n.b. This is a handout Dr. Geoff Baker prepared for one of his 400-level literature courses, and he has graciously offered to share it with our class. I think this is a thorough & useful introduction to the topic, and contains much useful information. --RGD

How to Write a Research Paper in Literature

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The difference between a research paper and a paper for which no research is done is both simple (in that one uses research, while the other doesn't) and complex. A non-research paper is about a text and you, the writer, and your skills as a reader of a text. A research paper, on the other hand, can be about that and something larger. Critic Kenneth Burke describes it as an engagement in a conversation that may stretch back thousands of years and include any number of other scholarly voices. You contribute to that conversation by making yourself an informed participant in it. You become not just a careful reader of the text in question, but a historian of that text's life. You know when it was born, who its friends and enemies were, what it accomplished for better or for worse, and how it has been remembered by those who came after it. In knowing those things and contributing to the conversation about the text, you keep it alive—not just the text, but the conversation, which is probably even more important. This conversation is never really just about the text. It's also always about what we read, how we read, why we read, and what we value.

Let me admit, right off the bat, that I love researching and writing papers, especially when things go smoothly. Below is a list of lessons I've learned—some of them the hard way—about how to make the process of writing a research paper as trouble-free and enjoyable as possible. If I seem to have frequent recourse to the vocabulary of empirical science, it's because I believe that, at many levels, research in literature can and should partake of the sort of diligent, systematic hard work that takes place in a laboratory. We tend to mystify the process of critical writing and think of it as the product of genius rather than labor, but it often uses some of the same processes as hard science: forming a hypothesis, collecting data, testing those data against the hypothesis, and then reaching a conclusion.

[This wee manual will be a work in constant progress, so any suggestions you have for its improvement would be much appreciated.]

Step 1: Select a field of inquiry and develop a working hypothesis.

If you read carefully, you will notice things in a text: a recurring theme or style of writing or structure that seems to ask to be explained. Pick a text that interests you, or a theme that you see operating in more than one text. What is it about this theme that seems important to the text? In what ways does understanding this one particular theme allow us to explain other, perhaps even larger, issues in the text? For the purposes of this exercise, we'll use the example of the theme of social mobility in Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*. The novel is chock full of social climbers. Why? How is social climbing used in the

novel? How is it described? Who tries to climb, and what does the novel do to those who try to climb?

Before you look at what others have said about it, you'll have your own ideas, your own working hypothesis. You may have noticed that social climbing is often compared to very violent acts, even murder. You may also have noticed that nothing good happens to the social climbers—they end up broke and scandalized. Based on those observations about the depiction of social mobility in the novel, we can generate a hypothesis.

Let's say we believe that: by using the vocabulary of violence and imperialism to describe upward mobility in *Père Goriot*, and by showing the horrible fates of upwardly-mobile characters like Goriot and Anastasie, Balzac asks his reader to be judgmental of those who would climb the social ladder.

There's our thesis, but it's just a working hypothesis for now.

Step 2: Gather your sources.

A. What else has been written about the theme of social mobility in Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*? On social mobility in Balzac's work in general? If no one has written on this particular theme, either in *Père Goriot* or in Balzac's other works, are there critical essays or books that *do* discuss this theme as it appears in texts by other authors, or discuss this theme in general? Do scholars from other fields—history, anthropology, economics, political science—have anything to contribute to this debate?

To answer these questions, run a search through the MLA International Bibliography.
Go to: http://www.csuchico.edu/library/
Click on "About Finding Articles"
Click on "Browse all databases (A-Z)"
Find MLA International Bibliography

Run another search through JSTOR.
Go to: http://www.csuchico.edu/library/
Click on "About Finding Articles"
Click on "Browse all databases (A-Z)"
Find JSTOR

On the MLA International Bibliography vs. JSTOR

There are advantages and disadvantages to both. JSTOR contains and indexes only downloadable, full-text articles, and, even better, you can do a full-text search of the articles it contains. Interested in researching a minor character in a novel? MLA, which indexes only titles of articles and

search terms specified by authors of articles, will likely not give you hits on minor characters, but JSTOR, which can search through the articles, will.

The caveat is this: JSTOR's coverage, if you're interested in being thorough, is miniscule compared to that of the MLA Bibliography. For Languages & Literature, for example, JSTOR indexes roughly 100 journals, while the MLA indexes thousands of journals—about 4,000, to be more precise—as well as books, both single-author and multi-author, edited volumes. MLA can also lead you to downloadable articles not indexed or stored on JSTOR, such as those on Project MUSE or EBSCO, for example.

The ideal solution is to simply use both, so that you are as informed as possible about the critical conversation surrounding the text in question. MLA will give you more hits, but JSTOR, despite its more limited coverage, might tell you something about those hits that you can't get from the slightly limited searching functions of MLA (limited only in the sense that you can't do full-text searches of articles).

