

Creating Saturation Research Papers in the ESL Classroom

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Introduction

ESL students, regardless of grade or proficiency level, seldom enjoy writing research papers. While students might find it interesting to read information about a topic or person of their choosing, they often find the note-taking, organizing, and information compiling processes tedious. Even after being guided through the whole research process, many of them become frustrated at having to use pseudo-academic language, having to quote sources, and not being allowed to be creative. The saturation research is a happy-medium where the students get to research about a chosen historical figure, then write about them in a creative, fictional manner.

What is Saturation Research?

A saturation research paper is, in a sense, historical fiction. To write this specific piece of historical fiction, students have to engage in research and look for information on their chosen topic. However, it is not a re-telling of history, as fictional elements can be added. A student could, for example, write about Abraham Lincoln, a historical figure, and how he wrote the *Gettysburg Address*. The *Gettysburg Address* is real, but the student would add fictional elements on how he became inspired to write it. The end result of a saturation research paper is a fictional work with historical elements. The historical elements include historical figures, events, and dialogues, while fictional events may include perspective and inner thoughts. Some good topics could be George Washington's thoughts after chopping down the cherry tree or a day in the life of a famous actor, which would be based partly on his real life.

While the saturation research is time-consuming, it is also rewarding, both for the teacher and the students. Since it is the students who choose the subject on whom to write about, they do not feel additional pressure from the teacher to write about a specific figure. Teachers' rewards come when they see the final products of the research: creative historical fiction that demonstrates student knowledge about a specific person.

In order to have students write a saturation paper, teachers must guide students through five basic steps.

Step 1: Hunting Down Information – Preparation Process

The first step to take when writing a research paper of any kind, even a saturation research paper, is to engage in research. To do this, the students should first choose a historical figure, like for example Dr. Samuel Johnson, to write about. Although the teacher can make suggestions as to whom to write about, the final decision should lie with the students.

After choosing the target of the research, the student should look for as much information on the person as possible. Once again, the teacher can aid the students in the hunt for information, point them in the right way, give them web-sites, and, if possible, even have a web-site or link-list with links to articles and biographies about the people that students most often choose to write about.

During this stage, teachers should give students a mini-lesson on how to make references using APA, MLA, or Chicago, the three most used formats in the academic world.

Once the students have all the information they need at their disposal, they must begin saturating themselves with it.

Step 2: Absorbing the Information – Saturation Process

The saturation process is the easiest, most simple, and possibly most tedious of all the processes. It is during this stage that students have to read biographies and articles about their chosen historical figure, take notes, and absorb, or saturate themselves with, all the information that they have.

Step 3: Choosing a Specific Moment in the Life of the Subject and a Narrative Voice – Pre-writing Process

Once the students have immersed themselves in the reading material, there are two ways of proceeding with the saturation research paper. If the purpose of the paper is to look at the historical figure from a more factual than creative point of view, students can choose a specific event in the life of their chosen figure and write as if they were the character. In this style of report, students will write in a first person narrative style how the historical figures felt during that specific moment (e.g. George Washington's thoughts as he cuts down the tree). Another way of approaching the historical view of the research is to have the students imagine themselves as spectators in a specific event and write about what happened as if they had actually been there (e.g. Someone who was witness to Martin Luther King J.R.'s speech). These two ways of writing allow for imaginative creativity in part of the students, but also focuses on historical events.

If the purpose of the saturation paper is to have the students engage in critical thinking or analyze the actual characteristics of a certain historical figure, students could take a historical figure and place him or her in a modern-day setting, then writing about how their chosen personas feel when confronted with present-day situations (e.g. Dr. Samuel Johnson, the smartest man of the 18th century, meets in a modern-day university to converse with Noam Chomsky, who is considered by many as the smartest man in present-day academia). By writing this kind of paper students will have to engage in an in-depth study of the character traits of their chosen person, analysis of style, and even think as their chosen character would.

The narrative voice must either be first-person narrative or third-person narrative. Each style has advantages and disadvantages. Students could choose to write as the characters or as a witness to a specific situation involving their chosen characters. While the first-person narrative style is easier to write when compared to a third-person narrative voice, students must engage in extensive amount of research, often looking for additional material besides what was already read in the previous step, in order to truly master and internalize the voice of their chosen character. However, the third-person narrative style requires less research, as the student could choose to write as himself witnessing a specific event in the life of their character, but the actual writing of a third person narrative is slightly more difficult than a first person narrative. Often, students attempting to write in a third-person narrative voice will shift back and forth between first and third person.

Before deciding on an event and voice, teachers should inform students of the advantages and disadvantages of both.

After the students have decided what they want to do, teachers should guide them through the pre-writing process. Brainstorming and freewriting are good ways of getting the students to start writing, as they often like the simple way of organizing thoughts with brainstorm diagrams, as well as the idea of writing whatever comes to mind without having to worry about a grade.

Step 4: Organizing Ideas, Outlining, and Making Drafts - Writing and Editing Processes

This fourth step, possibly one of the steps that students find the most tedious (along with step 2) revolves around a single task – writing. The completion of this step revolves around a series of tasks, instead of just one. First, students have to organize their ideas. To do this, they look at their brainstorm and free-writing papers and think critically about what they wrote. Some guide questions to be used during this stage are “What do I want to say?”, “In what order can I present my ideas?”, and “Am I getting the point across?”

