

Sarah Andrew-Vaughan and Cathy Fleischer

# Researching Writing: The Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project

Sarah Andrew-Vaughan and Cathy Fleischer ask their students to investigate a genre of writing that they find challenging or unfamiliar, recognize the characteristics that define the genre, and then write an original piece in the genre. Students reflect on their process of inquiry throughout and gain confidence by writing in a challenging form.

**T**ake out two different colored highlighters and clear your desk of everything else, please,” I (Sarah) announce to a room of talkative ninth graders. “We’re going to explore some of your fears about writing today.”

Two students shoot worried looks across the room while another pair simultaneously grin, knowing I’m up to something. As copies of the

**I want them to honestly select a genre that is foreign or intimidating, so I repeatedly assure them throughout the process (and in the rubric) that this is primarily a research project, and although original writing in their chosen genre will be the centerpiece of the presentation, the writing quality is only worth a fraction of the final grade.**

introduction to our Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project circulate through the room (see fig. 1), I ask students to fold the handout in half, hamburger-style, demonstrating with my copy. The bottom half of the front page consists of a three-column list of writing genres, a version of the list I will use later in the year when I introduce the multigenre research project.

“So far this year, most of you have chosen to write in genres that are either pretty comfortable for you or in genres that we worked on together

as a class. Today we’re going to start something a little different. For this next writing project, I want you to purposely choose another kind of genre to write in—a genre that for some reason you find unfamiliar. Here’s how we’ll start: Using your high-

lighters, make a key in the margin. Use your darker color for genres you like or tend to write in and the lighter color for genres that are challenging or kind of scare you.” As I speak, I’m making my own key on an overhead transparency of the handout.

“Please use your ‘like’ color to highlight all the genres you like or tend to write in. Go ahead and work through the list now.” Students again shoot looks at each other, seeing what their friends are marking. Soon, however, they’re busy at work, marking those genres they’ve been writing in for most of their lives. “When you finish, pick up your other highlighter and mark the genres you tend to shy away from as well as those you’ve simply never tried to write in. Not all of the items on your page will be highlighted, and that’s OK.”

Students keep looking at the list, occasionally asking for clarification. One student asks, “What’s flash fiction?”

I open it up to the class. “Does anybody know? What does it sound like? Maybe that’s one that is worth investigating.”

In this research project, I invite students to read, critically analyze, and experiment with writing in a challenging or unfamiliar genre. I want them to honestly select a genre that is foreign or intimidating, so I repeatedly assure them throughout the process (and in the rubric) that this is primarily a research project, and although original writing in their chosen genre will be the centerpiece of the presentation, the writing quality is only worth a fraction of the final grade.

FIGURE 1. Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project (Front Page)

**Project Overview: Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project**

After spending a semester in workshop, we've begun to discover our strengths and preferences in reading and writing. Because we each have distinctive experiences with the many genres we encounter, it's also true that we have our own comfort levels with each genre. (Perhaps you prefer to write fictional stories, or perhaps making up whole stories from scratch seems impossible to you.) In this project, I will ask you to identify the genres that are personally challenging—genres you are not particularly familiar with, that may intimidate you, or that you tend to avoid. From these, I would like you to honestly select one genre that you do not ordinarily choose to write in but would like to learn more about. This project asks you to investigate, read, and write in a genre that is personally challenging. It has several purposes: to learn to study genres (which you can apply to future genres you will encounter, such as college and SAT essays) and to learn *your* research process while *using* your research to create something you might otherwise think is too difficult.

**Picking an Unfamiliar Genre**

We'll begin this project with honest soul-searching as you pick a genre that challenges or intimidates you. To ensure that you pick a genre that is truly unfamiliar, rest assured that the quality of the final piece will only account for a small part of your grade on the project; engaging in the research process and the reflective journal will constitute most of your grade. (See the rubric.) A proposal in which you identify your challenging genre along with an explanation of why you chose it and what you'd like to learn is due as you enter the library for our presearch.

Here are some genres you might consider exploring. Don't limit yourself to these!

