

(Inter)Views: Engaging freshmen in primary research in the composition classroom

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## Abstract

While literacy autobiographies, citizenship autobiographies, and family narratives are common first writing assignments in the freshmen composition classroom, they are usually followed by some kind of research proposal, annotated bibliography, or research essay. While there is nothing wrong with literacy and citizenship autobiographies or family narratives, do these kinds of writing assignments prepare students for the transition to conducting academic research that usually begins with secondary sources? This study offers an alternative approach by introducing students to academic research and writing by teaching them strategies in conducting primary research. This approach involves having students develop a professional resume and conduct a series of three semi-formal interviews with individuals within their majors, careers, and future professions. Students then write reflections for each interview and then synthesize the information and knowledge they have gathered into one final reflection essay. The study that follows is a mixed method design, involving quantitative and qualitative data from a survey conducted online. The study was conducted at the University of El Paso during the fall semester of 2009. The duration of the study lasted approximately six weeks and involved one composition classroom with 25 students.

## (Inter)Views: Engaging freshmen in primary research in the composition classroom

The redesign that English Composition 1311 is currently undergoing in the First-Year Composition Program (FYCP) at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) is an interesting idea. The reason why this redesign is an interesting idea is because it extends the idea of research and writing beyond the traditional perceptions of freshmen composition. With such a redesign, there is the unique opportunity to help shape not only the curriculum of the FYCP, but also the goals, objectives, and outcomes, as well as develop standards and expectations for student writing.

One thing that I want to make clear is that I did not follow the current assignments in the 1311 redesign because I wanted to be a rebel. I have no desire to be the “stand out nail” ready to be hammered. I have taught similar sequences of writing assignments such as these before at the public school level and at the college level. I have seen how they can work when the goals are clearly set by the teacher, and I have seen how they cannot work when they teacher does not make a personal connection to them. I am not claiming to be an expert of designing curriculum, classroom activities, writing assignments, or new perspectives on pedagogies. First, let me explain the context of my situation.

One of the reasons that I decided to go for my PhD in Rhetoric & Writing Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso was because I wanted to keep teaching composition and because I also wanted to further develop my own theories and pedagogies on how and why I teach writing the way I do. With the redesign, I felt that I could not accomplish my goals in this area. Why? Well, it is not only because of the standardized curriculum but the standardized writing assignments. I have nothing against working in a standardized curriculum, in matter of fact I think that it is a good idea to have a curriculum that is standardized.

I do not believe that the writing assignments should be standardized. Why? Because as a teacher I am confident that I can prove that what I doing—as far as writing assignments, activities, goals, and objectives—are meeting the curriculum’s goals, objectives, and outcomes of the program (of course at this point I time I truly do not know what these are ... I think we need to develop them quickly). I might not be taking the same road as everyone else, but I am sure that I will end up within the same area at the end of the semester. I cannot be sure of this, though, but after seeing the syllabus, listening to conversations about the purpose of the redesign, and the new focus on writing, I think I will end up where I need to be.

To emphasize the importance on developing goals and objectives, I feel as if this program is lacking those goals and objectives necessary to justify the assignments to the teachers and to the students. The goals (the more intangible expectations) and objectives (the more tangible expectations) are important in guiding and directing the theory of why we are having our students do certain writing assignments. The writing assignment must have an overarching purpose that eventually leads to something that the students can look back on and see why we structured the assignments the way we did. The students should be able to see where they started, what paths or directions they choose along the way, and how the whole sequence of assignments culminate into some final project.

Pedagogy needs theory to make it work and to give it a purpose. The assignment I present here in this research is not simply pedagogically driven, there is the underlying theory that has

influenced me to create and develop it the way I did. The assignment in this study is the first stage/phase of the electronic portfolio that I had my freshmen students construct during the fall semester of 2009 at UTEP. The resume and interview assignment has been a continually “evolving” assignment for me and my students. What better way in which to learn about—and practice—rhetoric than to be put on the spot (and to put myself on the spot, *kairos*) and to see if those selfsame rhetorical strategies that I have been teaching my freshmen students over the last four years work? I admit that I enjoy doing active research in my teaching, as well as seeing if my theories “hold water” and if those theories are actually applicable in the classroom in the form of writing assignments and classroom structures.

The study that follows is the results from the resume and interview assignments that I implemented in my freshmen English composition course during the fall semester of 2009 at the University of Texas at El Paso. In this study, I will explain the methodology and the underlying theory of why I decided to have my students create a resume and conduct semi-formal interviews for their first writing assignments for me. The reason why I chose these first two assignments is because I wish to show how important they are setting the professional, goal-oriented tone to the class as well as to the students’ writing.

The questions that I ask and try to provide answers for in this study are:

- Why is it important to have freshmen engage in learning how to conduct primary research?
- How can primary research be effectively used in the composition classroom?
- What types of assignments and activities would be useful for students in conducting primary research?
- What would the structure of the classroom look like with students engaging in this type of research?
- What type of writing would the students be required to do within this primary research framework?

#### Definitions of terms

**Ethnographic research** – A type of research that involves students “going out into a discourse” community” in order to ask questions about that specific discourse community.

**Semi-formal interview** – An example of a primary research strategy in which inductive and qualitative methods of research are employed in order to develop questions about a specific field or area of interest, to help narrow down the focus to a question(s).

**Primary research** – A type of research that focuses on engaging students in field work, such as conducting interviews.

**Reflection** – A type of writing that involves having students write about their experiences, acknowledging and becoming aware of the patterns and deeper meanings of their purposes and goals and the strategies that they employ in order fulfill those purposes and achieve their goals.

**Writing** – An activity that involves students using rhetorical strategies in order to convey purpose driven modes of communication to an audience.

