. We're interested in creating intellectual feedback loops where students create knowledge that will be stored by the Libraries and those works can in turn be used by other scholars (students and faculty alike). We've also begun archiving student works produced by the [Iowa Narratives Project](#) in our institutional repository, [Iowa Research Online](#). That project asks students to work in groups and create eight-minute podcasts out of an interview with a local citizen. Students must make audio recordings, edit them in the style of, say, [StoryCorps](#) or [This American Life](#) or [RadioLab](#), take photographs, and write a brief paragraph of context for the interview. In our experience, students often compose essays in one take. It's four in the morning, they've just tumbled a bunch of text onto the page and...damn, it's perfect (in their exhausted eyes). By contrast, no students edit like the students asked to make an audio recording of themselves. We find that students do not readily edit their own writing in the same way they do their multimedia. Students making audio recordings of their own voices, for example, will do multiple takes

without any prompting — they know what sounds good. So what if we used assignments that highlight editing of multimedia as a gateway for helping them understand why and how to edit writing?

## The recipe (we think) for librarians to propose this kind of change

For librarians interested in pursuing this kind of pedagogical change with instructors, we have some suggestions for successful collaborations.

1. **Strategize.** Consider your target. Are there faculty/instructors who are known to be willing to experiment? Folks who are big advocates for the library? A course whose instructors are particularly grateful for help from instruction librarians? Or perhaps there are courses whose regular assignments produce groans every term. At the University of Iowa, all students are required to take a course titled “Rhetoric,” which is meant to introduce students to the art of persuasion. In that course, many instructors, students, and librarians alike lamented the long-standing paper-about-a-controversy. Those lamentations were an invitation for new ideas. By targeting shared frustrations and overlapping objectives, instructors and librarians were able to jointly remake the assignment in a way that better achieved their goals. If you can think of projects that both advance the library’s goals and instructor and student need, you’re likely to have a better chance of lasting success. Archives Alive! helped promote our digital collections in the classroom while hitting multiple course objectives tied to Rhetoric.
2. **Advocate.** Consider the possible motivations of the people you approach. Will they see this as the solution to a perennial problem? an innovative feather in their teaching cap? a hassle this late in the term? an opportunity to give back to the library? However you package your suggestion, be clear about your intended role in the project. Meulemans and Carr recommend practicing answers to hard questions from faculty, so you are prepared to stand up for yourself in the moment.<sup>13</sup> If you’re afraid of a tough interaction, roleplay with colleagues who might have helpful feedback.
3. **Work backwards from your objective.** If you’re going to rethink an assignment, think first about what it is supposed to do. Not along the lines of “it’s supposed to generate a paper” — but rather along the lines of “what do you want your students to be able to do?” If you want your students to become better researchers, think about what that means to you. What is a better researcher able to do? Once you have a sense of what it is you’d like as in end product (in terms of skills), work backwards towards the assignment prompt.<sup>14</sup> Ask yourself what steps the student will need to take to wind up at the desired end point. In the case of Archives Alive! we wanted to arrive at a live presentation on a topic of interest to the student that had been reasonably researched. And of course, “of interest” and “reasonably researched” don’t make that endpoint particularly easy to attain. Working backwards also better allows you to anticipate the time needed to work through each step in the assignment process. Unlike simply assigning a paper with draft and final due dates, our assignment included due dates for component parts of the assignment. This approach helped students lay the foundation for their eventual live presentation by completing one part of the assignment at a time.
4. **Be honest.** When you ask students to undertake new assignment models, be honest with them. Tell them this hasn’t been done before. Acknowledge that there will be bumps in the road. And tell them that they will be your troubleshooters. As they walk through the assignment, the problems they encounter will help the next semester’s students. This goes for interacting with faculty, too. There are costs associated with implementing new assignment forms; they take up time both in and out of class. So remain flexible when navigating a faculty member’s approach to the project, and find ways to be generous of your own time and resources.
5. **Promote.** Once your students have crafted these engaging, enlightening, and entertaining works, share them. Get them out of the classroom to present in a more public setting. At Iowa, we have had tremendous success getting classes to share their work in our Learning Commons within the Main Library, an open space that gets a lot of foot traffic. And to the extent that the works are digital, circulate them on the internet. Call attention to your hard work and that of your students, by

inviting faculty and administrators to come listen to your students' presentations. Celebrate their effort by trusting that it is something the public will find interesting.

6. **Take risks.** Let go of your assumptions of what library instruction means. For Archives Alive!, we went into it without really knowing what the assignment would look like. It took a lot of conversation to clarify the goals of the instructors and of the librarians, and to brainstorm about how to get all those goals met. For students to interact fully with the documents, we had to let them focus on deciphering the cursive, and let the finding aid wait for another time.
7. **Reflect and repeat.** Examine how things went, make adjustments, and try it again. Whether or not you can reuse the assignment as developed, it has certainly taught you something, and hopefully broadened your network of connections on campus. Both of us have developed a reputation for willingness to experiment, which draws otherwise unexpected opportunities.

## Conclusion

Ironically, the Archives Alive! assignment helped us bury the myth that the Rhetoric course was where University of Iowa students learn *all* their research skills. By intentionally designing an assignment where students engaged with primary source materials, we uncovered necessary scaffolding that was otherwise being left out. We also got students to better understand research as an engaging and ongoing endeavor rather than a set number of citations. This experience has given Kelly more confidence to set limitations with faculty who expect a whirlwind one-shot to solve all research woes.

It has also opened up collaborations within the library, as the folks who work with digital collections, special collections and archives have to communicate and brainstorm. And this partnership isn't dependent on personal relationships: a host of collaborations have continued although both Kelly and Jen Wolfe, the other librarian involved at the start of the project, have left the University of Iowa. This work also led Tom into the library, where he now heads the [Digital Scholarship & Publishing Studio](#).

Each of us has also had misfires in suggesting new projects: assignment designs that bombed, instructors who balked at making changes. However, the process of proposing and brainstorming remains a necessary one. At its root, education is about curiosity and the experience of seeking out answers to our questions. For us, asking questions of our assignments and looking for new, innovative ways to shape the curriculum has been incredibly rewarding — and brought with it some much needed relief from the five-page paper and its host of dated, restrictive, and staid trappings. We encourage you to usher in a similar sense of curiosity and relief as you and your students explore what new forms the 21st century has to offer.

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3. A 2010 Project Information Literacy study on research assignment handouts found that 83% of the undergraduate research assignments in their study pool were plain old research papers. [?]
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