Application <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• college</li> <li>• job</li> <li>• scholarship</li> </ul>	Last Will and Testament	Poetry (many kinds—pick one) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ballad</li> <li>• cinquain</li> <li>• epic</li> <li>• free verse</li> <li>• haiku</li> <li>• ode</li> <li>• sestina</li> <li>• sonnet</li> <li>• two-voice</li> <li>• others!</li> </ul>
Art commentary	Letter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• business</li> <li>• complaint</li> <li>• condolence</li> <li>• cover</li> <li>• letter to the editor</li> <li>• of recommendation</li> <li>• to representative</li> </ul>	
a Bill		
Books <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children's book</li> <li>• cookbook</li> <li>• flip book</li> <li>• graphic novel</li> <li>• how-to book</li> <li>• instruction booklet</li> <li>• pop-up book</li> <li>• user's manual</li> </ul>	Memoir	
Brochure/pamphlet	Microfiction/flash fiction	
Closing or opening arguments	Newspaper/magazine <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• news article</li> <li>• feature article</li> <li>• in-depth report</li> <li>• personality profile</li> <li>• obituary</li> <li>• opinion column</li> <li>• editorial</li> <li>• sports</li> <li>• review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• book</li> <li>• CD</li> <li>• movie</li> <li>• play</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Public service announcement
Constitution (organizational)		Résumé
Critique of art/photography		Scrapbook
Dialogue		Script <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• commercial (TV or radio)</li> <li>• monologue</li> <li>• one-act</li> <li>• puppet show</li> <li>• radio play</li> <li>• screenplay</li> <li>• skit</li> <li>• soliloquy</li> </ul>
Essay <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• personal (college)</li> <li>• prose</li> <li>• literary criticism</li> </ul>		Short story
Eulogy	Novel or novella	Song (lyrics with music)
Guide (e.g., citizen's guide)	Parody	Speech
Lab report		Vignette collection

FIGURE 1. Continued (Back Page)

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**The Research Journal**

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Although research includes many steps, the order of these steps may vary, as in writing. To some extent, this project is intended to allow you to discover your research process. You may want to jump right into a draft. You may prefer to begin by reading (and collecting) samples of your genre. Perhaps you will begin by journaling: you might first deal with your fears by putting them to paper. Whatever your process, metacognition, thinking about your thinking, is an important part of this research project. Throughout this study, keep a journal—handwritten or typed, your preference—of your experiences. Use this journal to keep track of your research strategy as well as your feelings about each stage of the work. You must write in this journal each time you work on the project.

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**Reading in Your Unfamiliar Genre**

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One part of your research in this genre study is simply to read within the genre. Please limit yourself to published works (no student samples). As you are reading, collect the best five to ten samples you can find and analyze how they were crafted. We'll practice this in class! You will compile these analytical notes in an annotated bibliography (again, we'll learn all about this in class), so, as you are reading, take notes on the writer's craft, structure, and strategies used in each piece. Remember to write down the information you'll need for your bibliography in MLA style when you first get the piece to save yourself the frustration of having to go back for this information.

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**Writing in Your Unfamiliar Genre**

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The centerpiece of this project, of course, will be a finished piece in your chosen (unfamiliar) genre. You must take this piece through several drafts, including parent, peer, and teacher conferences (required). Before you actually get to your final piece, it's likely that you will experiment with the genre—you may have several starts before you write the piece you will finish for your final project.

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“Now, read through the items you just highlighted—the ones that intimidate or are unfamiliar to you—and circle two or three that are interesting enough that you're willing to learn more about them.” Discussion slowly breaks out as students contemplate, privately and aloud, whether they will choose a genre that is truly unfamiliar or pick something “safe.” To capture this dilemma, I ask students to write about the options they are considering and work through the pros and cons of each. I then use this opportunity to introduce the research journal—a key component of the Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project—for which

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**Reflective Letter**

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When you finish the best draft of your writing and as you are compiling your research binder, take the time to reread your research journal and reflect on your experience over these six weeks. Now read your best draft again, thinking about what you have learned about yourself as a reader, writer, and researcher. With all this in mind, write a reflective letter explaining what you've learned about genre through this project and how you've demonstrated your newfound knowledge in your best draft.

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**Research Binder**

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The final project will take the form of a research binder. It should be typed, organized, and easy to navigate. Your binder should include the following (make one tab for each category):

- Your research (metacognition) journal, with an entry for each time you work on the project
  - Your final piece, with a reflection
  - Your experimental writing, all drafts, and all conference notes
  - An annotated bibliography of five to ten of the best samples you can find in the genre
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**Parent/Guardian Letter**

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As you know, I think it's important to share your hard work with your parents and guardians. When you are completely finished with your Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project, share it with your parents or guardians and ask them to write a letter *to you* in response to your work.

