

# Cupping the Spark in Our Hands: Developing a Better Understanding of the Research Question in Inquiry-Based Writing

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## Abstract

*This article serves to highlight the unique position the research question holds in inquiry-based research writing. Inquiry-based educational theories (see Dewey; 1910, Bruner; 1962, Ballenger; 1997) contend that learning begins with the act of questioning. Research writing remains especially challenging for many first-year college students (see Larsen; 1982, Carroll; 2002, Alsup; 2002). The author conducts a two part study of writing inquiry-based research writing samples and concludes that the inquiry-based research question should be treated as text in its own right and as such should be approached through process writing. Students should be encouraged to pre-write, draft, and revise their research question before they begin their research project. In this article the author discusses the writing sample study, and possible strategies and pre-writing exercises based in low-stake imaginative writing genres like fiction and poetry as a method of teaching first-year writing students to form inquiry-based research questions which are focused and well-developed.*

The key to wisdom is knowing all the right questions.

— John A. Simone Sr.

## Introduction

In *The Companion Website for the Curious Writer*, Michelle Payne describes the process of inquiry as “begin[ning] with the premise that students and teachers are collaborators in learning, creating knowledge together through the questions they ask and the methods that best help them answer them.” Inquiry theorists, including John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, and Bruce Ballenger contend that the act of questioning is central to academic inquiry. We begin with questions; we focus on the process of inquiry, of searching, of trying something in a way that is new to us. Yet first-year writing students are rarely taught how to craft well-developed questions as part of inquiry-based research writing.

It is my contention that because the research question holds a unique position in inquiry-based research writing it deserves special consideration in the first-year writing classroom. According to inquiry-based education, the research question acts both as the driving force of the inquiry process and as a focal point in the finished product. In “Skating Backwards on Thin Ice,” Ballenger says, “At the heart of inquiry—and essay writing for that matter—is finding the questions that make even the most mundane topics come to life” (103).

Students can benefit from learning to craft a well-developed research question because it will allow them to better engage in the inquiry process, to create more focused products, and to better understand research writing as artistic and imaginative. Because the research question is so important to the outcome of an inquiry-based research project, it should be taught not as a pre-writing strategy for the researched essay but as an important text in and of itself. Students benefit from crafting their questions through a process of pre-writing, drafting, and revision. In this article I will discuss my research of the inquiry-based research question, which includes an analysis of anonymous student samples, a unit I designed and taught to a summer class of English 101 students, and an analysis of the papers those students produced.

## Inquiry Theory and First-Year Writing

Students are most often introduced to inquiry-based research writing during their first year because first-year writing classes offer an ideal environment for students to focus on writing as the content of their classes rather than as a vehicle to better understanding the class material (Ballenger, “Skating Backwards”; Lauer; Harrington). In a first-year writing class we often concentrate on *how* to write, rather than on *what* to write. While doing so, we should also focus on learning how to write good questions in addition to learning how to write *about* good questions. Because inquiry-based writing is utilized by writing programs across the country in an effort to engage students in writing research (Ballenger, “Skating Backwards”; Boyer Commission; Lauer), it also offers an ideal opportunity to teach students to craft and develop questions as a writing process.

Even though the inquiry-based research question is acknowledged to be crucial to the inquiry process, the actual act of crafting a good research question is often glossed over, or mentioned only briefly as part of the pre-writing stage of the project. This may be due to the assumption that students already know how to ask questions, or perhaps we simply assume it is a skill they will pick up over time. Whatever the reason, students are often given little direction but are expected to find, come up with, or decide on a question quickly and to use that question to direct their research.

Yet students need to understand both the purpose of the research question and the language and syntax that inform how questions are constructed. They should have a clear understanding of the difference between surface questions, short-answer questions, and complex questions.

