Guide Students To Integrate Others' Ideas More Naturally

Start With A Strong Research Question

Once students have located their research, they may struggle to integrate it into their own writing. Should they locate their research and then write around it or formulate ideas and then use research to support them? A better option in most disciplines is to begin with a research question. Using research questions has been written about extensively, and you can use a text like David Jolliffe's excellent Inquiry and Genre or briefer resources like this one-page guide from George Mason University's writing center to learn more about how to employ research questions at the outset of the research process.

The research question offers a direction but not a conclusion, which allows research to be integrated most seamlessly and authentically. We all know of writers – perhaps even ourselves – who have used research selectively or with some bias. We wish for a particular outcome, so we choose quotations or data to support that outcome. But when we wish to teach students to engage meaningfully with the entirety of the research, having them choose evidence selectively to support a predetermined outcome can feel disingenuous. Similarly, developing an argument fully around their research without asking a question can prompt a simple compilation of others' ideas without the student's voice appearing at all.

Show Students That Their Ideas Are Vital To The Larger Conversation

It may be that students lack an argument of their own, so encouraging them with other techniques from the Process Steps can help them to situate themselves within a discourse. Reading others' ideas can also help students formulate opinions, but if they lack confidence in their ideas, research can become a crutch rather than a tool. Students may find themselves parroting others' opinions rather than taking a stand, so pushing students to think more deeply about the purpose of research can help them to see themselves as a necessary component of the conversation, not merely as a reporter of others' ideas.

"Why Include Another's Voice At All?"

One way to help students think about the integration of research is to ask them why they are including another's voice at all. I encourage you to push students towards a more specific definition of "support;" they should feel that they are building meaningfully on what others have said rather than simply including five sources because they are required to do so.

Point Your Students Toward The Argument-Based Reasons For Including Research

Chances are, across levels, that many students will believe they are only included sources to adhere to your rules, which is part of what makes the integration of sources so difficult; if they do not understand the argument-based (rather than requirement-based) reasons for including others' ideas, that integration will likely feel random, disconnected from the rest of the text, or entirely tangential.

If students are aware of the rationale for including research and can reflect on how each source contributes to their purpose, as well as how they can build on the sources by using their own voices and ideas, you will find significant improvement in their integration of source material.

Taking a moment to return to purpose – even if it feels frustratingly time-consuming – will lead to far stronger work in the long run and a better experience reading and evaluating student essays.