



# ***Bringing Passion to the Research Process: The I-Search Paper***

**by Brandy Appling-Jenson, Carolyn Anzia,  
and Kathleen González**

## ***Introduction***

Ken Macrorie’s seminal work, *The I-Search Paper* (1988), guided many in English Education programs in the late 1980s and early 1990s to the value of using the I-Search paper for teaching students the research process and the value of being curious. In the era of assessment when many teachers find themselves driven to focus solely on raising student test scores, the value of more comprehensive writing such as the I-Search paper entails has gotten lost.

Standards, and the assessment thereof, are not going away. That doesn’t mean, however, that the teaching of the assessed skills has to mimic the bubble-filling tedium that often rules teachers’ lives. The beauty of the I-Search paper is that it fulfills the Common Core Standards while engaging students where they live. Guided practice in writing each component of the I-Search paper incorporates the practice of skills such as proper Internet research that will serve students throughout their lives. The structure provided by the I-Search assignment leads students from “I don’t care” to “I want to learn.” Built on the premise that the “searcher” *needs* to know the information he or she is researching, the I-Search paper by its very nature emphasizes student choice and the authenticity of research. Additionally, many of the topics that middle and high school writers search—finding the right college, the world of video-gaming, saving the planet, or health issues—allow them to explore and use multiple sources. The I-Search encourages them to explore their interests within a set structure, preparing them for a lifetime of engaging with information.

The three writers of this chapter—Brandy Appling-Jenson and Carolyn Anzia, middle school teachers, in Part I, and Kathleen González, a high school teacher, in Part II—do not claim

they are doing something new; they have, however, for many years successfully used the I-Search paper with middle and high school writers and share their experience as a guide for teachers leading their students through this compelling alternative to the traditional research paper.

***Part I: The Crittenden Middle School I-Search: Introducing Passion  
Into Research and Long-Term Project Planning  
by Brandy Appling-Jenson and Carolyn Anzia***

---

---

“Ms. Jenson! Ms. Jenson!”

The urgency in her voice makes me spin around, ready to leap into heroic action. I search for something wrong, peering behind her for apocalyptic mayhem or at the very least a skinned knee.

“Ms. Jenson, did you grade my project yet?”

I struggle to avoid a look of exasperation—it’s Open House, and there might be parents just behind that student. However, I am actually shocked that anyone would have the audacity to ask. I collected I-Search papers just eight hours ago, but by the end of the evening I have had at least 10 parents asking what grade their child got on the “very cool” project that was turned in today, countless children begging to know their grade, and three emails demanding project grades “as soon as possible, Ms. Jenson.” The I-Search generates an engagement with writing for both students and parents, and defines our seventh graders’ experience.

The I-Search project has been an institution at Crittenden. In this project, students research one of their parents when he or she was age 12 or 13 and complete a research paper on that year. The I-Search takes two months; however, while the project is the primary focus during these two months, we simultaneously continue working on vocabulary lessons, Literature Circles, grammar and usage and other components of the language arts program.

***Why Do the I-Search in Middle School?***

There are many compelling reasons to do the I-Search. First, it addresses a number of essential language arts standards and skills. Over the course of the project, students learn how to write a formal research paper, including how to take good notes and document sources; exercise listening and speaking skills in conducting an interview; and engage in extensive personal/reflective writing about themselves and about their experiences with each step of the I-Search. Moreover, they learn how to organize and complete a long-term project. In recent years, in the rush to teach all of the necessary standards, many teachers have given up on such projects as science fairs and social studies symposia due to time constraints. As a result, the I-Search is often the only true long-term project students will complete before high school.

During the course of the I-Search, students complete several components addressing different aspects of the standards. They

- interview their parents (listening and speaking skills)
- locate information in an almanac (critical thinking)
- take notes from Internet and print sources (reading and processing information)
- write Biographical Poems (writing skills)
- write a Sensory Poem (writing and comparing eras)
- complete one research paper (writing, critical thinking, and reading skills)
- assemble an edited and professional final draft

Throughout the process, students reflect on their successes and challenges with the various parts of the project. All these tasks involve basic literacy skills and can be adapted to serve all skill levels. Even struggling writers turn out solid pieces that highlight the writing and critical thinking skills we work on all year.

However, the I-Search has an impact that goes far beyond meeting the Common Core Standards. As every middle school teacher knows, even seventh graders who abhor writing will gladly write about themselves and their own interests. Developmentally, this is perfect for them: the reflective writing in the I-Search helps them define their own growing sense of identity. The project also fosters one-on-one communication between students and their parents at a time in teenagers' lives when meaningful conversations with parents are virtually non-existent. Students often report that the project brings them closer to their parents. Occasionally a student will return from conducting his or her parent interview and say, "That's the most I've ever talked to my dad," or "I've never talked to my mom about her childhood before." Talking to their parents helps them to understand that Mom and Dad were once teenagers themselves and faced many of the same problems that they do.

