



THE OFFICE FOR
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

Graduate Research Consultant (GRC) Program Course Example

Humanities: English and Comparative Literature

Faculty name: Dr. Jane Danielewicz

Department: English & Comparative Literature

Course ENGL 134H: *Reading and Writing Women's Lives*

GRC: Chelsea Redeker, English and Comparative Literature

Number of students: 19

Date: Course taught as a GRC course for the first time in Fall 2004

Course overview:

In this course, students focus on women's life writing, exploring the lives of other women as well as their own lives through reading and writing different genres: autobiography, autoethnography, biography, and personal essay. Students are introduced to these four genres through reading exemplars, by reading theoretical and scholarly articles that discuss the qualities of each genre, and by meeting practicing writers. Most importantly, students also write in these genres. By studying the generic forms from the inside/out, so to speak, students gain knowledge and produce knowledge: they practice interpretation, the main skill in literary fields; they become writers, researching background information about their subjects, and generating texts that are primary sources in themselves. This combination of reading and writing is critical because students understand the methodology by which genres like biography are produced as well as the experience of being authors and having their work read by others. Students are organized into permanent writing groups; instruction is organized around the writing workshop which emphasizes sharing, feedback, and collaboration.

Course research methodology: Archival research and literary interpretation; biographical research methods

Examples of specific student group research projects:

1. Researching and creating an archive of biographical documents

Overview and purpose: Students produce a biography so they must understand how to conduct basic research by “creating an archive” of documents or materials from which to write. Because they write biographies of women, which differ historically in form, content, and value, from biographies of men, they must locate and use their materials in non-traditional ways. First-year students need extra guidance in choosing a biographical subject and then tailoring their research agendas to find the best materials. Research includes tracking down information about the subject’s life, looking at documents, photographs, etc, and interviewing. After gathering information, the biographer must catalogue and organize it, create a focus or angle, and finally write a text that communicates this perspective. This project teaches students the methods of biographical research that include constructing an archive from a variety of primary sources, especially those resources available on this campus.

Research skills used: investigating primary resources, interviewing and constructing an archive

2. Researching and writing biography

Overview and purpose: All students research and write a biography (with options for publication). While they are all doing the same assignment, what they do with it varies enormously. Students are extremely creative in choosing their biographical subjects, which range from women in science (Rosalind Franklin), in the arts (Georgia O’Keefe), in politics (Margaret Thatcher), or even in personal family history (a loved grandmother who was a Holocaust survivor). Each student’s research path is unique, and utilizes entirely different sources, data bases, and documents, whether physical or electronic. Sometimes students produce a web page or integrate electronic sources into their biographies. Learning a graphics design program is sometimes also required, depending on the project. Students are generally very ambitious about this project.

Research skills used: investigating primary sources, constructing an archive, literary interpretation

Communicating research findings:

Each student’s resulting biography is the result of conducting primary research. Not

only are these finished biographies shared with the entire class (by posting on Blackboard, for example), but students may also post their biography as part of the course's online anthology, a public website. (See <http://english.unc.edu/courses/english29>) They are required to post one unit paper on this website. In addition, students may contribute their biography to those institutions or organizations (e.g. Wilson library rare book collection) whose archives were used for the project. Students also perform or present their work during the last week of the course. I encourage students to participate in any and all other relevant publishing venues (such as the multi-media festival sponsored by the Johnston center). Furthermore, these biographies are usually shared with the students' families, particularly if they focus on a family member.

GRC role in the research:

Although I have designed the biography assignment to include research and the creation of the archive, this is only the first step. In the early part of the semester, the GRC studies the genre of biography itself—its shape, conventions, resources, along with theories about the genre, focusing on women's lives. Additionally, the GRC investigates writing pedagogies associated with writing biographies.

We collaborate in constructing daily lesson plans for the biography unit (about four weeks of the semester), in creating materials for students to use with their archives, in designing writing workshops, etc. We meet together to discuss how the conferences are going with the students during each phase of the research project.

Furthermore, the GRC works with me to revamp my guides for the biography unit project: (1) on methodology; (2) on primary data sources that biographers use; (3) on primary data sources at UNC (e.g. the Southern Oral History Project archives) and at nearby institutions (e.g. Duke's Center for Documentary Studies) or organizations (e.g. Chapel Hill Museum); (4) on methods of interpretation, use, and citation for different primary sources (e.g. interviews vs. photographs, etc.).

The GRC is a co-teacher for the biography unit. Besides appearing in class, the GRC is involved with each student as the student identifies a subject, plans a research agenda, locates sources, and then drafts the biography. Because the students are working in different academic fields, the GRC must develop expertise in seeking out resources in all disciplines. What worked best in the past is to have the GRC meet with students individually for conferences at least three times (but many students met more often) during the biography unit. Each of these conferences had a different emphasis: (1) refine and choose the subject; (2) develop a reasonable and accessible source list to build the archive; (3) read and respond to drafts of the biography.

The GRC serves as a model researcher for the undergraduate students, demonstrating how to do research, collecting and evaluating sources, then using sources to produce an original text. If necessary, the GRC accompanies students to the library or to collections

available at Duke, etc. In the past, students really loved this kind of customized, hands-on attention.

GRC: In choosing Chelsea Redeker (or any graduate student) as my GRC, I consider the following questions: (1) Is there a graduate student working in my general area of research who is neither brand-new to the program nor about ready to graduate? (The GRC must have some experience but not be so involved with her own project that she is overcommitted.) (2) Will this person be able to work independently (on her own with students) and collaboratively (with me during planning and teaching the course)? (3) Does this person have good research and writing skills, based on the work produced by the graduate student so far in the program? Often I will consult with other faculty members in my department or the director of graduate studies to ask for recommendations or for feedback about a particular graduate student I am considering. I choose a different GRC each year. Sometimes graduate students will ask to be considered if they have heard about the program from former GRCs.

Faculty comments on her course and incorporating research:

This project is particularly rich because it teaches undergraduate students how to do research in a wide variety of organizations and institutions, using many different mediums as primary data. It trains students in the research practices of one literary genre (with applications to related genres) and allows them to share their research in the form of a published biography. The GRC has similar opportunities to learn research methodology, to locate sources that may be used in his or her own research project, and to improve their interpretive and writing skills, partly by coaching others. The GRC also learns how to teach, particularly in a workshop setting, and through one-on-one conferencing. Both and GRC and I would be happy to publish our findings locally as well as nationally and to make the research guides, assignments, and data sources publicly available. In fact, because I maintain a website for the publication of students' work, I am frequently contacted by faculty across the country to request my course materials.

Since my academic interests include writing pedagogy, my own published work often refers to student work (with their written permissions) produced in this class. The GRC also has a chance to publish a variety of papers and projects as a result of collaborating with me and with the students. Such publication opportunities include the guides on researching and writing biographies, conference papers on content topics—writing women's biographies—and on process topics—working with primary data sources. The GRC may also write articles or conference papers on the pedagogical aspects of working with undergraduate students, teaching them research and writing skills. I guide the GRC to publishing venues such as journals or conferences.

Sources for this course summary: Edited text from Dr. Jane Danielewicz' GRC Proposal.