

## NINE

### “A Certain Kind of Seduction”

#### *Integrating Archival Research into a First-Year Writing Curriculum*

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One of the perennial challenges of the composition classroom, now a hallmark of first-year college education in the United States, is the research paper. Students and instructors both complain in evaluations and published academic articles that the rigors of the assignment are too great to cover in the one- or two-semester allotted for composition instruction.<sup>1</sup> Students must learn quickly to navigate their school libraries and databases, intuit and practice research as a process, compose parts of drafts and discard them when new evidence fortuitously presents itself, revise research questions, and read much more material than they will ever use in their papers. Teachers must stem the frustration created by these elements in order to teach research methodology alongside fluid writing style and sensible organization. In short, this assignment is as difficult to teach as it is to design and grade.

But rather than attempting to simplify the assignment in the face of these frustrations, Brooke Champagne, the assistant director of first-year writing at the University of Alabama (UA), and Amy Chen, the Council on Libraries and Information Resources (CLIR) postdoctoral fellow in charge of instruction at UA's Division of Special Collections, decided to complicate these issues even further. Following the former director of the California Rare Book School Susan M. Allen's injunction to offer college students “a certain kind of seduction,”<sup>2</sup> we chose to collaborate by re-

quiring Brooke's first-year students to locate and analyze special collections materials with Amy's guidance as a part of their research process. We discovered that while this strategy can compound the challenges of the traditional research paper, it also amplifies the rewards.

During summer 2013, as Brooke began to prepare for the two sections of honors first-year writing she would instruct over fall 2013, she concluded she wanted to incorporate primary source research into her syllabus. Her idea to use special collections in her class came after reading Erik Larson's *Devil in the White City*, which follows the events surrounding the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.<sup>3</sup> Brooke thought the nonfiction text, which reads like a novel, could become a primary course reader, as it modeled a combination of compelling narrative with extensive primary research. What impressed Brooke the most was the "Notes and Sources" section that concludes the text, in which Larson describes his research process:

I do not employ researchers, nor did I conduct any primary research using the Internet. I need physical contact with my sources, and there's only one way to get it. To me every trip to a library or archive is like a small detective story.<sup>4</sup>

In the age of students' reliance on Internet research, which, in many ways, eliminates their sense of wonder about their chosen subjects, Brooke found it fascinating that a book could be written using only physical items. Brooke thought by reading the book and emulating its technique on a scaled-down level, her students would learn not only how to compose compelling college-level writing but also how to combine research with analysis. Furthermore, she hoped that her students could realize how to write engaging nonfiction narratives that went beyond the relatively dry and prescriptive style of academic composition.

But this idea was as challenging as it was unconventional. Larson's text was certainly not one of the standard readers used to teach composition at Alabama. Brooke suspected that her first-year students would be uncomfortable writing a creative essay that also incorporated rigorous and, for them, unfamiliar research methods. Additionally, Brooke never had conducted archival research herself, much less taught students how to use it.

In order to assess how to bring her concept into the reality of the classroom, Brooke contacted Amy to ask for help. Amy moved to Tuscaloosa one month earlier to begin her fellowship after graduating with a PhD in English from Emory University. At Emory, Amy worked for five years in the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL). As a graduate student, she also designed and taught her own upper- and lower-level undergraduate English courses, all of which incorporated primary source materials.

When Amy held her first meeting with Brooke in July 2013, she was unfamiliar with the collections at Alabama but excited to hear Brooke's concept of teaching creative nonfiction writing alongside primary source research. Amy thought that while special collections pedagogy frequently centers on how best to meet the needs of undergraduate humanities researchers, it had yet to find a way to nurture beginning researchers in a wider range of disciplines. Likewise, Brooke saw composition instruction teaches writing and research methods, but often neglects to introduce students to working with primary sources. So, despite the short timeline we faced, both of us felt comfortable working together. We began to make plans to incorporate using special collections materials into Brooke's fall 2013 syllabi with Larson's book, providing the inspiration for the class project her thirty-six students would face.