### Literature review

I feel as if I have been here before, déjà vu. I taught my first semester of freshmen composition at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi in the fall of 2006. My previous experiences with teaching students writing were limited to the public school level, mostly the high school level. When I came to teach writing at the college level I quickly noticed the differences, especially the higher expectations for students in the areas of research.

#### *Theory*

One of the challenges that I faced in designing the “interview” assignment was how to introduce students to primary research techniques without them just writing a traditional research essay. Donna Dunbar-Odom says (1999):

A major problem with traditional approaches to research writing is figuring out how to create a sequence of assignments that will offer students a taste of the experience of ‘real’ research, research they are committed to, rather than the production of yet another version of the always-already-written, one-side-or-the-other research paper. (Dunbar-Odom, p. 8)

Dunbar-Odom’s emphasis on “authentic” experiences within researching and writing assignments is a key point when it comes to re-evaluating the current pedagogies within the freshmen composition classroom, as well as designing the kinds of writing assignments that do not allow students to reproduce the “traditional research essay.”

#### *Assignment design*

The question that I was facing with redesigning the resume and interview writing assignment was what kind of assignment will push students beyond writing another traditional research essay? In my opinion, this is where the interview assignment makes the difference between students writing for a grade and students writing to learn. The interview assignment breaks the monotony of viewing writing as a linear activity, where students use a narrative to explain how or why something is important to them or what they have experienced.

I wanted students to produce more actively reflective writing with their semi-formal interviews rather than merely passively retelling or recalling a past incident or experience. The interview assignment that I designed included having the students conduct a series of three semi-formal interviews from three different discourse communities: Academic, professional, or career (which could include family and close friends, professors, public school teachers, even upper classman who are currently majoring in their field of interest). I had the general plan figured out but my next task was to determine what types of writing activities that the students would need to engage in to prepare them for their interviews.

Barbara A. Morris’ (2007) approach to designing and implementing a interviewing writing assignment helped me to get a grasp of the kinds of writing activities that the students would be doing, such as contacting an individual for an interview, developing appropriate questions to ask the interviewee, taking notes or recording the conversation, and then turning that

information into a reflective essay (Morris, p. 287-92). While Morris had a different purpose for her interview portfolio, her approach to it helped me to better understand what my students needed from me as far as teaching them selecting who it was they were going to interview, how to conduct background research on that individual or department on campus using the university's website or just using the campus map to figure out where that department or individual's office was located, how to develop appropriate questions to ask based on their research, how to write a formal email, or how to best contact the individual or department for a possible interview. The next challenge that I faced was making the sure the students understood how to take notes or record important information while conducting their interviews.

### *Writing*

William W. Wright (1991) suggests when teaching students an ethnographic approach to research and writing that the focus is on "thick description" as being "an ethnographic attention to context" (Wright, p. 103). The "thick description" that Wright describes includes more than just noting or recording about what a student "thinks" or observes about their culture, culture in general, or in a discourse community, but also reflecting on those intricate interactions with individuals and concepts within a culture or discourse community. Wright clarifies:

I do not mean to suggest that by teaching ethnography we teach students to stamp 'take or leave it' on their journals and papers. Rather we recognize their authority with the information and encourage them to see their work as the central content of the course (p. 105).

While Wright does focus on the ethnographic aspect of research, he makes a valid point, especially when considering composition as its own discipline that the content of the course comes from the students' own research and writing efforts with minor instruction and guidance from the instructor. However, Wright points out that an ethnographic approach to teaching researching and writing might sometimes produce "incompleteness" in students' work (p. 105). Wright equates this sense of incompleteness that can occur within ethnography as an opportunity "to encourage authority" in students' researching and writing efforts (p. 105). What this translates into for the semi-formal interviews is that students might finish this particular assignment and still have more questions to ask their interviewees or other individuals that they would like to interview.

### Methodology

I (re-)designed the resume and interview assignment prior to the beginning of the 2009 fall semester. I had developed this assignment from a previous version of it. The resume and interview assignment is the product of a four year evolution, starting in the fall semester of 2006 at Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi. The assignment description required the students to construct a professional resume, conduct three interviews, and write three reflection essays on each interview, and a final synthesis reflection over all three reflections.

Before the students conducted their interviews, we spent two weeks in class discussing what primary research is and why it is important, how to develop effective interview questions, how to seek permission from departments on campus, we discussed how they planned to record

the responses from their interviewees, and how to write reflectively about their interviews. Some students decided to conduct email interviews, which meant learning how to write a professional email. I had the students read sections in *The brief McGraw-Hill guide: Writing for college, writing for life* (2009) by Duane Roen, Gregory R. Glau, & Barry M. Maid as well as use the *OWL at Purdue Online Writing Resources and Lab*, dealing with constructing formal emails, how to develop effective interview questions, and how to effectively conduct an interview.

After each interview, I required the students to write a one-to-two page reflection of what they had gotten out of the interview, such as their own personal impressions and observations, any new knowledge, or interesting answers or insights from the interviewees. After the three interview reflections were completed, I required the students to synthesize them into one large essay. This final reflective essay required the students to fuse all three interview reflections into their own personally developed theme, a personal description of the interviewees' answers and responses, as well as any observation they made while in those discourse communities.

By reflecting on their interviews, the students would start to internalize the interviewees' answers and contextualize it and then project it back out. Since I was requiring students to write a reflection after each interview, by the time they got to the final reflection, where they synthesized all three interview reflections into one, they would have had enough opportunity to reflect on their interviewees' responses and answers.

The difference this semester was that I presented the students with two options: Option 1) one interview with family member or close friend, one interview with someone from a campus department interview, and one interview with classmate interview, and option 2) three interviews with academics/professionals within their major or discipline of study. Basically, I used the first interview assignment I designed in 2006 (option 1) and the most recent version of it from 2008 (option 2) (Please *Appendices A-D*).