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they've just written the first entry. This journal entry also has a second purpose: it becomes a prewrite for their research proposal, which they will later need to enter the library while they conduct a presearch to ensure that they can find plenty of examples that they *want to read* in their chosen genres. Thus, the project begins: a project that asks students to identify a genre they find challenging, to gather and analyze model examples of that genre, to identify key characteristics of that genre, to write in the genre, and to keep a research journal in which they think through the project and attempt various drafts.

## A Case for the Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project

This project has several purposes for high school students: to learn basic research strategies, to engage in a genre study while practicing strategies real writers use to approach new material, to identify the processes we each use to learn about that which is unfamiliar, and to use research to create something students might otherwise think is too difficult.

Perhaps the most important quality of the Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project is that it asks students to *use* their research by experimenting with and drafting in the genre they have studied. Applying their newfound knowledge is a critical step beyond research projects that only ask students to present the information they've gathered. Actually using the research, we know from Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Masia, and Krathwohl), will cement the ideas and strategies students encounter in this project into their memories. It will also provide students with the confidence of having "figured out" the constraints and demands of particular genres, especially when they next encounter challenging and perhaps high-stakes genres, such as SAT essays or college applications.

In contrast, the intention of the traditional research project is too often limited to teaching students the research process, generally with the expectation that students know how to write in the "research paper" genre. Other alternative approaches to the research paper expand on the traditional approach: The I-Search paper as developed by Ken Macrorie, for example, recognizes the need to engage students in a personally relevant and interesting topic; the multigenre research project as developed by Tom Romano takes a further step by acknowledging that an extended essay is not the only germane form in which to present one's findings. Building on these alternatives, the Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project both incorporates the efficacy of these projects and extends them by asking students to use their findings and actually write in the genre they've chosen to study.

An added attraction of the Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project is that its topic is reading and writing. The research topics English teachers offer students often have nothing to do with reading or

writing; this project shines a spotlight on English as a research subject.

## Background

In a college classroom just ten miles down the road, preservice teachers are engaged in their version of the Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project. Cathy Fleischer, professor of English education at Eastern Michigan University, began this project as a way for these soon-to-be teachers to think carefully about their writing as well as to consider what it might be like for their future students when they are asked (as students commonly are) to write in a genre with which they aren't familiar.

"How many of you have ever been told to write in a genre when you didn't feel very knowledgeable about that genre?" As almost all her students raise their hands, Cathy continues. "What did that feel like? What did you wish you'd known about the genre?" As students share their experiences and their wishes, she pushes them further. "How about now? Are there still some genres you feel challenged by? What are those?" As students start to reel off a variety of genres, from sonnet to drama to analysis to short story, they also begin to share their discomfort in knowing they may soon have to instruct students in the genres with which they feel most challenged.

"How can I possibly teach poetry?" one student cries out. "I hate poetry! And the time my eleventh-grade English teacher made me write a sonnet was the worst moment of my school life. I couldn't get the rhythm, I couldn't get the rhyme, I couldn't think of anything to say, and I still don't understand it. All I learned was that I hate Shakespeare!"

Thus, the college version of the Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project begins. Cathy also asks students to select a genre that they find challenging in order to learn more about it—through research into the genre and practice writing in it. And, like my students, Cathy's students keep a research journal of their experience in which they reflect not only on their newfound knowledge of the genre but also on the experience of their immersion into it: How did it feel to write

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in a genre that is uncomfortable or unfamiliar? How do you think your future students might feel if you simply assigned a genre without giving a lot of background—a sonnet, for example, or any other genre

**The research journal's content should document each student's attempts, false starts, experiments, and approaches while evaluating how each method worked and how it felt. I want students to reflect on frustrations as well as successes so that they might begin to determine what their processes look like.**

that might seem uncomfortable or scary to them? What strategies did you use to feel more comfortable with that genre? How could you adapt those strategies to help students feel ready to take on that genre?