Like many students, I was introduced to inquiry-based research as first-year writer. Professor Arnold, my English 101 professor, asked us to read “The Bothersome Beauty of Pigeons” by Bruce Ballenger in our text, *The Curious Researcher*. It read sweet-coffee smooth, painted pictures of a Europe I longed to see, and offered up lines like, “Pigeons are punks. Looking them in the eye, I’m sure they know this but they just don’t care” (16–17). In all seriousness, he told us the “pigeons” piece was research. He told us a researched essay was a style of writing that encouraged the exploration of questions, a way to better understand something that interested us. He told us it would be more interesting, more personal, and more fun to write than the research papers we remembered from high school.

But to me the research essay felt contradictory, like a mythical beast made of bits and pieces of genres I knew but they were mixed-up in a way I had never seen before. It had the voice and heart of a personal essay, the backbone of a research paper, and a wild exploratory spirit. I had no experience with such a paper and no idea where to begin. Professor Arnold told us we would “begin with a question.” It was the first time I had heard that phrase and I remember wondering what it meant. I would continue to wonder every time I came across a researched essay, and eventually that wondering influenced the research that led to this article.

In class we worked through a few pre-writing exercises. We made lists of questions, we questioned each other’s questions, and we drew spider graphs, free-wrote, and then sallied forth to the library. I chose fairy tales and folklore as a topic and wrote three drafts. I did not begin with a question. If asked to articulate a question from the nebulous thought process I employed to write that paper, it might be something like: What’s up with fairy tales?

The first draft was about my family folklore. The second was a mangled overview of European fairy tales, and the finished draft was a long-winded conversation about the effects of fairy tales on children. I decided to write the third draft because I could add the question “Are fairy tales good for kids?” which was a requirement of the paper. In every draft I diminished, my voice faded in an effort to balance what I cared about and what I thought of as research. I earned an A on the paper but the project left me frustrated and unsure of what makes a good research essay. To this day I wish I’d kept and reworked that first draft.

This is not a unique story. Academic writing is hard to learn and hard to teach. First-year writers struggle to understand what is expected of them and to execute it (Carroll; Alsup and Bernard-Donals). In a longitudinal study of first-year writers, Sommers and Saltz said, “Students are asked as freshmen to leave something behind and to locate themselves in the realms of un-certainty and ambiguity” (126). First-year writers are asked to leave behind the safety nets of formulaic writing and asked to use writing as a mode of learning rather than a mode of recording, at the same time they are expected to, as Lee Ann Carroll points out, “be able to write fluently and correctly on any topic, at any time, in any context” (1). This leaves them unsure of their writing skills, their voice, and their ability to contribute to the discourse. It makes it very tempting to fall back on what they know, which is fact, figures, and reporting information. David Bartholomae points out that students have to “invent the university” by an immersion process, by being tossed into a new environment where they bluff, pose, fake, and mimic their way into an understanding of the discourse. However, there are skills that cannot be faked; they must be understood and practiced. Asking questions is one of those skills.

In addition, research just doesn't feel interesting or personal to most first-year writers. They struggle to understand research writing as artistic or imaginative. In the article *When All Writing Is Creative and Student Writing Is Literature*, Wendy Bishop documented attitudes students held toward writing. Simply put, they believed creative writing was fun and interesting, and fact-based writing, assigned writing, and writing research-based projects were boring. Her students felt there was a divide between composition writing—what Bishop called “bread and butter” writing—and creative writing—what she called “jelly.” Like Bishop, I believe that our “bread and butter” is given flavor with a little “jelly,” and our “jelly” gains substance when mixed with “bread and butter” (192-202).

Bruce Ballenger documented many of the same attitudes. In *Beyond Note Cards: Rethinking the Research Paper*, he wrote, “What they [students] seem to believe most of all is that ‘facts’ poison prose; any writing that deploys research has got to be dull, dull, dull” (101). And he points out that the inquiry-based research essay offers a format that encourages the mixing of both the substance of good composition writing and the flavor of creative writing.