## PLANNING

Planning how to incorporate primary source research into the syllabus for Brooke's two sections of honors first-year writing went rapidly; given our time constraints, we had to develop the writing assignment using a combination of what worked for each of us in the past. Amy developed a best resources guide to describe the collections available to students for their projects while Brooke applied a scaffold method to break the project down into smaller steps more appropriate for beginning researchers. Additionally, we aligned our approach with the learning objectives and assignment types dictated to all instructors in the first-year writing program.

The major research assignment directed students to mimic Larson's method by choosing a single historical figure that would provide a suitable foil for exploring a larger story or theme. To support this approach, Amy generated a best resources guide highlighting fourteen historical figures who each had their own collection in the Division of Special Collections. Students could choose to work on the same person and collection as a classmate if they wished because their research was intended to be driven by their personal interest on a specific, narrowed portion of that person's history. However, we agreed that students were not allowed to tackle more than one person for the topic of the paper, as we wanted students to practice focusing their analysis on close reading a few primary documents, rather than attempting to understand multiple collections at once. Amy made the decision to preselect collections but not individual items for students to examine. Asking these first-year students to select their own subjects from the hundreds of collections available in UA's repository simply would be too high of a learning curve. We knew that declining to preselect items within the collections featured on the guide would still induce a difficult experience for the students, but we

were eager to provide a more flexible and intensive seminar than traditionally is given to first-semester students.

Amy had created similar resource guides for the classes she taught at Emory that more closely adhered to best practices in special collections pedagogy, which emphasizes students working with fewer items, especially when they are early in their education.<sup>5</sup> However, Brooke's class was designed with a different goal in mind: students were composing a creative rather than a purely analytical essay, and learning how to work with a broad range of primary sources was an essential part of the assignment. As a result, we believed it was important for students to make their own determinations about which items were most relevant and, in the process, learn how to explore entire collections themselves.

The best resources sheet for the class included a short biography of each individual whose collection could be used for the assignment, the location of the collections, and guidelines for asking for additional help. As the division of special collections at UA is split into two branches—the A. S. Williams III Americana Collection and the W. S. Hoole Library—Amy not only had to provide a manuscript number or reference number but also indicate in which branch the collection resided to remind students where they would need to visit.

It was critical at this point to teach students that the procedures of working in special collections as part of a class will differ from their experience using general collections. Our guidelines emphasized the need to email for an appointment prior to coming to the reading room at either Williams or Hoole. While both collections are open to the public and do not require appointments to use, they have more limited hours than are available in the main campus library. With a smaller time frame for visits, we also knew it would be important to regulate the number of students that came into either reading room at one time. We did not want multiple students requesting the same box at the same time since we did not mandate each student work on a different collection. Additionally, we needed to avoid swamping the reference desk as, at UA, only one staff member and page serve the reading room at a time.

We also structured the assignment to allow Brooke's students, who were new to both college-level writing and primary source research, to scaffold from one skill to the next in order to meet the project's objective. This decision required breaking the project into seven distinct phases: brainstorming a thesis, outlining the paper, meeting for individual conferences with Brooke, presenting to the class, submitting a rough draft, participating in peer review, and then completing a final draft. These tasks were timed to maximize their pedagogical impact. Brooke opted to require a focused research question to be given to her about two weeks after distributing the assignment. A preliminary draft of the essay, consisting of an introduction and informal outline of body paragraphs, was scheduled to be due one week later. Conferences were conducted just

before rough drafts were turned in, several weeks into the research process. In these conferences, students pitched their project by discussing which facet of their subject's life they planned to cover and how they wanted to structure the narrative.

Then, during research presentations, which took place during the drafting and peer preview process, students discussed their project focus and narrative ideas with their peers. Part of the peer audience's participation grade depended on their taking notes and asking questions of the presenters, which helped presenters identify the gaps in their prospective narratives. A first full rough draft of the paper using ten sources, half of which should be from special collections, would be due soon after. Rather than using parenthetical citations, as is typical in a Modern Language Association (MLA)-style research paper, students employed endnotes that would contain source citations as well as an explanation of how they were using their sources. Then the process of drafting and peer reviewing would continue for about three weeks until the deadline for the final draft.

