

## The term paper is disappearing

By Tara Malone

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The high school research paper, that academic rite of passage riddled with footnotes and anchored by a bibliography, has faded from many classrooms, a consequence of larger class sizes that leave teachers with more students and less time.

Several Chicago-area high schools have dialed back the paper's length requirements and instead emphasize the research process and weighing of sources, a critical skill in the digital era, teachers say.

Others skip the extended assignment entirely in favor of shorter, intermittent papers, while some allow students to showcase their research with PowerPoint presentations and Web pages.

But students could miss out on key research and writing skills that help them succeed in college as a result, contend several historians and professors.

"I figure if you write a serious history essay ... you've broken the ice of scholarship," said Will Fitzhugh, the founder and one-man force behind The Concord Review, which spotlights the best high school research papers. "But we're sending kids to college without that experience."

Timothy Gilfoyle, chairman of the history department at Loyola University Chicago, estimated that fewer than 10 percent of his students wrote a history research paper in high school that drew on primary sources and spanned 10 pages.

So to give freshmen a taste of historical research early in college, Gilfoyle assigns a 10- to 12-page paper as a take-home final exam in his freshman survey class. He offers to read and edit an early draft of the essay for students willing to rewrite and rework it for their final grade.

"They are less capable of writing long papers of 10 pages or more. It often requires more remediation on our part to explain and encourage them to submit rough drafts," said Gilfoyle.

Some Chicago-area high school teachers say they are emphasizing more modern methods of presenting research.

"I can't honestly say we are still engaged in that old-style, 12-plus-page literary research paper," said Jack Bowyer, chairman of the English department at Barrington High School. "We allow for it to take other approaches."

While some teachers in the northwest suburban school still assign a literary analysis that requires students to consult sources, develop an argument and write at length, others ask teens to research an issue drawn from their own surroundings, interview experts and write with a more informal tone about their conclusions. Whatever the final format they use, Barrington 11th-graders must complete the research project to pass English.

Students who still are tasked with writing — and rewriting — term papers confront the assignments in English more often than history.

Lake Park High School recently revived a research paper requirement after more than a decade after graduates of the Roselle school said they wished they had done more research and in-depth writing while there.

In the past, 11th-graders who failed to submit 15 to 20 pages of research and analysis risked failing the junior English course, according to district policy at the time.

"It was an albatross," English curriculum leader James Salter recalls. "I remember being the new guy on the block, and I kind of looked around and said, 'Is this like a root canal for everybody else?'"

So in 1998, Lake Park dropped the tried-and-true term paper, allowing students to present their research with speeches, PowerPoints or even Web pages. The research paper did not return in any great length until this fall, when seniors were required to write a five- to 10-page document in their English courses. This spring, they'll write another one.

Other schools are proud to have held on to the time-honored term paper.

"I think the research paper is so traditional it's cutting edge," said history teacher Paul Horton at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. Research papers by four Lab students were featured in the two most recent editions of The Concord Review in what Fitzhugh called a rare feat.

New Trier High School assigns a junior theme paper that spans six to eight weeks of research with intermittent deadlines, assignments and teacher conferences, English department chairman John Cadwell said. Students consult a blend of primary and secondary sources, and no, Wikipedia does not cut it. Length varies, but most final works hover from six to 12 pages.

Cadwell said teachers routinely demythologize the assignment for incoming students who've heard accounts from older classmates or even parents who attended the North Shore powerhouse.

"For many people in this community, it's sort of a badge of courage, having gone through it," Cadwell said.

At Niles West High School, students have long confronted the assignment as seniors.

This year, though, educators in the Skokie school sought to make standard the criteria by which all papers are judged. Sanlida Cheng, the school's director of English and reading, said teachers will consider a student's writing — from the language they use to how they construct an argument — and research, including the quality of their sources, citations and evidence.

Senior Michael Dawson, 18, of Lincolnwood, studied whether Roberto Clemente, his favorite baseball player, could be considered a tragic hero.

Dawson spent about a month reading biographies and other accounts of Clemente's life, flagging relevant sections with a system of color-coded sticky notes. He drafted the eight-page paper during winter break and emailed a final version, complete with a precisely punctuated bibliography, to his teacher. It was the first paper he'd written with works cited as they would be in college.

"Once you get to senior year," he said, "then it's all about the research paper."

In 2002, Fitzhugh persuaded the Albert Shanker Institute to fund a survey to find out how many public high school teachers assign history research papers. With state standardized exams increasingly affecting how students, teachers and schools are measured, he wondered if the traditional term paper might be lost.

About 95 percent of the 400 high school history teachers surveyed said they thought it was important for students to write a research paper, saying it improved students' research, writing and thinking skills, the study found. But six of every 10 said they never assign a paper longer than 12 pages.

Time played a leading role in the disconnect. About 27 percent of teachers cited the time required to read and correct papers as cause for why they did not hand out more term papers. A third said they spend 30 to 60 minutes grading every assignment, according to the results.

Fenwick High School assigns teachers a lighter load of classes in a nod to the intensive writing that students must do and that teachers must grade. English teachers at the Oak Park school shoulder four courses rather than the standard five, said Richard Borsch, associate principal.

"I want spaghetti sauce all over the paper. I want corrections so they learn," Borsch said.

For his part, Fitzhugh of The Concord Review offers a basic formula to promote scholarly writing in high schools. He calls it the page per year plan, under which a student would write a page for every year he or she is in school that draws on an equal number of sources and culminates in a 12-page paper by senior year, 12th grade.

And, he quipped, students must focus on a topic other than themselves.

"Let's give teachers exemplary work to show other kids, and they'll step up their game," he said. "We do that in athletics all the time."