After Cathy shared the basics of this project with me, I decided to adapt it for use with my students; it seemed like the perfect project to precede a multigenre research unit. Since then, this project has evolved as the two of us have worked together, talking about the

project and its value to two different groups of students, visiting each other's classes to see how this project actually plays out for our two different audiences, and continually revising the project for each group. While the purposes of the project differ somewhat in each setting, what we find intriguing is this: Both college students and high school students benefit from this kind of immersion in genre as they become the central inquirers into how genre works. Research takes on new meaning—both groups learn that various genres have particular constructs and that understanding those constructs can help them gain the confidence they need to figure out the intricacies of any genre. An added benefit—we hope—is that by sharing my forays into the Unfamiliar-Genre Research Project with the preservice teachers, Cathy's students begin to acknowledge that alternatives to the traditional research paper are indeed possible in a real classroom; they see how they might adapt their experience in Cathy's class to their future classes.

### Overview of the High School Experience

Over six weeks, the high school students will spend about half of their class time and much of their homework time working on the project. Class periods are devoted to library visits, lessons, and workshops. The teacher-led lessons involve introducing expectations, presenting sample projects that we'll analyze for

strengths and weaknesses, demonstrating how to keep a research journal, practicing how to identify genre conventions through reading examples, role-playing conferencing strategies, writing annotations, and formatting a bibliography using MLA style. At least one day a week is devoted exclusively to workshopping this project. Conferencing is emphasized throughout: Every student is required to conference ideas, drafts, and experiments with classmates as well as a parent or guardian and, of course, the teacher.

Students present their projects in a research binder (see fig. 1). The binders include separate sections for (1) the best draft of original writing in the studied genre with a reflection on how the piece demonstrates the student's research as well as what the student learned in the roles of reader, writer, and researcher; (2) all experimental writing, drafts, and conference notes; (3) a bibliography of five to ten samples that the student read in his or her chosen genre with an annotation explaining the analysis of the conventions, style, structure, traits, strategies, and so forth as well as the quality of the piece; and (4) the student's research (metacognition) journal.

The rubric I use for this project is broad; it includes ten categories worth 10 percent each. Just as students analyze their chosen samples for craft and evaluate their quality, the first two categories ask the same of the students' final drafts of the genres they have chosen. A third category credits students for their self-evaluation. They receive 20 percent of their grade for their process and are given credit for the experiments, drafts, and conference notes. Students compile their observations from the research process in an annotated bibliography, which is weighted heavily with another 20 percent. I expect that the final drafts of their genre, reflection, and annotated bibliography are polished and proofread, which accounts for another 10 percent. (This rubric is on *EJ* on the Web. The URL is at the end of this article.)

### The Research Journal

*Metacognition* is one of the first terms students learn in my classes. I cannot stress enough how important it is to be conscious of and evaluate the internal dialogue we engage in as we think, read, write, and learn. In this project, I am specifically interested in helping students internalize what all teachers know: each person's process is a little different but

includes common strategies and skills. As I see it, my job is to introduce useful skills and strategies; the students' job is to try them out and find a process that works.

I want students to understand that they have the power to learn about that which is unfamiliar and that they can employ this power with or without a graded assignment. As with all worthwhile ventures, a core intention of this project is to nudge students toward lifelong learning.

I require the research journal to help students make this subtle venture more pronounced (see fig. 1). The research journal's content should document each student's attempts, false starts, experiments, and approaches while evaluating how each method worked and how it felt. I want students to reflect on frustrations as well as successes so that they might begin to determine what their processes look like. I also want students to internalize the common wisdom that the process, far more than the result, is key to learning.

## Researching Lessons

Most of the direct instruction associated with this project is focused on demonstrating for the students how to evaluate writing samples and then how to compile those observations into an annotated bibliography.

My first lesson in this series, a handout with a short, fake news story I wrote, awaits students as they take their seats. We talk about defining characteristics—what makes a news story different from any other genre? As a class, we brainstorm a few obvious and more subtle characteristics as I mark them on an overhead transparency of the handout: columnar layout, short (often one-sentence) paragraphs, paragraph-long standalone quotes.

When it is clear that students are picking up the idea of defining characteristics, we divide into small, heterogeneous groups and continue the job. When it seems that groups are beginning to lose focus, I ask them to look for two additional characteristics and distribute my second handout, a copy of the original with the addition of thirty-six observations specific to news stories. (These two handouts are on *EJ* on the Web.) As no group has come up with more than half of these, they are amazed and impressed with what one can find when one looks carefully at a text—and this is a simple, two-hundred-word piece!

