

The Eighth Grade Research Paper

February 2016

Choosing A Topic

What makes the eighth grade research project such an exciting and memorable experience is the freedom students have to choose their own topic on which to write. Over the years, students have written on everything from the origins of hip-hop to the passage of Title IX. There have been papers on Napoleon's invasion of Russia and the effects of global warming on coral reefs. Want to know if there's life on other planets? So did one of our eighth graders.

Having the opportunity to research and write about whatever they want for six to eight weeks is both thrilling and intimidating, and while some students greet this freedom with excitement, others feel stymied. English and history teachers work with students to find a way to turn their area of interest (The Nets! Africa! Poodles!) into topics that are appropriate given the parameters of time and space built into the project. Few questions students have ("Why won't my parents let me play more video games?!") cannot be turned into appropriate term paper topics ("Do violent video games lead to violent behavior?") While our goal is to help students answer the questions that keep them up at night, it is important that they select topics that are well represented in articles, books, etc. available through either the Saint Ann's library or a nearby library.

The Process

The project begins with an early February meeting of the entire 8th grade, History and English teachers, and John Smith, though classes may begin discussing the project beforehand. Students are expected to head into vacation having identified an area of interest (not the same thing as having chosen a topic) and found at least one source.

Once back from vacation, classes visit the library and students begin their research in earnest. Working from guidelines about note taking on index cards, as well as footnoting, students use class time in both English and history to conduct research and begin shaping their ideas.

Teacher teams may take different approaches to the next stages of the paper, but all require students to form their ideas into a first draft of a detailed outline. This detailed outline is revised in a second draft, which is ultimately shaped into a final draft of their paper. Teachers determine, on a case-by-case basis, if a second draft is warranted. The first draft of the detailed outline is due, (roughly) in the third week of the project (from the start of library visits), with the second draft of the detailed outline due in the 4th or 5th week.

Deadlines tend to move a little bit as the project progresses, but teachers will routinely make clear exactly what is expected from each student for each week. Each teacher team provides their class with a rough schedule for the paper; ask your child to see it!

Final Thoughts

The final draft is a typed, six to eight page research paper with a bibliography and footnotes. Although it does not have to be a history paper, the paper needs to be an analytical one -- it cannot be a biography, an opinion piece, or a piece of literary criticism. That said, if students want to write on a person, a controversial topic or a favorite book, teachers can usually help them find a way to do so. However, each paper must have a clearly stated and supported argument.