Upon completing the I-Search, students are amazed at how much they have written. Years later, this will be the one thing that they remember doing in middle school; indeed, many former students (now in high school and college) admit to still having their final projects.

## *The Process*

Now, actually getting to a place where every student is successful with this large project requires significant scaffolding and encouragement. The first step involves sending a letter home to parents with a timeline of due dates and deadlines for the various stages of the I-Search project. Getting the parents on board is vital to the students' success.

Throughout the next two months, students are periodically asked to reflect on the process. We begin this with the Introduction and a paragraph about what the I-Search is and why we are doing it, taking ideas from the parent letter and from the discussion about what the rest of the project will encompass. With emerging writers it is especially important that we write this first paragraph together on the document camera over the course of one period.

By beginning with a success, all students feel more confident in their ability to finish this project; after all, the beginning is easy enough. The second paragraph of the Introduction is essentially a KWL (K = What I Know, W = What I Want to Know, L = What I Learned) in paragraph form. The students write about which parent they chose, why they chose that parent, what they already know about him or her at 12 or 13 years of age, and what they want to find out. This sets the stage for the interview and research portions of the project.

### ***The Parent Interview***

The parent interview is vital for a successful I-Search. Almost every other piece of the project draws on information gathered during the interview. To ensure student success, I provide instructions and a list of sample questions that they can ask their parents about their lives when they were 12 or 13. Then I play the role of the brusque parent, forcing them to draw information out of me:

**Student:** “Did you ever get in trouble?”

**Teacher:** “Yes.”

**Student:** “Did you get grounded?”

**Teacher:** “Yes.”

**Student:** “What did you do?”

**Teacher:** “Lied to my mom.”

**Student:** “About what?”

**Teacher:** “A boy.”

**Student:** “What was his name?”

**Teacher:** “I don’t remember.”

**Student:** “Did you *kiss* him?”

It takes all of my self-control to stifle the giggles I feel as I model the role of the uncooperative parent. After all, part of learning to do interviews well is learning to ask follow-up questions, but it’s sooo difficult to control myself and not just spill the juicy details of



***Brandy Appling-Jenson***

the 12-year-old me. The process of asking meaningful questions and then asking follow-up questions encourages a level of thinking that students don't often use in conversation. They also enjoy the interview.

When they return to class with the completed parent interview, they conduct a self-interview and answer the same questions that they asked their parents. Eventually, both interviews are typed up and presented as a final draft. It's fascinating to see students' similarity to and difference from their parents at this age. These interviews are followed by the writing of Bio Poems in which students synthesize information from their interviews and present it through a new genre.

Every year, there are poignant stories about the actual interview, and these reinforce that the project is valuable in ways not measurable by any assessment. This interaction, this conversation, is the reason that our I-Search is so successful.

### ***The Search Process***

Continuing with the reflection component of the project, "The Search Process" is a three-to four-paragraph ongoing document that explains the hows/whens/wheres of the I-Search. There is a brief introduction to the main parts of the I-Search, followed by a paragraph each about the interview, research, and choice assignments. The interview paragraph details the setting of the interview, how they felt during it, how their parent(s) reacted to it, and one or two things that they learned from it. For emerging writers, it is helpful to provide scaffolding in the form of a paragraph frame, while proficient and advanced writers can be given a list of "must-haves" and then sent to write. I encourage students to include the necessary information, but also to practice using their own voice. Immediately after the research and choice assignments are completed, students write similar reflective paragraphs.

### ***Research!***

For this portion of the I-Search, students research what was going on in the world the year their parent was 12 or 13. Of the two months of the project, this is where teachers will work the hardest. Frustrated students will most likely offer opinions like "This encyclopedia thing is stupid! Why can't i just use Wikipedia and be done?" Our students can text prolifically, find and download the most obscure YouTube videos through the school firewall, and, between classes, update a FaceBook status to warn of a tough test, but ask them to find factual information online or through traditional research sources and they are completely lost. The idea that Google is not omniscient and that the very first hit may not answer their question boggles their minds. This portion of the I-Search requires very structured scaffolding for all students because the goal is for them to complete the project with research skills that meet the standards and will allow them to succeed in high school. These include finding, paraphrasing, and synthesizing information, as well as documenting sources.