I agree with Bishop and Ballenger. First-year writers need to understand that academic writing isn't all “bread and butter” and creative writing isn't all “jelly”; the two intermingle. They need to understand that all writing, including research-based writing, has the potential to be creative. However, I also understand why it can be difficult for young writers to embrace research as artistic or imaginative. Like Bishop, I think “writers need classes that allow them to take risks and experiment with prose, and they need to see similarities between the types of composing they do, adding a little jelly to their bread and butter writing” (28).

I see the act of asking and writing questions as just the place for “jelly” in the “bread and butter” process. Crafting research questions opens up a place in the process to be artistic, to be imaginative, because it forces students to think about what is unknown. It opens a space to write about the things that interest us, to ask why they interest us, how they interest us. It opens a space to experiment with our writing. A student might write a poem about his or her research interests, a personal narrative may illuminate why he or she cares about the research topic, or a short story might spark ideas of experimentation or hypothesis. The possibilities for imaginative and artistic approaches to the act of questioning are endless. But first, students need to understand that a great question isn't written in one try any more than a great essay, article, or story.

### **First-Year Writers and the Act of Questioning**

As a first-year writer, I had a great deal of trouble articulating my thoughts as a question. I could never find the right words, or the right form to write a clear question. I observed many of my fellow students struggling in the same way. When I began this project for the McNair Scholars Program (a program designed to help prepare first-generation, low-income, or underrepresented students for graduate studies), I found I was struggling again; my question was nebulous and amorphous. I knew I wanted to better understand first-year writers, and I knew I wanted to find ways to encourage first-year students to engage more fully with research writing. To do so I needed to begin at the beginning, so I looked more closely at how I was taught to write research, which led me to writing about the inquiry process. Yet I continued to find myself getting stuck. I still didn't understand how to begin with a question. Instead, I began by diving into the discourse, searching for a focus, a compass.

I came across a case study called “Learning to Question for Inquiry” in which Marian Martinello paired graduate students and children of grade school age and asked them to devise a research project and write a paper. She found that children often lacked the syntax for constructing complex question. They had trouble creating questions even about topics they picked, and they gravitated to yes or no and short-answer questions. She found that her students lacked a process or system of refining or revising their question, and they lacked an understanding of the purpose or point of asking good questions. I saw myself and my struggles in her students, and I wondered how many first-year writers would recognize their own struggles in this study.

I began to see that I expected a question to start out well formed, to begin well developed. I realized that I had never considered revising a question, not in the same sense I would revise a paper. In revising a draft I would reimagine the draft, changing entire passages and concepts, reorganizing or even beginning fresh on a section I wasn't happy with. I had been asked revise my question in my scholars program but I didn't revise, I edited, exchanging one word for another, cleaning up grammar. I never rethought, reenvisioned, or rewrote my research questions.

It wasn't until I was writing my concept paper, and then my research proposal, and then my first drafts that I began to see new and interesting questions surfacing from my on-paper musing. Once I had spent some time reading and learning about what interested me about inquiry-based research writing, I began writing from ideas. Unfortunately, I would then turn around and try to fit those ideas into the confines of my original questions instead

of revising these to fit my evolving understanding of my research. Once I began to see this pattern, I realized my struggles were due not to my lack of research skills or writing skills, but due to my lack of questioning skills.

Once I began to treat my questions the same way I wrote a draft, through pre-writing, drafting, and revising, I began to develop an understanding of the purpose of asking good questions. I began to see how they would connect to my research process and to my finished product. In the process of writing my questions I finally began to understand why beginning with a good question is so important in inquiry-based writing. Which led me to wonder how first-year writing students understood the act of questioning. Do they understand how to craft a question? Do they understand how their question influences their writing? Or do they expect good questions to simply spring to life fully formed and ready to be researched?