The course that the resume and interview was used in was English composition 1311 at the University of Texas at El Paso during the fall semester of 2009. The course met three times a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, for fifty minutes each day. The course contained twenty-five freshmen students. The resume and interview assignment lasted for approximately six weeks, from August 24-October 2. The original due date was set for September 30 but I decided to change it to October 2 to give students a little more time to write out their interview reflections. The resume and the interview assignment counted for 20% (10% each) of their overall grade (out of 100%).

During these six weeks, students learned how to create a resume and why a resume is important (I used pages 56 & A-28-A-31 from Roen et al.'s *Guide* & the *OWL's* section on "Resumes"), students also learned how to seek out individuals to interview, as well as researched their degrees and majors (once again I used Roen et al.'s *Guide*, focusing on the pages dealing with field research and how to develop interview questions, 861-64 & the *OWL's* section on "Conducting Primary Research" & "Interviewing").

The students also learned how to construct a formal email (Roan et al.'s *Guide*, page A-32 & the *OWL's* section on "Email Etiquette"), as well as engaged in developing interview

questions (*Guide* “Writing processes,” pages 285-88 & the *OWL*’s section on “Starting the Writing Process”), practiced in mock interviews with classmates, and then conducted their semi-formal interviews. The class was structured around the interviews, allowing class time (if necessary) to conduct their interviews. Out of the six weeks, three days were devoted to “workshop” days, where the students were given time to ask questions, conduct their interviews, and start writing their reflections.

I explained the assignment description and the grading rubric for the resume and the interviews to the students before they began and asked them if they had any questions. At the beginning of the semester, I explained to the students that they would be required to construct a portfolio (I had the students read pages A-1-A-4 from Roen et al.’s *Guide*). I also explained to the students that we would be using PBWorks—a free online collaborative workspace—for uploading the writing they would be doing during the course of the semester. I explained to the students that this type of electronic portfolio (“e-portfolio”) would be web-based, that is that accessible through the Internet. Once the students were done with their interviews and reflections, I had them submit their writing in our online wiki space.

I decided to have the students create “e-portfolios” because I wanted to emphasize the accessibility and “living” nature of the documents they were creating. John Zubizarreta (2009) claims, “Electronic media choices have introduced an array of strategies for archiving, organizing, and reflecting on information about a student’s learning” (Zubizarreta, p. 58). E-portfolios present a shift from “more static paper models that often are reviewed only by the instructor” (p. 59). E-portfolios also provide students with the opportunity to keep “live” writing, where they can go back and make changes or add new information. Because of the nature of e-portfolios, students were also aware that their interviewees could be able to view their reflections on the wiki site.

Below are the goals and objectives that the resume and the interviews assignment met:

### *Goals*

- Goal 1: To introduce students to genres of writing and the use of rhetoric within various professions
- Goal 2: To introduce students to various methods of professional and academic research (using primary and secondary sources) and writing

### *Objectives*

- Objective 1: Students will construct a professional resume
- Objective 2: Students will conduct a series of 3 interviews and write reflections on each of one of them, as well as one large reflection synthesizing all of them together

The overarching goal of the English composition course was to have the students construct an electronic, web-based/electronic portfolio, containing documents that focused on their majors, future professions, or fields of study.



## Method

I conducted a mixed-method survey using SurveyMonkey.com. I chose to use SurveyMonkey.com because of its user friendliness and because it is accessible. The survey was administered after the resume and the interview assignment was due, not prior. The survey contained eight quantitative questions that were based on the Likert Scale Model, with the answer options: Strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree. The students were not required to reveal their identities or give out any personal information the survey. The survey was voluntary and no extra credit was given to those students who took the survey. Since I did not plan to publish this research in an academic journal, I did not seek IRB approval nor have my students sign a consent form.

Prior to having the students fill out the survey online, I asked them to share their thoughts on what they thought of the resume and interview assignment. The survey was administered during class. Twenty-two out of twenty-five students participated in taking the survey. The questions that were asked in the survey:

1. I felt that the resume was a good first writing assignment.
2. I had difficulty in locating individuals to interview.
3. I had enough time to conduct all three interviews before the due date.
4. Contacting the individuals, developing questions to ask them, and then conducting the interviews challenged my thinking and writing.
5. Writing a reflection for each of the three interviews was not necessary.
6. Writing one large reflection for all three interviews would have been better.
7. The instructor provided assistance in locating and showing me how to find individuals to interview.
8. Writing the interview reflections was clearly presented by the instructor.