As Amy is the editor for *Cool@Hoole*, the Division of Special Collections' blog, she also wanted to give one student from each section of Brooke's class the opportunity to publish his or her paper and be interviewed on the blog about his or her research and composition process. Brooke chose the two students who would be featured by selecting the top project from each class, which could then be used as models for future student work. The idea to interview selected students, as well as publish their work, came from "The Apprentice Researcher," which describes the significance of following what Carol Kuhlthau describes as a students' "information search process."<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Bonnet et al. calls the same technique a way to create "literacy narratives" that discuss how "your ideas and methods changed and responded to your research."<sup>7</sup> Because surveys like the ones administered by Kuhlthau and Bonnet so effectively articulated the challenges students face, we decided to follow their general guidelines by including the following questions for our blog interview: What were students' first impressions of special collections? How did they conduct research? What problems and opportunities did they encounter? What would they say to future students given a similar assignment?

Many of the questions we asked of students on the blog reflect one of the mainstays of the composition classroom, "writing as a process," which is in turn supported by the concept of "the arc of the semester," in which writing skills and goals are recursive, both building upon one another and continually revisiting lessons already covered. What we mean by writing as a process is rather self-explanatory: each major writing assignment is thought of less as a final, finished product and more focus is paid to its constituent parts. The final papers ultimately comprise the bulk of each student's grade, but much time is spent in and out of

class working on the process, from research question to source hunting to thesis to outline to introductory hook to first draft and subsequent essay drafts, with many revisions of all elements of the project in between. Along the way, each paper evolves as students master new steps and processes.

In the case of this particular assignment, students were burdened with the additional task of working with manuscript materials for the first time. Their typical drafting and researching procedures were encumbered by the planning and timing needed to visit the archives. Whereas typical library or Internet research might feel like a seamless approach for students, accessible at any time or stage of their papers, the waiting game inherent in archival research means that moving from thesis to outline and back to thesis revision requires more stopping and starting than they likely are used to, as new archival discoveries tend to be made slowly. The writing process already is difficult and nearly impossible to follow through with in a typical sixteen-week semester: adding this element admittedly made it even harder.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Several weeks into the semester we introduced the assignment to Brooke's students by combining an overview of the project with a fifty-minute archives introduction session taught by Amy. In this session, Amy described what special collections are, explained the repository's hours of operation and policies, showed students how to locate information regarding our resources, and passed around a sign-up sheet to schedule appointments in the reading room. The majority of time in this session was dedicated to the way in which students must access information about collections at UA, as it can be quite confusing because UA does not have all of its finding aids digitized. To counteract these difficulties, Amy emulated a search for the class and provided a handout for the students that modeled the information search process she followed. This handout included screen captures of each stage of the search for maximum clarification. Then we waited for the student appointments to arrive and the research process to begin in earnest.

All of Brooke's students came to special collections at least once in the following weeks. Depending on the historical figure chosen, for some students one visit was enough to gather all of the available materials on their subject. For example, one popular topic was a single twenty-page journal written by an anonymous nineteenth-century Blocton, Alabama, woman who recorded instances of domestic abuse by her husband. In a single appointment, students could either transcribe the contents of her journal onto their computers or use their phones or cameras to take a picture of each page and transcribe the journal pages on their own time.

Other students visiting special collections two or three times reported intensive, hours-long sessions in which they first distinguished useful documents from those they would not need and, after finding their approach to the subject, spent more time pouring over a handful of the necessary pages. While most students averaged about three to four visits, over the ten weeks that the classes signed up for research appointments, some reported visiting the reading room as many as eight to twelve times. This number of visits is extraordinary for any undergraduate researcher, but it is notably high for first-year students.