Of course, as students are quick to point out, I am experienced and comfortable with newswriting; this is supposed to be an unfamiliar genre. Of course. The point of the lesson is that through the course of our research, we must read in our selected genres *to become familiar with* the conventions, structures, layout, style, voice, strategies, and other defining characteristics used to craft them. Through their analysis of multiple samples, students begin to observe that while each genre looks and reads in a recognizable way, professional writers do not follow strict formulas.

I expect students to perform a variation of this lesson on each of the samples they select for their annotated bibliography and then to use these observations to write each annotation. In future lessons, we will analyze the genre of annotations and will collectively write an annotation for the news story from the handout.

**Students are apprentices experimenting with the tools they observe the experts using in their sample pieces.**

## The Workshop Approach

Additional class time is spent teaching and reteaching workshop essentials, especially role-playing writing conferences, much like Nancie Atwell describes in *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*. I require students to conference with at least one classmate, a parent or guardian, and me. During writing conferences, I expect students to read their drafts aloud and take notes; I make it clear that simply trading papers and never actually talking to conference partners is unacceptable. Talking through writing choices and intentions is an important part of a writer's research process.

A note on conferencing: Students value one-on-one time with teachers as much as we do with them. Further, class sizes of twenty-five to thirty or more are a reality of public schools. As such, the quick check-in Atwell recommends during every writing workshop doesn't happen in my classroom. Even by spreading conferences over several periods, and because many students request a conference with me closer to the project due date, I find it impossible to conference with every student during in-class workshop time. Because I believe that students genuinely appreciate the time, I offer writing conferences before school, during lunch, and after

school in addition to in-class workshop time. Alternatively, additional workshop days might be added to the schedule to accommodate conference requests in the two weeks before the project is due.

Although I treasure the times when we devote our entire week to reading and writing workshop as Atwell does, the once-a-week workshops I offer during this unit provide a similar value at the core of this research project. Students are apprentices experimenting with the tools they observe the experts using in their sample pieces. This brings up an important point some students miss without my explicit reminders: their five to ten samples cannot simply be the first samples they find in their chosen genre but the best they find. Culling is an important research skill students learn in this project.

## Lessons Learned

Students repeatedly impress me with the breadth and depth of the work they voluntarily undertake in this project. Students choose genres as varied as microfiction, scrapbooking, sonnet, and novel as some of their unfamiliar genres. And it doesn't end there. Students report that within the six short weeks of the project, they are amazed by the dramatic changes they see in their learning.

"This project helped me a lot more than I expected it to," Leo, who studied cookbooks, wrote in his reflection. "I thought this was just going to be like any other project, but it was different from most of the ones that I have done before. . . . The project has opened my eyes to new forms of writing and has shown me how the format and aspects of writing make the piece. . . . As a reader, I will now pay more attention to different formats and styles of writing so I can incorporate them into my own. . . . I found myself just today reading my dad's newspaper and paying attention to the special way it was written."

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The rubric, news story, and news story with observations are all available as *EJ* Extensions on *EJ* on the Web. Visit <http://www.englishjournal.colostate.edu/Extensions/extensionsmain.htm>.

What's more, students internalize their new-found skills and feel empowered to put them to work.

"My writing benefited from having to pay such close attention to detail. . . . This was a change for me because I am used to writing where detail and specifics are not so important. It helped me develop some discipline. . . . I will never read a book or any other piece of written material quite the same again," reflected Susan, who investigated how-to books. "This project taught me to look for the specific qualities that make each genre unique. I now read as if I am on a treasure hunt, and I am searching for clues. . . . I have a brand new perspective on reading, one that I probably would not have learned without having done this project."

The students have convinced me that this project is a worthwhile and welcome addition to their ways of learning. They learn some traditional research skills—how to use the library, how to use the Internet, and how to critically assess and annotate their findings—and have the added benefit of applying those skills in an immediate and tangible fashion. The long-range benefits are important as well: As students learn more about the concept of genre, they are more-informed readers and writers, understanding in a real way that various genres have various demands and using that awareness to approach the new as well as the familiar genres they encounter. Further, researching their genre helps students gain confidence that they can take on new writing tasks—a tangible end to the sometimes elusive research unit.

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