Figure 1.2 Survey Fall 2009

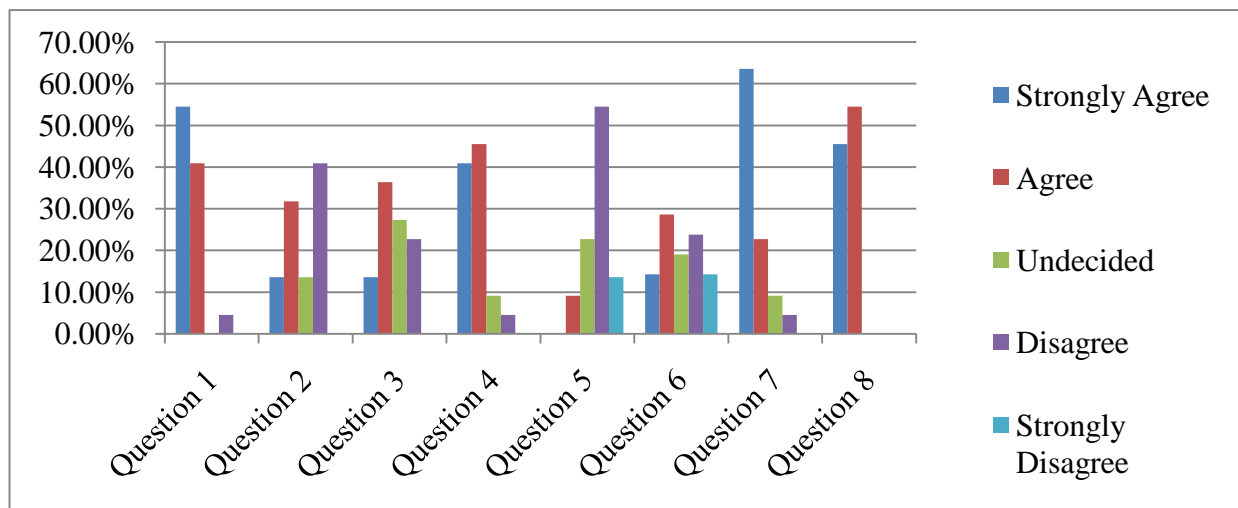


Figure 1.1 Survey Fall 2009 (raw data)

Survey Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I felt that the resume was a good first writing assignment.	<b>54.5%</b>	<b>40.9%</b>	0%	4.5%	0%
2. I had difficulty in locating individuals to interview.	13.6%	<b>31.8%</b>	13.6%	<b>40.9%</b>	0%
3. I had enough time to conduct all three interviews before the due date.	13.6%	<b>36.4%</b>	<b>27.3%</b>	22.7%	0%
4. Contacting the individuals, developing questions to ask them, and then conducting the interviews challenged my thinking and writing.	<b>40.9%</b>	<b>45.5%</b>	9.1%	4.5%	0%
5. Writing a reflection for each of the three interviews was not necessary.	0%	9.1%	<b>22.7%</b>	<b>54.5%</b>	13.6%
6. Writing one large reflection for all three interviews would have been better.	14.3%	<b>28.6%</b>	19%	<b>23.8%</b>	14.3%
7. The instructor provided assistance in locating and showing me how to find individuals to interview.	<b>63.6%</b>	<b>22.7%</b>	9.1%	4.5%	0%
8. Writing the interview reflections was clearly presented by the instructor.	<b>45.5%</b>	<b>54.5%</b>	0%	0%	0%

### Quantitative data analysis

Almost all of the students felt as if the resume was a good first writing assignment. If I had to speculate on why the students viewed the resume this way, I would say that it is a way to connect what they have done either in high school or shortly after high school, and what they are planning on doing or are currently doing in college at the moment. In many ways, a resume is a “living document” that the students can go back and update or change as they see fit. A resume is also somewhat of a goal or plan that can allow the students to view their accomplishments, and future goals, strategically.

The second question addresses the interview process. The results were an interesting mix with 40.9% disagreeing that they experienced trouble in finding individuals to interview; however, there was a significant 31.8% of students that agreed that they did experience some difficulty in locating individuals to interview. I am speculating that this mix between those students who disagreed and those that agreed in locating individuals to interview is a beneficial feature of this assignment because on one hand, the assignment was not too difficult that students could locate someone to interview, as well as it was not too easy of an assignment that students sought out just anyone to interview.

In questions three, 36.4% of the students agreed that they had enough to conduct all three interviews. However, there was 27.3% that were undecided and 22.7% disagreed that they had enough time to conduct all three interviews. Once again, I can only speculate that the nature of

this assignment caused that imbalanced between being too easy of an assignment or too difficult of an assignment, depending on how they went about setting their goals for the interviews, how much time they spent developing their questions, or how well they planned their interviews around their other schedules, or if their interviewees contacted them back promptly or not, or if at all. Another factor that might have played a role was that many students had never experienced an assignment such as this one. Some of the possible telltale signs of what I speculated above in question three are apparent in questions. 45.5% of students agreed and 40.9% of students strongly agreed that contacting individuals, developing questions, and conducting the interviews challenged their way of thinking and writing.

Question five, “writing a reflection for each of the three interviews was not necessary,” 54.5% of the students disagreed. This is an indication that reflecting on each interview was useful for the students to not only see the value of the interview, but also to reflect on the information they had gotten from the interview as well as utilize that information to form a new perspective. However, there was a significant 22.7% of the students that were undecided. A possible reason that they were undecided might have been due to the fact that they had not engaged in an assignment such as this before.

Question six, “writing one large reflection for all three interviews would have been better,” shows an interesting split again. 28.6% of the students agreed that writing one large reflection over all three interviews instead of one for each one would have been better. However, 23.8% of the students disagreed that would have been better to write just one large reflection of three. This question provided the most spread out data set, because not one category was not greater or less than half than the other. A reason for this might have been due to fact that each student had their own interpretation of the purpose of this assignment, and therefore their goals and expectations changed as they started begin to engage in the assignment.

The remaining two questions on the survey focused on how effective or ineffective the instructor provided assistance and how well the instructor introduced and explained the assignment. Question seven, “the instructor provided assistance in locating and showing me how to find individuals to interview,” 63.6% of the students strongly agreed and 22.7% of the students agreed that the instructor provided some kind of assistance in helping them locate individuals to interview. The exact strategies and tactics included assisting the students in locating individuals to interview included:

- Explaining how to conduct background research in locating the right individuals to interview for their purposes
- Explaining and using activities in constructing a formal email in which to contact an individual for an interview
- How to develop appropriate and useful sets of questions to ask their interviewees
- How to conduct a semi-formal interview
  - Dress/attire
  - Initial greeting
  - Being considerate of the interviewee’s time
  - Allowing enough time for the interviewee to respond to the questions
  - How to take notes and/or record during the interview

- How to conduct follow-up questions
- Sending the interviewee a thank you email after the email
- And allowing the interviewee the opportunity to read the reflection once it is written).