The students' visits to the reading rooms of Williams and Hoole required that they interact with reference staff at both locations. At the University of Alabama, no one staff member exclusively provides reference support. Kevin Ray coordinates reference services at the W. S. Hoole Library, but Amy aided him during the semester as she gave her business card to all students from Brooke's class. Often Amy would reply to students who contacted her first, and then, when necessary, she would hand off students to Kevin if she did not know the answer or if the request required more extensive work. This division of labor was necessary, as Amy runs the exhibition program, web presence, and social media profiles of the repository as well as teaching all other classes for the Division of Special Collections. After all, Brooke's sections represented only two of eleven total classes that came to Hoole during fall 2013. Over at the Williams collection, interim curator Nancy Dupree assisted Kevin. Likewise, a variety of staff members, including Amy, took turns staffing the reference desk at Williams and Hoole.

The session during which Amy shared research strategies with the classes paid off: instead of having to discuss the collections on a case-by-case basis when each student came into the reading room, most students were able to identify what manuscript collection and even what box they needed on their own without extra help from the reference desk. Therefore, the staff largely interacted with the students to the same extent they would with any other patron with more advanced research skills. As a result, the staff devoted time to students who either chose to work with the larger collections or the few who felt more overwhelmed by the process of sifting through materials to find a usable topic. These types of interactions were relatively standard in terms of their content and did not differ significantly from the kind of help many patrons require. So, despite the intensive learning curve the first-year students faced when researching and writing, navigating the policies and procedures of the special collections environment proved to be less difficult.

As the semester progressed and more students came into the reading room, Brooke incorporated her students' research concerns as they occurred into classroom discussion. Students revealed that in high school they encountered two basic types of research papers and developed distinctive strategies to deal with each. One was the scenario in which they

were allowed to choose a topic to argue. With infinite possibilities at their fingertips, students often picked a controversial subject they already felt strongly about and sought research that corroborated their preexisting ideas on the subject. In other words, they did not research to learn but researched to prove already-established arguments. Another typical assignment employed canned topics related to the course's theme or based on the teacher's interest. In these cases, students admitted to researching for the teacher, rather than for the student's own edification. They approached these assignments by guessing, based on discussions throughout the course, the teacher's position on the subject and sought evidence to corroborate that position because they believed this was the way to garner a high grade.

Neither of these strategies would work for the assignment we set before the students, but this did not dissuade students from first trying their previous methods before abandoning them for new techniques. Students admitted that they first tried to conduct the required research by relying on Google, which was their default research tool. They only wanted to come to special collections when they came up with zero results. We were glad to see that in the context of this new type of research assignment, the students were forced to begin with no preconceptions and rely strictly on close reading, their own critical thinking, and a general intimation about their chosen historical period in order to proceed with their work. In other words, the research process Brooke always taught—let your evidence guide your argument—was reinforced more easily by using special collections materials.

## RESULTS

We both considered the collaboration a success because Brooke noted that her students were much more engaged with the special collections assignment than other research essays she assigned in her ten years of teaching. Through discussions with students both during and after their writing and research processes, she believed this was because the nature of the assignment reestablished their sense of wonder and quelled their discomfort in not knowing: they were forced to investigate, much like a journalist or an archaeologist, to find the story or the approach that interested them, and their angles and focuses were completely of their own making. We believe the qualitative strength of our students' reported and assessed learning outcomes demonstrate our achievement.

Brooke also observed increased student engagement due to the particular types of interpretative problems created during primary source research. For example, one student was faced with the following question based on her historical figure, an Alabama lawyer and politician named Lister Hill: which was Hill's more identity-defining experience—the elec-



tion he nearly lost or the election he won by a landslide? Given the nature of the assignment, in which there was only space for one element of the historical figure's life to be retold, students had to make decisions of this kind on their own, and that ownership was reflected in the consideration they placed into their discussion of their subjects. In Brooke's estimation, this helped them to produce more creative and rigorous projects.

The students also became more affectively engaged in their research topics. Another student was reviewing the papers of Alabama journalist Buford Boone when she came across a letter addressed to him and written by Martin Luther King Jr., thanking Boone for his contributions to the civil rights movement. This letter stunned her. What if, she wondered, King's fingers were placed on this sheet of paper exactly where my fingers are now? She told her instructor she tried not to get too overwhelmed with the moment because she did not want her tears to stain this piece of history.