B. From the database, you can have the results e-mailed to you. Once you get them, compile a list in MS Word, and print it out. The list should, at the very least, have all the bibliographical info you'll need to be able to find the articles, books, or book chapters. It can also serve, later, as the frame for your Works Cited page, although substantial editing will likely need to be done in order to make the list conform to MLA standards for a Works Cited page.

C. Searching the library's holdings at http://www.csuchico.edu/library/books.htm, find out which items the library owns and which it does not. If the library **does** have an item, write down its call number next to it on your list. If you are going to be using a larger research library, it may help to write down the floor number on which the item is found, so that you can get all of the things you need from each floor before moving on. This will save you running up and down stairs or retracing your steps, which is good for exercise but not for efficiency!

If the library **does not** have an item, can you order it from Interlibrary Loan (ILL)? Find it in a local bookstore? Borrow it from a colleague? Find it at a large, public library nearby, such as UC Davis' or Berkeley's? Preparing well in advance gives you more options, because ILL takes time. Unfortunately, it can also cost money.

D. Using your list, check out all of the books and photocopy all of the articles or book chapters that look relevant. Read the first section of each article to see whether that author's interests relate to the concerns of your project or offer any interesting perspectives on the questions you're asking of Balzac's text.

Step 3: Do your research.

A. Read through the sources you've collected. Pay attention to interesting arguments, especially as they relate to your project or where they seem to offer competing ideas about Balzac's novel. Pay special attention to moments of close reading by these other critics, above all close readings of the same passages or chapters or characters you hope to address in the novel.

B. Take notes in a way that feels comfortable and thorough to you. Use this as a chance to begin your conversation with the authors you're reading. Here's an example of some notes I took on Carlo Ginzburg's essay on *Goriot*. Anything out of brackets is a quote from Ginzburg; anything in brackets is my paraphrasing of Ginzburg or my preliminary questions about his take on the novel. Where I'm quoting Ginzburg quoting someone else, I try to note whose words are whose, because I'll need to know, if I plan to use this in my paper.

Ginzburg, Carlo. "To Kill a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance." *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*. Trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper. New York: Columbia UP, 2001. 157-72.

[quotes Aristotle's *Rhetoric* on the "chronological and geographical limits of pity and envy" (159, G's words)]

[Diderot's *Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants* is quoted: "The murderer transported to the coast of China is too far away to make out the corpse he has left bleeding on the banks of the Seine" (161, D's words)]

"This turning inward takes place across a geographical space—the distance from France to China—infinitely wider than the Mediterranean world Aristotle wrote of. But why China?" (162) [G does not really ever give us an answer. Why?]

Of course, you don't have to be this thorough, but I find it helpful. If you will be able to keep the materials from the library for the duration of your paper-writing, you can bookmark the relevant passages (in a non-destructive way, like with a Post-It). The advantage of writing them down, though, is that you will always have them, and if you type them into a computer they are also searchable.

C. Be alert for patterns in the *reception* (the critical appraisals) of the work you're writing on. Does everybody tend to see certain aspects of *Père Goriot* the same way you do? Who agrees with you, and who doesn't? Are there dissenting cases compelling enough to make you re-think parts of your hypothesis?

If you come across a consistent pattern of reception, and your take on the text challenges that pattern or even just highlights inadequacies in it, you have something even more substantial to contribute to the debate: You have an argument that could change how this text is viewed by future scholars.

D. You should know, too, that sifting through other scholars' work is scholarship all the same, *even if you find nothing that you feel is related to your thesis*. Part of the work of research is confronting dead ends, just like in the laboratory; if an experiment doesn't work, you've eliminated a possibility, and that's a job well done. Much of what you look at might not help your case, but knowing that fact is also useful information. It allows you to say things like "Scholars have largely neglected the manner in which Balzac's novel does blah blah blah…" You know of a certainty that you have something new to contribute.

Step 4: Make a mental map.

A. What's the map?

We have already mentioned, in our thesis above, a few things we'll need to discuss in order to demonstrate it effectively:

1. the vocab of violence and how it relates to upward mobility;
2. the vocab of imperialism and how it relates to upward mobility;
3. the fate of the upwardly-mobile Goriot;
4. and the fate of the upwardly-mobile Anastasie.

We can begin by listing those four subtopics as areas we will have to develop.

B. Types of maps

I prefer to use an outline, but other ways of visualizing the relationship and order of these parts to each other—and to your argument's whole—can work just as well. If this were an outline, under each of the subtopics we could list the relevant quotes from the novel *and from the reception*, so that we can begin creating our own discussion of the topic. Our discussion of the topic will demonstrate an awareness not just of how the topic is treated in the novel but also of how other scholars have treated the topic or the passages that we'll be reading closely.