For question eight, “Writing the interview reflections was clearly presented by the instructor,” 54.5% of the students agreed and 45.5% of the students strongly agreed. One of the reasons why the numbers favored this side of the scale was due to the fact that I had examples of students’ interview reflections from previous semester to show students as well as allowing them to work on the interview reflections in class “workshops.”

Another reason that students felt as if they understood how to write out the reflections was because I offered them the opportunity to email me drafts before they turned them in. While I encouraged students to share their reflection drafts with their peers in the classroom, I did require them to engage in peer review sessions. One of the reasons why I chose not to incorporate a peer review element in this assignment was because I felt that it was too early in the semester to expect the students to understand what type of feedback to give in a peer review session. I wanted to show students how I read over their essays and make comments to give them a framework in which they can use for future assignments within the class.

Below is the final question (question 9) I asked the students on the survey and the student responses:

What did you like or not like about the resume and interviews? Please respond below.

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*I liked the interviews because since I did the professional interviews it gave me confidence in approaching professionals in the workforce.*

*This was a great project to do. It’s an ice breaker for us not only to find out about our careers but to present ourselves as future professionals.*

*The interviews were an amazing idea. After interviewing some people I had a completely different perspective on some of the options I was confused about. Because of the interview, I think my confusions slimmed.*

*I really liked the fact that we were able to get other perspectives on the major/job field we are interested in. It honestly helped a lot because now I know what some of the ups and downs are and I can more realistically consider these jobs. The resume is good too because it will help us in the future.*

*I didn’t like the fact that it was very difficult to locate the interviewer, I liked the whole idea of the interviews because it gave me an opportunity to meet my soon to be professor and get there opinion on how they felt about their career and its challenges.*

*I enjoyed this project to a very high extent. It tested not only my communication skills but helped me gain confidence for future projects. Coming in contact with people who have had experience that I don't yet have given me an excellent idea of what to expect in coming years.*

*What I liked about this project was being able to interview people that I already knew and I didn't know. I was able to meet new people and know more about the person that I already knew.*

*Fun and good experience!!!*

*I liked the different way of learning critical thinking.*

*The resume showed how much I need to add and it's important to know how to write one, in the interview I think were helpful for my career and my writing skills.*

*The resume wasn't really a writing assignment to me. The interviews were really fun to do, I enjoyed doing them.*

*I like the interview because I learn about the professional experience of the engineer.*

*I liked how we worked on the interviews during class and how the professor helped us throughout the assignment. Awesome job Mr. W.*

*I liked how we got our own creative style to go about the interviews.*

*It was discouraging when the person I interviewed would have to cancel.*

*I really enjoyed this project*

*It was interesting and it was a good way to get more involved with your major/future career field.*

*I liked everything about it.*

*What I didn't like is that people didn't respond. I know that they are busy but they can respond by saying no or yes.*

*Everything is great.*

*What I liked and found out very interesting about the resume and interviews is that it helped me a lot in knowing more about my major and leading me to a better path in where I am right now and were I need to be.*

### Qualitative data analysis

Many of the students saw the benefit of interviewing someone within their major or future career/professions. By conducting the semi-formal interviews, the students got to put a

face or name to the major or career/profession they are going into one day. Based on the “thick description” (borrowing from Wright’s description) in the students’ reflections, they did more than observe or simply note down what the interviewees’ said, but many students also made a connection with the knowledge and information between interviewees, as well as to their own understanding and expectations from their majors and future careers/professions.

Some of the students expressed a level of frustration when the potential interviewees did not respond back to their emails or had to cancel. This could be reflected from discrepancy in numbers in question two, the difficulty in locating individuals to interview, and in question three, having enough time to conduct all three interviews before the due date, in the survey. Because of the possibility of students ending up with “incomplete research,” teachers and students would have to think of strategies and tactics in order to finish the assignment by a particular due date. Another possibility is that teachers would have to either negotiate grading scales and/or allow the students more time to successfully do their interviews.

### Findings in the students’ writing

In this section of the paper, I discuss my findings in the students’ writing based on the resume and interview assignment, as well as the grades the students earned.

#### *The resume*

All of the students turned in the first part of the assignment which was the professional resume. Besides explaining the importance of a resume and showing them examples, I offered to read over the students’ resumes and give them some helpful feedback or suggestions as to what they could tweak or improve in order to receive full credit. Almost all of the students took me up on this offer. Misspelled words were a common issue in the students writing. One of the largest issues that students struggled with was trying to organize their resumes in order to make them effective.

Depending on what they wanted to emphasize the most in their resumes, I instructed students to list their interests, education, goals, extracurricular activities, etc. as to how they would like someone to “see” them from an academic and professional standpoint. Many of the students took my suggestions and altered their resumes before turning them in for a final grade. I encouraged the students to use the university’s writing center in the library for an additional set of eyes to read over their resumes. I also encouraged the students to read over one another’s resume in order to get an idea of how their peers were constructing theirs.

#### *The interview assignment*

One of the reasons that I allowed the students to send me drafts of their interview reflections was because I wanted to become familiar with their writing styles and to see if they had any issues within their writing. I am not limiting “issues” simply to “skills,” such as grammar and punctuation or syntax and semantics, but mainly to see if they fully comprehended what I expected them to do with the interview assignment. I usually gave students fairly detailed feedback in my comments during the formative stages of assessment.

The more detailed types of comments I gave usually dealt with global issues, so I offered explanations and examples of what the students could do to alter it. I tried not to misinterpret the meaning in their writing, although I cannot be completely sure of this. I also tried to avoid the run-of-the-mill types of comments, such as “Excellent work!” or “Very good description!” Instead, I tried to offer the students explanations on why it was excellent or examples of what I meant by good description. While this seems time consuming to do in the early stages of drafting, there is a benefit when it comes to the summative part of assessment because there is usually less to comment on when issuing out the final grade.