We begin the research by passing out packets with all the directions, a list of resources, and a note-taking guide. Reading through the first page of the packet takes about 15 minutes because we answer questions and explain each item in detail. The magic number

for research is three: at least three different resources, including books. Three topics must be covered in the research paper, and each topic needs to have at least three subtopics. Each of those subtopics needs at least three pieces of specific, detailed information. For example, a research paper on the year 1963 might include the topics “News,” “Music,” and “Sports.” A completed note-sheet for the topic of music might look like this:

***Topic: Music of 1963***

1. Beatles
  - Beatlemania in England
  - two hits: “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” “She Loves You”
  - John, Paul, George, Ringo
  - followed by screaming teenage girls
2. Billboard Top 10 hits
  - “Surfin’ USA”—The Beach Boys
  - “My Boyfriend’s Back”—The Angels
  - “Louie, Louie”—The Kingsmen
  - “If You Wanna Be Happy”—Jimmy Soul
  - “He’s So Fine”—The Chiffons
3. Other musical artists tried new types of music
  - Folk: Peter, Paul and Mary: “If I Had a Hammer,” “Times...”
  - Motown: Martha and the Vandellas
  - “Blue-Eyed” Soul: The Righteous Brothers

To get students to this point, together we select a topic and demonstrate how to find the information using the resources listed in the research packet, projecting websites and placing books under the document camera. Students enjoy this activity because they have a sincere interest in what was going on in the world before they were born. They are especially excited by the hairstyles of the various decades; a picture of the “beehive” elicits raucous laughter and the girls always ooh and aah over a picture of Mick Jagger.

We complete one full topic together (they are not allowed to use my sample if the years happen to coincide) before they are allowed to choose their own topics. We spend about one 45-minute class period practicing how to choose information and how to write it in our own words. This lesson provides an excellent opportunity to introduce the concept of plagiarism. We emphasize the importance of citing one’s sources and using quotations when necessary, reminding students that when they encounter text that they do not understand, they should ask for help rather than resort to copying the author’s words.

Students all begin their research with the topic of “News” because part of the I-Search goal is to teach them about recent history. Using the book *America’s Century* (Daniel, 2000) as a starting point and branching out to other texts collected from the school library, the students complete a note-sheet (as above) for the year that their parent was 12 or 13. Research on the news takes place in class so that we can monitor the students’ progress. Students get their “News” topic checked before they choose two additional topics, ensuring that they have all grasped the concept and have mastered the note-taking skill before being let loose online. Finally, we head to the computer lab for two or three days to finish the two choice topics. It’s surprising how little they really know about the last 30 years of history.

Many students are excited to tell me about the *Challenger* explosion, or to ask me, “OMG, did you know that ‘Thriller’ by Michael Jackson was written over 30 years ago?” I love that the research engages them and allows for student-led learning to take place. Altogether, the introduction to research, the practice, and the note-taking itself take about one week in class. Anything that the students do not finish during this time is finished at home.

For the most part, we encourage students to stick to U.S. history and popular culture, despite the fact that many of their parents grew up in different countries. One reason is that the school library and online sources contain an abundance of age-appropriate information about the American past; information about musical groups, TV shows, and movies from other countries is much more difficult to locate. Additionally, in researching U.S. history, students learn about important events and trends that are frequently referenced in day-to-day conversations. Their “News” research inevitably leads to brief class discussions about the Watergate scandal, the Vietnam War, the assassination of JFK, and the moon landing. When they research “Music,” they are surprised to learn how many songs from the 1970s and 1980s are still popular. Occasionally, a student will be able to find information about a non-American musical group, TV show, or athlete mentioned by their parents during the interview; however, because the information is not always available, it’s not required.

### ***Writing the Research Paper***

At this point, students are determined to successfully turn in a full research paper and are generally eager to get started. Again, the end goal is that every seventh grader becomes a competent writer, so whole-class instruction is key. Group writing on the overhead projector or document camera allows every student to contribute to a well-written paragraph. I always begin by listing the parts of a paragraph and giving examples of each. Then, using the “Music” notes from our group research, the class writes a sample paragraph. I model the process by thinking aloud about how I am synthesizing and organizing the information. With the emerging writers, I frequently prompt them for each sentence; the more advanced students readily volunteer their own ideas. A sample paragraph follows:



Todd Refalovich

Carolyn Anzia

*The year 1963 was an exciting year for music. To start, it was the year of British “Beatlemania,” when Beatles songs hit the charts in England for the first time. Two of their first hits were “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and “She Loves You.” The four young men—John, Paul, George, and Ringo—quickly became so famous that they were being followed everywhere by hordes of screaming teenage girls. Meanwhile, The Beach Boys continued to please their listening audiences with songs like “Surfin’ USA,” which was a hit single that year. Other musical artists were successful in different genres. A girl group, The Chiffons, had a hit with “He’s So Fine.” “If I Had a Hammer” and “Times They Are A-Changin’” were two of the first hit songs by folk group Peter, Paul and Mary. Early Motown music groups like Martha and the Vandellas also began to have music aired on the radio. These are just a few of the innovative musicians who were popular in the early 1960s.*

Writing a sample body paragraph together helps all students to be successful. We also provide the students with well-written sample paragraphs from previous years, on all of the possible topics (Movies, Sports, News, etc.); they can refer to these models as they work. Finally, we display a list of topic sentences that students can use. It generally takes two or three class days for students to complete all three of their own body paragraphs.