C. Why the map?

This mental map is not just for you, because this paper is not just for you. While outlines can be particularly useful for us as writers as we approach the writing of the paper, they're probably even more helpful for the reader who will have to come along and read our paper; the more clearly you write, and the more organized your argument is, the easier a time your audience will have following it, and the more persuasive and productive it can be. Think of your audience as a

friend you've sent into your room to find a sock for you. If your room is messy and things are all over the place, Good luck. You will never see your sock. If your room is organized and uncluttered—if it's well outlined—your friend and audience will see what you want them to, and your sock will be found.

Step 5: Start writing.

A. Begin by writing your intro, and then move through your outline. Don't be afraid, as you move through your writing, to jump back and re-develop earlier paragraphs if you uncover connections you didn't see previously that can support your case. Don't be afraid to present views of critics who disagree with you; explain very diplomatically why your reading of the novel is more accurate than theirs or what their reading might overlook or conceal. You can also simply agree to disagree, and this is typically done in a footnote or endnote: "So-and-so offers a different reading of this passage by arguing that blah blah blah." You've done your due diligence in reporting the difference of opinion, and you can leave it to your reader to look at the other side of it, if she or he is curious.

B. The paragraph is a perfect piece of technology, beautifully developed over millennia to package one important point supported by a few persuasive moments of close reading or argument. Ask yourself, as you move through your supporting paragraphs, which main point each paragraph is making. If you can't answer that question—the question of what each paragraph contributes to the movement of your argument—then a reader will likely not be able to answer it either. And when you lose your reader, you've lost your case.

Be attentive, too, to moments of possible connective thought between and across paragraphs. Does something you're arguing about Anastasie's upward mobility relate to that of Goriot? Mention it. This might be the start of seeing a larger pattern, and it might further allow you to show your audience that there is something consistent and systematic in Balzac's larger picture of Paris. If the goal of a critic/scholar is to point to some interesting coherence in a text (or, in the case of some avant-garde authors, to show the purpose of incoherence), then all of these possible patterns might be useful.

Step 6: Once Again, With Feeling

In "Little Gidding," T.S. Eliot writes: "We shall not cease from exploration,/and the end of all our exploring/will be to arrive where we started/and know the place for the first time."

The introductory paragraphs should be the first thing we start writing and the last thing we finish. By the end of our paper, we certainly will have strayed a bit from our original *working* hypothesis. Because our introduction is meant to introduce what follows, we'll need to re-work it to make sure that it ably and accurately announces what we've done.

We may also have better perspective on our argument now, and thus a better awareness of how to prepare a reader for that argument with a clear introduction.

Step 7: Give It a Name

Your title can be clever or straightforward—that's totally up to you, the author—but it should, at the very least, give us an indication of what the paper is about. If you are focusing on a particular author, name her in the title. If you are focusing on one or two texts, name them and their authors in the title. If, by the end of your introduction, your reader should have a thumbnail sketch of your larger argument, then your reader should similarly be able to glean from the title a sense of the paper's main interests.

Sample Proposal

Name
Date
Course

PROPOSAL: "Violence and Social Climbing in Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*"

In this paper, I want to examine Honoré de Balzac's depiction of upward mobility in his novel, *Père Goriot*. It is obviously a major preoccupation of the novel, because the plot focuses on the protagonist Rastignac's desire to move up in Parisian society. As Brodsky Lacour argues in her article, Rastignac's quest is motivated both by romantic desire and by his being easily seduced by ideas of money and power in the city, but Balzac's narrative continually chooses disturbing words to describe this quest. The criminal Vautrin's parable of the "Chinese mandarin" (109) offers an idea of upward mobility as a zero-sum game; for one person to rise, Vautrin implies, another must suffer. Ginzburg's essay explores this but does not connect it thoroughly to other moments in the novel that are clearly related. Elsewhere, too, Balzac uses images of violence (the duel with Taillefer, for example) to paint upward mobility in a negative light. Vautrin's attitude toward slavery (which had already been abolished in the French empire by the time the novel takes place) adds, to the general vocabulary of violence, the more specific idea of imperialism, which is critiqued elsewhere in the novel. In addition, Balzac portrays for us characters who have already attempted upward mobility and failed. In the case of Goriot, he is punished when his daughters turn their backs on him; Anastasie is similarly duped when her husband leaves her bankrupt. By depicting upward mobility as a violent and imperialistic act, and by showing its effects on people who have tried it before, Balzac questions the attempted rise of the protagonist, Rastignac. In so doing, Balzac suggests a more rigid understanding of social class and of the boundaries between the classes.

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