Joop van der Schee, a Dutch scholar, also noted the difficulty students had with writing good research questions. In an article titled “How to Train Students to Formulate Good Research Questions,” he looked at research writing in Dutch curriculums. The goal was promote a “more active and independent learning.” However, “in Dutch education there is no long tradition of writing research papers . . . [so the] article . . . reports on the first Dutch experience in the field” (245–47). In an effort to better understand the research process and the act of questioning, several experiments and approaches were tried.

One involved simply having students develop a project and asking them to concentrate on choosing a theme, formulating a central question, formulating two sub-questions, and making a plan. Seventy percent of those students found formulating their central question difficult. In a second experiment, students were asked to write research papers mixing geography with history; they were given instructions and had access to coaching via instructors. Nine out of ten of those students showed “a low level of competence in formulating central questions” (251). In a third experiment, students were given an extensive handout explaining the research process, criteria showing them what was expected of them, and some mapping exercises to help focus their central question. This produced better work, but the students continued to struggle with evaluating what made a good central question.

This article simply reinforced my belief that many students do not understand how to craft a question, they have no process for writing a question; they lack the language, syntax, and semantics of well-developed questions. It also strengthened my contention that a well-developed research question can help students navigate through the process of inquiry by sparking their curiosity, providing them with a filter as they gather information, and providing a lens through which to question, discuss, and unpack that information. In the drafting and revising process, the research question can act as a starting point and lens, helping students navigate the challenges of organization. By taking the time to teach students to form a good question through a process, giving them a chance to understand the purposes a good question serves, and letting them experiment and explore their own beliefs, ideas, and curiosities, we can offer them a chance to take risks, be imaginative, and develop a better understanding of the inquiry-based research process.

## **Doing the Research: Methods and Findings**

In order to better understand how students dealt with the act of questioning in their writing, I gathered samples of researched essays from my mentors, from old portfolios, and from an online publication of first-year writing produced in by my university. I read over one hundred researched essays looking to see how students wrote questions, why they asked those questions, and how they discussed those questions. I made no judgment on the quality of the writing or the content, focusing only on how the student dealt with questions. I was granted permission by the intuitional review board of Boise State University to conduct this research and the essays I used were either from portfolios or from an online publication of first-year writing. Permission was granted for any student work quoted in this article.

### **Findings from the anonymous student samples**

Three key points surfaced from my samples:

1. Students who wrote about their questions, rewriting them throughout the work, ended up with better questions.
2. Students who voiced their reasons for asking their question and understood their personal stakes in the project produced better questions.

3. Dealing with information, particularly finding and utilizing sources were clearly areas of difficulty for many students, but the students who articulated a good line of questioning often seemed to use those questions as a way of interacting with their sources.

## Organization in the anonymous student samples

Broad, undefined questions like “What is wrong with us?” or “What is pain?” were common in my sample. These questions, about the topic of mental disorders, were undefined and undeveloped.

The student who asked, “What is pain?” started by discussing types of disorders, then the drug industry and how it may or may not impact the rise in mental disorders. She speculated about the relationship between mental disorders and changes in culture and society. Eventually she focused on depression on the second-to-last page. She just kept writing questions throughout the paper. She eventually came to a more focused question, “Why are so many people depressed?” through her conversation about mental disorders and through refining her question as she was writing. This student’s paper was particularly interesting because of the heroic attempt she made to categorize and focus her discussion of pain. She worked so hard to categorize her information but never came to a question or line of questioning that might have helped focus her topic.

Another trend that emerged in my review of the student samples was the tendency to explicitly state a question and then write a discussion on something else entirely. For example, one student asked, “Why do we love to be scared?” and then wrote a personal exploration of a local haunting. She never attempted to revise her question.