Occasionally, I offered feedback or suggestions for misspelled words, misused words (i.e. “defiantly” for “definitely,” or “there” for “their”), although I rarely had to comment on possible sentence re-arrangements. In the case of the students whose first language was not English, I spent a little more time commenting on sentence structures, such as missing verbs, verb tenses, missing articles (i.e. a, the), use of prepositions, repetition of information, and run-on sentences. Many of the students who did take me up on my offer to read over their drafts before turning them in for a final grade did usually alter their writing based on my feedback and suggestions.

Many students I noticed during the formative and summative stages of assessment struggled with the APA format/style. A few of the students revealed to me that they had been taught or had used MLA in high school, so when it came to citing direct quotes from the interviews, they had no problem (of course, this is just introducing the interviewee and what they said, there was no citation beyond that within the text, such as in citing information from a written primary source). The students who did take me up on offer to read over their drafts before they submitted them for a final grade did tend to take the feedback and suggestions that I offered them and make the changes or further alter their essays to better fit the APA format.

However, there were a few students who still struggled with understanding the APA format and style of writing (basically the page dimensions, acceptable font sizes and styles, and how to construct a cover sheet). I think that this is my fault because while we discussed what APA formatting is before they started writing their reflections, we concentrated too much time on *how* to write in APA, but not *why* we should use it in such an assignment. I think that by explaining and exploring why it is important to use APA formatting for writing the interview reflections would have helped the students to connect the type of research with the kind of writing that is expected with that type of assignment.

As for the reflection aspect of the interview assignment, many of the students offered enough “thick description” by elaborating on the questions and interviewees’ responses and connecting them with their own knowledge, experiences, or interests in their majors and future careers/professions. A few students did just produce transcripts of the interviews—basically listing the questions they asked their interviewees and the responses they received. However, the students who did just offer their interview reflections in form of transcripts with minor analysis did still produce description rich final reflections with the information and knowledge they had received from the interviewees.

While grading the interview reflections, I noticed that one of the students had converted his essays into PDF files and I could not comment on them. I decided to write him a separate

“note” offering comments on each reflection. I considered trying this out on the other students’ regular MS Word document files, but decided against because I wanted them to actually see my feedback and comments with their writing at the same time.

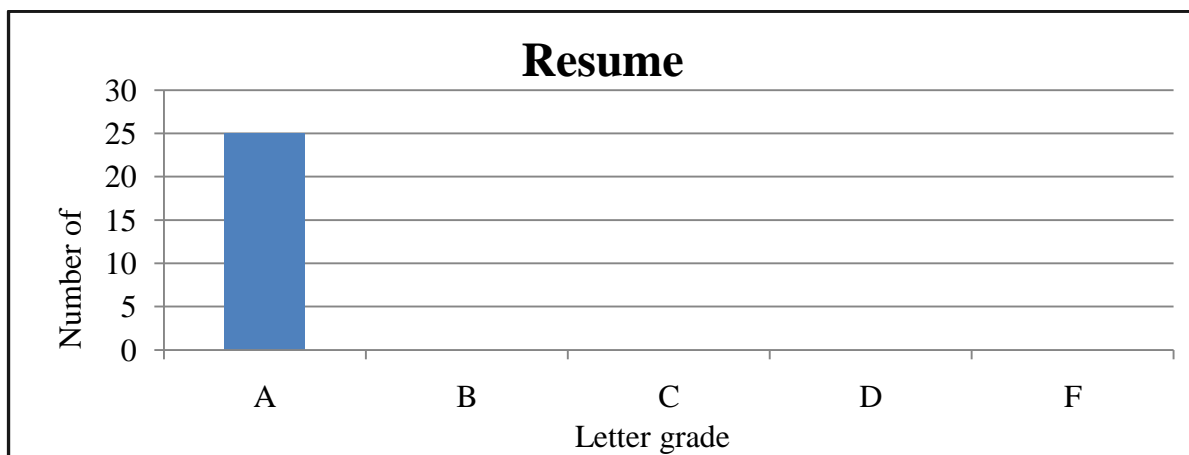
I feel as if I need to explain why I chose not to incorporate peer review sessions into the assignment. At first sight, the interview assignment appears to be built for engaging students in peer review sessions where they can share and read over one another’s writing, offering constructive feedback and suggestions. I have attempted using peer review sessions with this interview assignment before, providing them with a framework, such as things to look for in the writing or the kinds of questions to ask about the writing.

However, I quickly noticed that many of the students either did not provide the necessary feedback or suggestions as to how to improve their writing or sought me out to validate a suggestion they had made about another students’ writing. While I was not acting as the “holder of knowledge,” but more of as a guide, I still felt that the students would not make or move on a comment or suggestions until they got my approval. Another factor that complicated incorporating peer review sessions was the nature of this assignment.

In order to have a successful peer review session, students would need to have drafts. While many of the students were successfully getting their interviews done and writing their reflections on them, not all of the students were at the same place or stage. This was due to the fact that many students were waiting on their interviewees’ approval to conduct the interview, or they had just conducted the interview and were just starting to write out their reflection on it. I encouraged the students to use the university’s writing center in the library for an additional set of eyes to read over their interview reflections. I also encouraged the students to read over one another’s reflections in order to get an idea of how their peers were constructing theirs.