By the time students are able to make an outline, their topic should say something like “My thoughts as he cut down the Cherry Tree”, to then focus on George Washington's thoughts as he cut down the tree, “My Tour of the Hebrides”, which would talk about Dr. Samuel Johnson's trip through Scotland, or even a more controversial “Reflections of my life, by Martin Luther King J.R.”, which would focus on Dr. King's thoughts as he was gunned down. Once students have organized their ideas on a clean sheet of paper, they have to make an outline. In the outline, students will divide their ideas into topics and sub-topics. They can use their chosen

character's history as a main topic, their feelings as another, and their actions for a third, then elaborate on each of these topics by adding sub-topics. If there is enough time, teachers could have students do a rough outline and a final outline.

Once their outlines are completed, students will engage in the actual writing. Their papers should demonstrate that they know about their character's lives, speech (if applicable), behavior, and other personal aspects. For example, it would be unacceptable to have Martin Luther King Jr. think that a violent revolt should be carried out to fight for equal rights, but it would be perfectly acceptable to have Dr. Samuel Johnson hit a man with a large book then step on his neck, something that he actually did in real life and then describes to his biographer James Boswell in the following manner: "Sir, he was imperitnent to me and I beat him. But it was not in his shop: it was in my own chamber" (Boswell, 45). During this stage, students will write an initial draft which will be corrected by the teacher, then returned so that the students can fix the errors. How many times the students hand in their drafts is up to the teacher.

Students should keep in mind that they are writing AS IF they were their chosen topic, from the perspective of their character living a moment.

Step 5: Making a Final Manuscript – Publishing Process

Once the teacher returns the students' final drafts with all the corrections, the students will write final versions of their saturation papers. Even though it is in part a creative paper, a saturation research paper is still a research paper. Because of this, students should adhere to the standard size 12 'Times New Roman' font. Their work should be double-spaced, and all their references should follow the same format. The final work should be graded in terms of creativity, evidence of research, writing style, and writing voice, just to mention some of the criteria that might be used.

Possible Modifications to the Saturation Research

Even though ideally the saturation research should be written from the point of view of a historical figure, some modifications can be made in order to keep students interested. Students can be given permission to write as if they were a fictional character instead of a historical figure. However, when doing this, students should be reminded that their fictional figure must have a substantial amount of story in order to be accepted as a topic. For example, Darth Vader, from *Star Wars*, has a substantial amount of history behind his character. He was originally Anakin Skywalker, a child conceived by no man, who was supposed to bring balance to the force. He enjoyed pod-racing, and often put his life on the line to help others. His love for Princess Amidala is what led him to the dark side, where he served the emperor and eventually had to fight his own son. His tale is one of betrayal and redemption. In addition to the *Star Wars* movies, there can be found a substantial amount of information about Darth Vader, as well as an enormous amount of fan-made videos which depict Darth Vader in different stages of his life. Just as Darth Vader has a substantial amount of history behind his character, so do the characters Naruto, from the animated television series of his own name, Rand al'Thor, from Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* book series, and Ryo Hazuki, the main character from the *Shenmue* video game series. All of these fictional characters, to mention a few, would make good research subjects for a saturation paper. However, characters like T-1000, a fictional assassin robot in the movie *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, 'Bahn', a character from the game *Fighting Vipers*, or even Raz the Destroyer, a violent character in Ralph Ellison's masterpiece *Invisible Man* whose only purpose is to create revolts are not fit subjects for a saturation paper due to the lack of information on them. The same steps as described above for historical figures should be taken with fictional characters.

Another possible way of having the students write their saturation papers is by encouraging them to imagine themselves as a spectator in a historical event. For example, instead of writing as Abraham Lincoln as he gave the Gettysburg Address, students could write as someone who was present at the Gettysburg Address. Although this gives students more creative freedom, as they can now write as themselves, it takes away from the research of the paper, as they would not have to look for as much information on their topic as they would if they were writing as someone other than themselves.

A third take on the saturation paper is to take a historical figure out of their own time and place them in a different time and place. For example, a saturation paper could entail Mr. H.G. Wells, author of *The Time Machine*, traveling back in time to take Alexander Pope, the best English poet of the early 18th century, even further back into the 16th century to chat about literature with Miguel de Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote* and one of the best writers in the Spanish language. Another variation could have Noam Chomsky, a theoretical linguist and one of the brightest men in the world of academia in the 20th century, according to many, have heated discussion about language with Dr. Samuel Johnson, lexicographer, literary critic, author of the dictionary that defined the

English language for over 150 years, and the brightest man of the 18th century. This version of the saturation research involves more work than any other version, as students would have to absorb not only their chosen topic's attitudes and behavior, but also their language, and then imagine what would the reaction of their chosen topic would be to completely fictional events that never happened. This translates to research about the main historical figure, research about any other people they might run into, and research about the event in which this historical figure will be placed on (Shakespeare in Woodstock, for example).

Conclusion

In the end, saturation research is a tough, yet rewarding activity. Although certainly this is by no means an activity to be used in introductory ESL classes, it is ideal for upper-intermediate ESL students, as well as for university writing courses. Students enjoy becoming their favorite historical figures or fictional characters. Since they will be doing research and writing on someone whom they like or admire, students often enjoy the long hours of work.

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