



Moving Students to a Research Topic & Guiding Them to a Thesis Claim

To motivate students to begin research papers, some teachers require students to propose a thesis assertion before they begin researching. Some teachers even require a draft of an outline of the paper. However, scholars recommend having students first choose a topic for the paper, using a question or problem to research.

Avoid Having Students Create a Thesis Before They Have Completed Significant Research— Instead, Have Students Identify a Problem or Question to Guide Their Research

In the early stages of research, students have no “real grounds for making such a claim” as a thesis statement (Witte, n.d., p. 227). “When students are required to submit a thesis claim at the beginning of their research, they often use research to verify their own assumptions” (Wierszewski, n.d., p. 232). In contrast, when a researcher has a question, “it’s logical to see if and how others might have answered the same question . . . they are investigating; however, that information serves as a starting point for researchers, who then ask further questions” (Witte, n.d., p. 228).

Help students understand that research is a process:

- (1) seeking information that is new to the researcher,
- (2) interpreting, evaluating, and organizing that information, and
- (3) reporting that information to others to [encourage] some action. (Witte, n.d., p. 228).

“Another potential harm of the thesis-first model of research is the attendant assumption that the research process is linear. In a thesis-guided research process, a question is posed, an answer is generated, and sources are found that match up with that answer. Truthfully, research rarely progresses on an uncluttered path toward a clear solution. Instead, research is a recursive process that involves many diversions, bumps, and missteps” (Wierszewski, n.d., p. 232). Unfortunately, this process is difficult for students. If they begin researching with “a narrow and rigid focus on [their] thesis, they can become discouraged and inclined to abandon [their] ideas when the research process does not unfold neatly” (p. 232). If students do not find sufficient evidence to support their original thesis, they may give up and start over with a new topic.

Students might learn more if they begin research with a question or a problem. Then, they could research as a “process of discovery” rather than simply to “back up [their] pre-existing assumptions and prove [they are] right about something” (Wierszewski, n.d., p. 232).

Create Thesis Claims After Students Have Researched a Problem or Question

Although many academic institutions recommend starting student research with a thesis claim, “genuine inquiry—the kind of research that often leads to new ideas and important choices—tends to begin with unsettled problems and questions, rather than with thesis statements and predetermined answers” (Wierszewski, n.d., p. 232).

“Student research needs to shift from finding and confirming the student’s preliminary ideas to solving problems and answering questions in new ways” (Witte, n.d., p. 229).

As the university becomes more invested in the importance of “Information Literacy” for Church members (see the Church Handbook), a small group of BYU faculty have been studying and applying the literacy document created by the Association of College and Research Librarians (ACRL). [I believe we will learn much more about this document in the coming months.] ACRL claims that “research often begins with open-ended questions that are ‘based on information gaps or reexamination of existing, possibly conflicting, information.’ In other words, research isn’t just for backing up our hunches. It can, and should, also be used as a method of investigating areas of uncertainty, curiosity, conflict, multiple perspectives” (Wierszewski, n.d., p. 232).

The ACRL’s framework also emphasizes that as researchers seek to address their research questions, they will discover points of disagreement. Researchers then need to analyze how they support or challenge their original assumptions (Wierszewski, n.d., p. 232).

After Students Have Completed Significant Research, Consider Providing a “Template” to Help Students Draft a Thesis Statement to Reveal the Paper’s Organization

Many models can help students understand how to create a statement that provides the overview for their paper. One common method is **QSR** [Qualification Stance Rationale]. For example,

Qualification: *“Although mindfulness training has been implemented into Cognitive Behavior Therapy sessions for adults, [students often ignore research that is contrary to their claim; this formula requires students to be aware of conflict on a topic and to acknowledge it]*

Stance: *elementary school students may benefit from learning how to use mindfulness to combat depression*

Rationale: *because the basic elements of mindfulness are easy for children to understand and to implement.”*

The FHSS Writing Lab is happy to help your students with any step of the writing process from brainstorming to the final revisions.

References

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