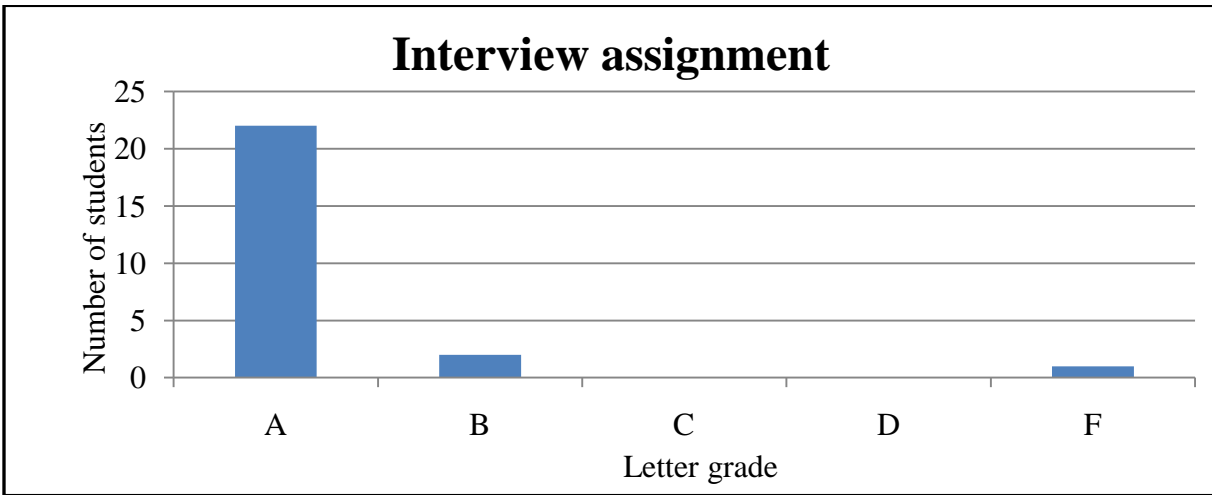
Below are the grade ranges that students made on the resume and interview assignment. All grades were based on a 100 point scale, A =90-100, B = 89-80, C = 79-70, D = 69-60, and F = 59-below.

Grades for the resume





## Grades for the interview assignment



## Data analysis for the resume and the interview assignment

Every student turned and received full credit on their professional resume. On the interview assignment, almost all of the students made “A’s.” Two students made “B’s.” Only one student did not turn in the assignment, therefore losing 10% of their overall grade. At first glance, the interview assignment looks as if it is an “all or nothing assignment” or a “pass or fail” type of assignment. However, while many students made “A’s” on the interview assignment, it does not mean that they earned a perfect score of 16 checkmarks. Many of the students earned the minimum of 14 checkmarks, which still equals an “A.”

One of the concerns that arose with the grading rubric was that a student could skip an interview reflection essay and still successfully write a final reflection with only two interviews. However, students completing only one interview would not have worked, since there would have been no synthesis required, nor a final reflection to write. I will have to reexamine the interview assignment’s grading rubric and see if there is a way to make state that in order to earn full credit (or make an “A”) on this assignment, students must complete all three interview reflections.

## Limitations

One of the limitations of the study was the limited scope. The study only involved one teacher and one group of students. The teacher designed, implemented the assignment, collected it, and graded it. While the resume and interview assignment was conducted previously at another university (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi), this was the first time that this assignment had been used with freshmen in the composition classroom at the University of Texas at El Paso. Ideally, more than one instructor would need to use the resume and interview assignment in their classrooms, preferably set up against a control group, and then repeated over a course of two or three semesters in order to prove replicability.

### Conclusion

I have been using a continuously evolving version of the resume and interview assignment in the freshmen composition classroom. What would I change after this current evolution of this resume and interview assignment? I am not sure if I would alter the assignment description or the grading rubric, but I think that I would somewhat alter my approach to how I introduce or structure my classroom around, especially with the kinds of activities that help students get prepared for conducting their interviews. As with almost any writing assignment, there is a certain level of exigency there that requires the students to act or think about their motivations and goals and purposes. However, with the interviews there is almost a more heightened sense of exigency, possibly due to the fact that they do not only have to meet a deadline for a writing assignment but also have an “outside (real) audience” that they will be interacting with via their interviews.

One last thing that I would like to mention, although this was unexpected development that I did not anticipate, was that many students seemed to use the interviews as a springboard for developing a research question(s) to research. While the theory backing this assignment seems to be solid and the pedagogy seems to be successful, more research and studies within this area are needed to prove this approach’s replicability and validity. For teachers interested in using this approach an assignment, I strongly suggest that they take it and make it their own otherwise it will be as if the teachers are merely “copying and pasting” ideas as their own and not truly seeing the underlying value, and theory, of them.

## Appendix A

Choice 1: Fall Semester 2009 Writing Assignments #1 (Resume) (10% of your grade) & #2 (Interviews) (10% of your grade)

Writing Assignment 1: A professional resume (electronic submission to your PBWorks wiki pages). This assignment will be due on **September 9, 2009, by 3:00 pm.**

A series of 3 interviews conducted in 3 different communities: *personal*, *department on campus*, and *peer/classmate*. Develop questions, set up a meeting time either through the email or by the telephone, act polite at the interview, ask questions slowly, allow adequate time for interviewee to respond and to elaborate, take notes during each interview, be consciousness of interviewee's time, thank interviewee for their time and answers, write a 1-2 page reflection on interviewee's responses, any observations, send a email thanking the interviewee for their time and help, ask if they would like to read a copy of the reflection you wrote after the interview; after all 3 reflections are written, synthesize them into 1 large written document, adding any new information or insight you have gleaned through this assignment (electronic submissions to your PBWorks' wiki page). This assignment will be due on **October 2, 2009 by 3:00 pm.**

## Writing Assignment Breakdown

- 1 professional resume (my improve one if students already has one)
- 1-2 page reflective paper of Interview 1 (family member or close friend interview)
- 1-2 page reflective paper of Interview 2 (someone from a campus department interview)
- 1-2 page reflective paper of Interview 3 (classmate interview)
- 3-5 page final paper, synthesizing all 3 interviews into one paper

