
Making a Case for Writing Research Papers

By Stephen L. Broskoske, PhD.

When asked to prepare a research paper, many first-year college students tend to submit a position paper filled with opinion and unsubstantiated claims rather than a research paper. Recently, I have tried a new approach that seems to be helping students understand the task more thoroughly before they begin. Through a series of three PowerPoint presentations that I prepared, I present to my students the analogy that writing a research paper is like being a lawyer defending a court case. Students can relate to this analogy because there seems to never be a shortage of high-visibility court cases in the news to which I can refer. I draw out the analogy in terms of how lawyers frame their case (define their topic), search out evidence (search for sources), present the evidence (write the paper), and make the closing argument (draw a conclusion). I am finding that, if I frame their thinking in this way, the students write better papers.

First, I begin with the topic. I find that students typically submit a topic that is too broad and lacks focus. For example, I typically get topics like “Distance Learning” or “Assistive Technology.” Before a lawyer begins a case, he/she has to frame the case properly. Similarly, a writer has to frame the topic so that it is definable and defensible. While the topic of “Distance Learning” is too general, “Is Distance Learning Effective in Teaching/Learning?” can be

defended. Many students have wanted to research assistive technology, but did not know what to research or how to approach the task. If the topic is framed as “Benefits of

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Using Assistive Technology in the Classroom,” this is a case that can be defended. Defining topics in this manner guides students through the next steps in the process.

The second phase is searching out evidence to support the case. Referring to a current, highly visible court case, I indicate to students that although a lawyer might feel or believe certain “facts” about the client, these so-called facts are merely conjecture unless they are substantiated by evidence. Then I draw the analogy that the evidence researchers use is information from professional

literature. This leads to several other discussions:

- **What constitutes believable evidence?** The sources must be respected, scholarly material. After all, not all witnesses are believable. A witness may not add to the strength of the case, which may lead the jury to discount the testimony of that witness.
- **Is there sufficient evidence to support your case?** I prompt students to do a preliminary search of the professional literature to ensure there is sufficient research to support their topic. If not, I instruct them to either adjust the focus of their topic according to the material they are finding, or select another topic.
- **Selecting more sources rather than fewer is better because you have more on which to report.** I point out that it is difficult to write a multi-page paper using limited sources.

The third phase is presenting the evidence in court, which is analogous to writing the paper. At this point, I show students how to present their evidence in the context of the paper. Just like a lawyer would do, the students should introduce evidence to argue key points that will help them make their case. When viewed from this frame of reference, students can realize the importance of using an authoritative tone and of writing in the active voice. After all, evidence is presented live by witnesses who are on the stand.

The fourth phase is making the closing argument, which is the most critical time in a court case. A lawyer begins by reminding the jury of the argument he/she was attempting to make. Then, using a persuasive tone, the lawyer briefly reviews the entire case, highlighting the key points. The

FROM PAGE 12

lawyer then draws a conclusion, and rests the case. From this part of the analogy, students realize the important role of the conclusion section of the paper.

Finally, before actually going to court, a lawyer would review the

entire case to make sure there are no “holes” in the case, areas that could be discredited due to lack of evidence. This is analogous to looking over the paper to ensure that sufficient sources were cited to support the claims presented, and to ensure that the student made no unsubstantiated claims.

To view my PowerPoint files and other teaching materials, visit my Web page: www.misericordia.edu/academics/education/drsteve.

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