Brooke felt that the excitement generated by spending time in special collections—what Amy described as a feeling of spiritual materialism or what philosopher Jacques Derrida calls “archive fever”<sup>8</sup>—inspired students to dedicate themselves to their research and composition. While many archivists may feel these sentiments are too overwrought and dismiss them as naive, we believe it is a mistake to overlook the pedagogical impact of these experiences. Students who care about their subjects are more likely to persist and succeed when facing a learning curve as steep as the one we introduced. Embracing rather than distancing ourselves from the emotions provoked during primary source research allowed us to become more effective teachers.

Interviewing the two students Brooke chose to feature on *Cool@Hoole* gave us the opportunity to learn more about the viewpoint of first-year undergraduates. For example, Shelby Gatewood reported that she struggled when learning new research techniques, particularly research that required multiple trips to gather information. Gatewood noted:

This research paper was also different because I had to spend weeks gathering information for this paper rather than simply a few hours or days. The process for this research paper required more effort than any paper that I have written, and I had to adapt my writing process. Usually I think of the focus for my paper, gather all of the information in one sitting, and write the entire paper at one time. However, for this research paper I had to make many visits to Hoole before I was even able to choose a focus. . . . I was also writing sections of my paper for about two weeks rather than writing it all in one day. The many trips that I made to Hoole Library changed my writing process, but they also helped improve my paper.<sup>9</sup>

Gatewood's experience showed that first-year students found the challenge of using special collections came from learning how to conduct

research that required more knowledge, a greater variety of sources, and a stronger narrative voice than the papers they had been assigned in the past. However, these skills ultimately were obtainable. Gatewood wrote a note of encouragement to future students, suggesting that they should “not be intimidated when visiting Hoole Library because the librarians want to help.”

## LESSONS LEARNED

We both came away from our collaboration with valuable lessons. After fall 2013, Brooke adjusted her spring 2014 syllabus to include more time in class for students to discuss their research, introduced the assignment earlier in the semester, and provided models to help inspire student work. While the first two changes improved the course, the third decision to give students examples, as we explain below, actually backfired and led to less innovative projects. This result shows that pedagogical progress is often two steps forward, one step back. Amy further developed her best practices regarding how to coordinate an instruction program that could support multiple sections of students learning intensive research methods.

Brooke’s spring 2014 class benefited from a series of adjustments she made after gathering feedback from the two fall sections. The first adjustment meant allotting about twenty minutes of class discussion per week on the status of students’ research progress. This change gave students the ability to reflect critically on their time in special collections. Class discussions which began in anecdotes concluded in conversations about how to combine intellectual and personal interests in such a way that projects could be both academically rigorous and entertaining to read. Brooke also introduced the assignment to her students much earlier in the spring than in the previous fall. In fall 2013, we did not explain the project to the students until week six; in spring 2014, students learned about the assignment during the first week of class. This shift was precipitated by informal student surveys Brooke conducted throughout the fall that revealed that the students needed more time to adjust psychologically to a new type of research.

While both fall 2013 and spring 2014 students wanted more models for their work, and the spring 2014 students benefited from having both author Larson’s notes alongside Smiley and Gatewood’s *Cool@Hoole* interviews and their sample papers as models, we learned that providing students with more models to work from made them less creative in their approach to the project. For many students, models imply a stringent form of correctness. After reading others’ work, students could not imagine how to generate new types of nonfiction narrative. For example, during the fall, one student from California had worked for some time

reading screenplays for producers, so she decided to tell the adventures of William Gorgas and his eradication of yellow fever in Panama through the format of a screenplay. In contrast, during spring 2014, a couple of students asked permission to use their topic to write a traditional research paper, as they did not like the idea of telling a story. Some even felt compelled, even after much commenting and peer review, to include a traditional thesis statement. It seemed these students felt the model papers from the fall semester of 2013 were outliers composed by model students: they felt intimidated by these examples of creativity. Fortunately, through both class discussions and individual conferences with students, the spring 2014 class brainstormed other approaches to narrative that deviated from our successful samples from fall 2013, and most students opted for the creative approach.