## Appendix B

Choice 2: Fall Semester 2009 Writing Assignments #1 (Resume) (10% of your grade) & #2 (Interviews) (10% of your grade)

Writing Assignment 1: A professional resume (electronic submission to PBWorks' wiki pages)

- This assignment will be due on **September 9, 2009 by 3:00 pm.**

Writing Assignment 2: A series of 3 interviews conducted in 3 different communities: *Academic*, *professional*, and *business*. Develop questions, set up a meeting time either through the email or by the telephone, act polite at the interview, ask questions slowly, allow adequate time for interviewee to respond and to elaborate, take notes during each interview, be consciousness of interviewee's time, thank interviewee for their time and answers, write a 1-2 page reflection on interviewee's responses, any observations, send a email thanking the interviewee for their time and help, ask if they would like to read a copy of the reflection you wrote after the interview; after all 3 reflections are written, synthesize them into 1 large written document, adding any new information or insight you have gleaned through this assignment (electronic submissions to PBWorks' wiki pages). This assignment will be due on **October 2, 2009 by 3:00 pm.**

### Writing Assignment Breakdown

- 1 professional resume (my improve one if students already has one)
- 1-2 page reflective paper of Interview 1 (academic or professional interview in APA format)
- 1-2 page reflective paper of Interview 2 (academic or professional interview in APA format)
- 1-2 page reflective paper of Interview 3 (academic or professional interview in APA format)
- 3-5 page final paper, synthesizing all 3 interviews into one paper (in APA format)

## Appendix C

## Writing Assignment #1: The Resume Grading Rubric

This is a progressive-formative rubric, which means that the requirements to complete the writing assignment below will eventually grow with the following writing assignment that you will put into your portfolio. It does not mean that you have to repeat some of these requirements, but it rather suggests that you see these 6 separate writing assignments as a semester long project. Each check mark indicates that you have engaged in the required tasks in order to complete the assignment. A check mark indicates that you receive full credit.

**Due on:** September 9, 2009, uploaded to your PBWorks wiki page by 3:00 pm.

**GRADING SCALE**

8 check marks = 98: A, 7-6 check marks = 89: B, 5-4 check marks = 79: C, 4-3 check marks = 69: D; 2-0 check marks = F.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

- Does the resume follow the template provided (or an approved template)? \_\_\_\_\_
- Is the resume consistent throughout (i.e. font size for headings, text fonts, etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does the resume display the student's best achievements, activities, organizations, awards, etc.? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does the resume list at least 2 references? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are all words, names, schools, etc. spelled correctly on the resume? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are acronyms (i.e. University of Texas at El Paso = UTEP) spelled out in full? \_\_\_\_\_
- Is the resume relatively free of non-standard academic uses of English? Are deviations of style/usage appropriate and effective? \_\_\_\_\_
- Has the final resume been properly uploaded to the student's wiki page as an attached Microsoft Word document? \_\_\_\_\_

Total Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

## Writing Assignment #2: The “Interviews” Essays Grading Rubric

This is a progressive-formative rubric, which means that the requirements to complete the writing assignment below will eventually grow with the following writing assignment that you will put into your portfolio. It does not mean that you have to repeat some of these requirements, but it rather suggests that you see these 6 separate writing assignments as a semester long project. Each check mark indicates that you have engaged in the required tasks in order to complete the assignment. A check mark indicates that you receive full credit.

**Due on:** October 2, 2009, uploaded to your PBWorks wiki page by 3:00 pm.

**GRADING SCALE**

16-14 check marks = 98: A, 13-11 check marks = 89: B, 10-8 check marks = 79: C, 7-5 check marks = 69: D; 4-0 check marks = F.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

- You stayed in constant contact with your composition teacher and any team members during the construction of portfolio one and has the necessary documentation to prove it (i.e. emails, plans, phone numbers, class meetings/discussions) \_\_\_\_\_
- You have arranged a visit(s) to your campus community(ies), have proof of the email that you sent to conduct an interview, as well as the response of the individual(s) \_\_\_\_\_
- You have developed appropriate questions that you plan to ask individual(s) within various discourse communities, with constructive feedback from any peers, and composition instructor (i.e. in-class conferences or separate conferences with me outside of class) \_\_\_\_\_
- You have adequately reflected on the answers or responses from the staff, faculty, or individuals from the various discourse communities, as well as proof (i.e. that the those individuals have approved the use of that information within an academic essay or in a presentation on campus) \_\_\_\_\_
- You have proof of any rough drafts (reflection essays), as well as a final essay, that shows both primary and secondary sources (if any) properly cited \_\_\_\_\_
  - Reflective interview papers (3 total mini-papers, 1-2 pages in length):
    - 1 from an academic community \_\_\_\_\_
    - 1 from a personal/professional community \_\_\_\_\_
    - 1 from your campus/professional/academic community \_\_\_\_\_
  - Final Essay-document (Synthesizing all 3 interview reflections into one):
    - Does the writer describe the various communities/observations/answers in detail?  
\_\_\_\_\_
    - Is your paper relatively free of non-standard academic uses of English? Are deviations of style/usage appropriate and effective? \_\_\_\_\_
    - Is there a logical flow to your ideas? \_\_\_\_\_
    - Is each paragraph unified? \_\_\_\_\_
    - Are there effective transitions between your paragraphs? \_\_\_\_\_

- Does the writer exhibit appropriate appeals and an awareness of audience, purpose, and context? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does it encourage the reader to read the essay? \_\_\_\_\_
- You have shown that you have fully reflected on the primary research (i.e. the interviews)

\_\_\_\_\_

Total Grade : \_\_\_\_\_

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