After reading these papers, I could see that the students lacked a process of revision for their questions, and since their questions often remained undeveloped and vague, those questions were of little help to them in their research. I’ve added a list of questions asked by the students in the papers (see appendix I)

## Personal stakes in the anonymous student samples

Two things that stood out to me were the students’ desire to explain their reasons for their questions and their desire to write about something they cared about. They narrated family stories, talked about tragedy and turmoil, fear and stress. The more they wrote about their stakes in their questions, the more curious they seemed to be to find answers. For example, one student’s mother was a teacher and watching her mother struggle with the demands of the No Child Left Behind laws prompted the student to question the laws’ validity. Throughout the essay she relies on her observations of her mother to prompt her questions. Another student’s negative experience with voting made him wonder if he was too young to vote. He writes, “I feel with a few more years of the adult life and experiences, as well as finishing college. I may one day vote but for now I have too much going on to know the issues, and who is running.”

I saw this tendency to make the research question personal as an opportunity, a possible way of helping students better understand research. If they understand their own motivations, they might develop a deeper curiosity about the world around them, which might encourage them to write more complex questions and search out answers about topics that matter to them.

## Sources used in the anonymous student samples

The most prevalent trend I saw in the samples was the tendency to ask questions that are easily answered. These papers felt like a one-sided conversation, like catching bits and pieces of a passerby’s cell phone call. These are yes or no questions, short-answer questions, questions that are answerable only by opinion or speculation. These types of questions offer the writer no way to navigate the discourse, no way to decode what the sources are saying, and no way to filter all the voices discussing the topic. For example, one student wrote about horses but never articulated any questions, problem, or conflict. Without a clear question, he had no guide to the information about horses. How can any student be expected to navigate all the information and sources available without a focus point?

It was clear to me that students needed to understand what part a question plays in research and a better way to write questions so I designed a mini-teaching unit about the act of questioning to use in the classroom. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to teach that mini-unit to a summer English 101 course on my campus.

## Textual Analysis of Classroom Samples

The English 101 class consisted of thirteen first-year writers and an excellent instructor, who assisted me in my research while expertly guiding her students through a vigorous and demanding curriculum. This study was conducted under a number of limitations, including a small sample set of finished products, a small group of student participants, and a very short period of time. The assignment the students were given called for research essays that discussed some aspect of higher education. The students had a two-week period to complete the unit. I was able to collect only rough drafts. All of the students were informed of the research in the beginning of this research, but because the research was part of the planned classroom activity they could not refuse to participate however no sample, taken, read by me, or used without a consent form.

The unit included:

- A PowerPoint presentation and discussion of the purpose of a research question, the syntax and language used in creating a question, and the ways a well-developed research question can help guide the research process.
- Two writing prompts that utilized low-stake genres, including poetry and narrative (see appendix II). The prompts were used to guide the students through the pre-writing, writing, and revision process.

Throughout the unit, I observed the students' process of questioning from the beginning to the end of their research unit and collected their prompt responses and finished essays. I observed and helped them to develop a question, research that question, and rewrite the question, all before they actually began working on the researched essay.

As with the anonymous samples, several key points surfaced during the reading of the classroom samples:

1. These students began with well-developed questions and the information they gathered was more focused. They rarely rewrote or revised the question in the finished product.
2. Throughout this sample set, students referred back to their questions. They talked about why they posed their question, they talked about their process, and they talked about the difficulties they encountered in their research.
3. These students navigated the information with a clear guide and rarely got bogged down in the discourse.
4. The most interesting trend I saw among this sample was the number of students who made statements indicating how they might approach or go about further research if they had more time.

After reading my classroom set and working with this group of students, I am more convinced than ever of the value of inquiry-based writing. I am also more convinced that one of the keys to making inquiry-based writing engaging for first-year writers is to help them to write good questions.

### Organization in the classroom student samples

In the beginning of the research unit, my co-instructor built a spider graph with the words "higher education" in the center and asked the students to suggest sub-topics or research ideas. They responded with terms like empowerment, sports, family, and challenges. She then asked them to ask question about these terms and they asked questions like, "Is college empowering to women?" Next she asked them to define a researchable question. She drew two columns on the board and asked them to define researchable questions versus other questions.