Amy's lessons consisted of how she could coordinate an instruction program that would give students the information they needed to surmount substantial learning curves while reassuring and guiding faculty members that integrating new pedagogical approaches into their curricula would result in greater student engagement. For Amy, both balanced on maintaining good communication with those providing reference support for classes she coordinated. Without the help of reference services, students would not have the ability to access and browse collections, rather than just coming to the reading room to analyze individual items. Additionally, having reference support available to students showed faculty that the special collections staff was just as invested in improving the learning outcomes of students. Engaging equally with Brooke and the reference staff, and making note of the needs of both parties, allowed Amy to facilitate a collaborative environment that benefitted each stakeholder.

## CONCLUSION

The success of our collaboration, tested over two semesters, enabled us to be able to expand our approach to all Honors College first-year writing classes at the University of Alabama in fall 2014. Each fall semester, a cohort of advanced first-year writing courses within Honors College are theme-based, with all courses sharing a reader and participating in events based on the chosen text. Part of Brooke's administrative duties within first-year writing includes selecting the text and the theme of each fall semester. Based on the success of special collections research across three sections of composition during fall 2013 and spring 2014, both the director of first-year writing and the associate dean of the Honors College welcomed the opportunity for students to enroll in courses titled *In the Archives*. This outcome is a huge accomplishment for both the first-year writing program and the Division of Special Collections, for first-year

writing will be able to provide unique materials for student projects while the Division of Special Collections will obtain a much larger population of undergraduates engaging with its holdings.

In fall 2014, in addition to *Devil in the White City*, students are using B. J. Hollars's *Opening the Doors: The Desegregation of the University of Alabama and the Fight for Civil Rights in Tuscaloosa* as their course reader.<sup>10</sup> Hollars is a graduate of the master of fine arts program in creative writing at UA, and much of the research conducted for his book took place in UA's special collections, so his book provides an important local example of how to integrate primary sources into an exciting narrative.

While Amy is thrilled to work with more sections, the increased number of students required her pedagogical approach to evolve from encouraging students to browse collections independently back to requiring that they concentrate their analysis on previously selected items. Even though she was successful in keeping the students from requiring too much reference support during the academic year of 2013–2014, during fall 2014, the number of students present in Honors College sections, in addition to limits on staffing levels and space, makes it impossible for Amy to provide the experience she previously offered.

Instead, digital surrogates will allow a greater number of students to work with special collections. We selected individual items found in Acumen, UA's digital repository, for students to examine in fall 2014. While Amy knew this restriction was inevitable if the collaboration expanded programmatically, and she felt that Acumen offers a rich experience for students learning to integrate primary sources into their research for the first time, she nevertheless felt sad about removing students' ability to interact with the original items and to enjoy the fun and frustration of freely browsing collections. After all, this experience is what led to some of the most rewarding experiences of their first-year collaborating. However, we both believe this compromise is necessary to offer more students the educational enrichment provided by using primary sources. Using Acumen will open new conversations on what it means to see analog items on a screen, how collections of physical items are represented in computing environments, and even the necessity of considering that not all materials in special collections are available on the Internet. These dialogues will remind students that online repositories are only surrogates for—and not replacements of—physical materials.

By bringing the Division of Special Collections and first-year writing together, we integrated the curriculum of different sectors of the University of Alabama, introduced students to rare materials earlier in their college careers, encouraged creative approaches, and more effectively taught composition and research skills. We have continued to maintain our collaborative relationship while evolving our methodology to fit the needs of greater numbers of sections that are supervised by other instructors. By matching students with a course text that demonstrates how

primary sources reveal new information about local history in addition to *Devil in the White City*, the original book that inspired Brooke, we hope to continue to seduce new generations of first-year writing students into the pleasures of working with special collections.

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## NOTES

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10. B. J. Hollars, *Opening the Doors: The Desegregation of the University of Alabama and the Fight for Civil Rights in Tuscaloosa* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013).

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