They responded by saying a researchable question is one that isn't easy to answer, or isn't a yes or no question, or isn't a big question like "Is college good?" They said a researchable question should have sources and should be relevant. The instructor then gave a few verbal examples of researchable questions before they began writing their questions. At this point I began my unit.

I asked the students to begin with writing a question. Even though they had discussed the act of questioning, when they began writing their questions they wrote short-answer questions or yes and no questions. They used terms like "is" as in "Is college empowering?" or "are" as in "Are drugs causing dropouts?" or "how" as in "How does college build confidence" I asked them to rethink those questions using phrases like "in what ways?" "what is the relationship between?" and "how might x cause y?" I also asked them to consider which questions might be more helpful in their research.

My first step in helping the students refine their questions was a PowerPoint presentation about the purpose of a good question. I gave them examples of how a good question would contain a direction for their research. For

example, instead of “Is college empowering to women?” I asked, “In what ways can a college education empower a woman in the job market?” I pointed out that this question contained a demographic (women) and a relationship (college and the job market) but was open enough to allow for exploration and interpretation.

Next we talked about the language and syntax of asking a question. I asked them to consider the difference between a question like “What is the relationship between sports and academic success and how might it affect students in their first year at college?” and a question like “Does playing a sport help students succeed?” I pointed out the difference between “what is the relationship” and “does,” explaining how the first one offers more room for exploration while at the same time focusing the research. We also discussed cause and effect questions, such as “How does binge drinking affect the freshman dropout rate?”

Next we discussed what I called the basics of a research question. I asked them to look at these questions and see if they could answer them about their research question.

- Who is the question about?
- What relationship, phenomenon, situation, or aspect of the “who” is the question about?
- What kinds of information might you need to explore this question?
- Where might you find this information?
- How can this question help you organize your paper?

Then I asked them to rewrite their question. In the second set of questions they struggled with syntax, asking questions like “How might college empower women who are coming back to school?”

Next I had students work through a series of prompts (see appendix II) intended to get them thinking about their interests, their curiosities, and their topics. At the end of each prompt they were asked to rewrite their question. We also spent a day at the library, where their instructor set up a session with one of our librarians. The librarian walked them through different types of sources and showed them how to locate library material. At the end of the day they were asked to turn in their final version of their question.

At this point I also explained to them that questions often change during research and reminded them to rewrite their question if they came across information that changed the course of their research. What I saw during this time was that it wasn’t until the students had a chance to discuss and write about their interests that their questions began to take a more distinct shape. One of the most interesting things I saw in these samples was that students used their questions in their opening statements in their final project (see appendix II). For example, one student wrote, “How does education empower a non-traditional female student in the U.S. today? That seems to be a big question in today’s society with so many non-traditional female students returning to school.” Another began with, “When I had made the decision to write about patriotism and what we learn about it through higher education, I had to stop and ask myself, what does patriotism actually mean?”

Others gravitated to personal narratives that set up their reasons for asking these questions, as the following example illustrates:

I didn’t want him [my father] to read it. I wished I could have turned back the clock by nine months. I don’t know what I was thinking by lying to my dad about my school status. “I did great, Dad. Boise State is an easy school.” I continued to spin this thought to my family for the entire course of my *first* go around at Boise State University. Unfortunately, the school year had to come to an end some time.

This student had asked, “How does Hispanic culture affect Hispanic college students?”

Another student wrote, “I did my first line of ‘coke’ at BSU in the late 1970’s. College campuses were just getting over the aftermath of the 60’s, peace, love, harmony and free spirits and free sex; free meaning, free from being committed to a relationship.” This student had asked, “How are Boise State university students affected by drugs and alcohol?” Throughout each of these essays, the question remains a constant, unifying thread tying their writing together.

This isn’t to say that students didn’t struggle with organization or writing or grammar, as they do in any writing class, only to say that once most of them gained a better understanding of the act of questioning, it positively affected their work. Overall, the students who had a well-developed question to begin their project seemed more engaged in the research. I’ve added a list of the questions students asked. (see Appendix I)

## Personal stakes in the classroom student samples

One of the most compelling trends in both samples was the students' tendency to talk about themselves, to tell the reader about themselves, about why they care about the research. In the classroom sample, this tendency really took over in some cases. A number of essays were explorations of personal questions. One student asked, "How would my life be different if I were a traditional student without all of the responsibilities of raising kids and having a family?" This student discussed learning new things about himself and students like him through his research. Throughout the essay this student questions his own ability to succeed as a nontraditional student but eventually comes to the conclusion that his life experiences could be motivating, making him a stronger student than he might have been at eighteen.

These personal insights and discoveries are a big part of what the research essay is supposed to be and when students find a personal stake in their questions, when they have the time to explore themselves as well as research on a wider level, they synthesize information at a deeper level than if they were doing one or the other exclusively. This is not to say that all of these students were able or willing to make the writing about personal discovery. As in my anonymous sample, there were two students of the thirteen who wrote a question on the first day and never revised or explored it.

## Sources used in the classroom student samples

One trend I was extremely pleased with was my students' use of sources. They used mostly scholarly articles and they used them well. For example, one student wrote:

In my mind I knew I had made the right decision and that I would be able to keep up. Nancy Shields has done a very good job of encapsulating the feelings some older students have: "... the findings are interesting in light of stereotypes of 'nontraditional' students—for example, feeling 'too old' to be a student, feeling academically inferior to traditional age students, feeling out of place on campus, and so forth."

Another student wrote:

[My father] told me to think about my nieces and nephews who look up to me. What would they think if not even the great Uncle Junior could pass college? I needed to set an example. A family tradition of graduating college must be started. Lionel Sosa, author of *The Americano Dream*, states that one factor as to why Hispanics don't attend/complete college is because, "... we see so few of our own earning diplomas, we do not have a frame of reference for the possibilities" (Sosa 90). My family and community need to see a familiar face finishing college.

I believe these students handled their sources as well as they did largely due to the amount of time their instructor and one of our librarians spent in the library with them helping them to understand how to differentiate sources and how to read them. But I also believe that part of the reason these students were able to engage with their sources as well as they did was because they started with questions that helped them to sort through a vast amount of information. Having a clear, well-written question in mind for a research essay is crucial to the process. It is also crucial that students understand that a good question is the result of a process.

## The unexpected trend

The unexpected trend I saw in the classroom samples was the number of students who speculated on what they would do if they had more time. The fact that students wanted to continue researching, wanted to better understand their projects, surprised me. I expected them to be thrilled just to be finished with their papers. One student writes, "I have to close this paper now, because I am out of time. . . . I have so much more to talk about and I want to share with you the discovery I made. . . . I will use this information to develop a strategy of prevention for my addictions study class next week."

To me this is what teaching inquiry-based writing is all about, cupping that spark of interest in our hands and blowing it into real academic curiosity. It's about watching our students grasp the idea that inquiry and research are one way we experience the world, how we come to new knowledge: it's how we change the world around us.



We teach our students in the hope that they will further the academic conversation, in the hope that they will surpass their masters, in the hope that each new generation will make the world a better place. Inquiry-based writing is one of the best tools we have to help students be academically creative, academically curious. Many teachers, like Bruce Ballenger, have generated and sustained the spirit of inquiry through innovative and inventive teaching methods, showing us how important it is to begin with a question. The next step is ensuring that our students understand how to create a well-thought-out, well-developed, carefully crafted question.

## Cupping the Spark

At last count this project, which began in the fall of 2008, has, from concept to final draft, undergone something like twenty-one revisions—each of them a true re-vision where my ideas and questions were turned upside down and inside out. I began with so many question and ideas, mountains of information, and valuable input from my instructors, my mentor, and my peers. There were times when I was sure I would never find my way to the end of the journey. Perhaps I can honestly say this project really began when I was a first-year writer questioning what it meant to begin a research project with a question. That the sparks began to fly when I was struggling to write a paper in which my voice wasn't overpowered by facts, figures, and sources, a paper that I felt led me to something wonderful. And now I can finally say I understand what it means to begin with a question.

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## **APPENDIX I: Questions the Students Asked**

### The anonymous samples

- Will you ever grow up?
- What is wrong with us?
- When you look back at your childhood, what do you remember?
- What is the impact of media on our children's behavior?
- Is \$65 a lot of money?
- So who did discover America?
- But just how safe and useful are the sidewalks of Meridian?
- What were my experiences with death? How did I deal with them?
- Social Security: economic security or government pyramid scheme?
- Why does one event have multiple stories depending on who you talk to? And more importantly, why would someone tell the story inaccurately on purpose? What are they trying to make the audience feel?
- Why do people choose to take these [immigration] risks?
- Are cell phones driving [you] crazy?
- How do we suffer gracefully? Is there an art to [suffering?]

### The classroom samples

- What are the challenges and reasons for non-traditional female students to seek empowerment by returning to school?
- What measures do universities have implemented to better accommodate soldiers through their time in a higher education setting?
- How does gender affect an ideal learning environment?
- Does drug and alcohol abuse between the ages of 18–25 have long term effects?
- How are Boise State university students affected by drugs and alcohol?
- How do sports affect university life?
- University is for me or not? What are the problems of widening participation in Higher education. [This student's first language is Chinese and the student struggled with syntax and grammar.]
- Should American born children of undocumented Latino immigrants be allowed to attend university?
- How does Hispanic culture affect Hispanic college students?
- What are the effects of affirmative action in higher education?
- What effect does higher education have on patriotism?
- How does higher education promote patriotism?
- What factors might impact gay men so that they are more successful in the academic sense?
- Are there any new ideas about the grading system that will revolutionize this seemingly robotic way we look at education?
- How would my life be different if I were a traditional student without all of the responsibilities of raising kids and having a family?

## APPENDIX II: The Prompts

### Focusing your topic

Please fill in the blanks.

Your research question or topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Rewrite it by filling in the blanks:

I want to study \_\_\_\_\_ because I want to better understand \_\_\_\_\_.

Can you state your topic in the form of a question? For example, can you fill in one or more of these blanks?

What is the relationship between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_?

How does \_\_\_\_\_ affect \_\_\_\_\_?

Why does \_\_\_\_\_ affect \_\_\_\_\_?

Why does \_\_\_\_\_ cause \_\_\_\_\_?

What causes \_\_\_\_\_?

What causes \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_?

Does your question generate more questions? Please write 3–5 questions your topic brings to mind.

What does your topic question suggest to you about organizing your paper?

Check anything on this list you think apply to your topic question.

My question will generate a lot of information.

My question will help me decide what information to use and what not to use.

My question will lead me to new ideas but may not be able to be answered.

My goal is to write a paper that will answer my question.

My goal is to write a paper that will better help me and my readers understand my question topic and its significance.

Rewrite your question in your own words, but make sure it is in the form of a question.

### Writing prompt #1:

Poetry is an act of distillation. The short space of a poem often forces us to decide what is most important to us about our subject. Your subject is your topic question. Write me a poem. It can be any type of poem, or just free verse. What is important is to get the most important aspects of your subject on paper. Underline what you think are the most important lines in your poem. Then rewrite your topic question . . . Has it changed?

### Writing prompt #2:

Part of being a writer is finding new angles to view the world from. We draw inspiration from personal experience and from the things that are important to us. All writers suffer from an enlarged ego, no matter what form, style, or format we are writing in, we find ways to make it about us. We find ways to make it important, relevant and significant to our lives, our opinions, our beliefs. Be as egotistical as you can be. Make it all about you. Tell me why you want to write about your topic then rewrite your topic question . . . Has it changed?