We conclude the research paper portion of the I-Search by teaching how to write the introduction and the conclusion of the research essay. Using the document camera, we give guidelines and examples for both paragraphs; students are expected to complete them during class. Following these guidelines, students are able to produce a complete research paper.

### ***Expanding the Research Process***

There’s nothing quite as sweet as a room full of preteens singing along to “Build Me Up Buttercup.” We rock to a playlist of Billboard hits from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s while working on the almanac assignment, in which students hunt through an almanac for facts about their year. We love this assignment because it is the first (and often last) time that our students come into contact with a paper almanac. Students practice the important skills of identifying key words, using an index, and locating information. They also have a lot of fun; at least half of the class time they are given to work on the 12-question worksheet is spent looking randomly through the book, shouting out oddball facts to one another.

The Sensory Poem is yet another easy way to add feeling and voice to this stage of the I-Search process. Students use the five senses in comparing and contrasting the current year and their researched year. They conclude the poem by offering their thoughts about the differences between “then” and “now.” One of my favorite final lines is: “And I think to myself that Steve Jobs is a genius and I thank him for the iPod, so that I do not have to deal with records like my Mom!”

For the “Choice Assignment,” students are given the option of four ways to express and share what they have learned during this project. For the first option, they may choose to contact a relative or family friend and ask questions (at least five) about what her parent was like at 12 or 13, hopefully eliciting new information and offering additional insight into the parent’s childhood. The second option encourages students to compose two paragraphs that compare themselves with their parents. The third option encourages students to collect pictures from the year that was researched and create a labeled collage. For the last option, in the spirit of

*Back to the Future*, students are encouraged to write a story where they travel back in time and meet their parents at 12 or 13. We also allow students to come up with their own creative projects (getting approval, of course) to showcase some of the things that they have learned.

### ***Wrapping It All Up***

Finally, we get to the directions students use for revising their I-Search into a polished final draft. By this point, most students are eager to showcase their work. We go over the grading rubric and directions for the final draft, providing examples of the title page and table of contents. Students are expected to stay within the norms for writing in terms of font and spacing, again preparing them for the formatting expectations in high school and college.

When the students walk in with their completed projects, they positively glow. They are so pleased with their final product and can't wait to show it to me, their friends, and any other audience they can corner between their house and our classroom.

Undoubtedly, this is my favorite assignment to assess because I learn so much about the students. During this project, they share a big part of their true identities—that's ultimately what makes it so valuable. Twenty years from now, the I-Search will serve as a snapshot of their 12-year-old selves and how they saw themselves fit into the world. Their parents comment about how much they have enjoyed the process and often thank us for assigning it. Students share the I-Search as part of their senior year capstone project in high school. In addition, parents who went to Crittenden dust off their I-Search papers and share them with their children. It ends up being writing at its best: writing that satisfies Common Core State Standards but also, much more importantly, demonstrates the power of authentic writing about meaningful topics.

## ***Part II: Demystifying the Research Process: The I-Search Paper*** **by Kathleen González**

---

When was the last time a student thanked you for assigning a research paper? I'll never forget Derek, who was researching dust mites since he had a terrible allergy to them. He had never before completed a research assignment and thought he couldn't do it. He sat with me after school for a couple days where I could talk him through the process and give him immediate feedback on each section. When he finished, he looked at me with a surprised grin and said, "That's all it is? I never thought I could do a research paper, so I never really tried it before. Thanks, Ms. G."

Many people have written about the I-Search paper, particularly Ken Macrorie. I first read and used his book, *The I-Search Paper*, in a university writing course to conduct my own I-Search. Without presuming to have the only formula for the process, I offer the lesson plan I have used with ninth graders of all skill levels; the process can be replicated and adapted for sophomores, juniors, and seniors. A key component of the I-Search paper is the first person perspective that personalizes the writer's search, incorporates authentic voice, and steers the

writer away from plagiarizing. Moreover, students choose topics based on their interests, connecting a school assignment to their lives and allowing them to be experts on a topic.

In “Seeing Academic Writing with a New ‘I,’” Rebecca Feldbusch (2010), a teacher-consultant with the Southcentral Pennsylvania Writing Project, reviews many arguments for using the first person perspective when writing research papers. She tells the story of winning an award for an academic paper on Shakespeare written in first person: “I made a connection to [the audience] as I embraced the ‘I’ in academic writing.”

When students choose a topic that they care about and that they want more information on, it becomes easier for them to write a successful paper. Assigned topics have their place, but it’s not always necessary for teachers to mandate them. Table 6.1 shows the complete assignment sheet; Table 6.2 with Parts 1, 2, and 3 offers an inventory of interests. I actually start by having students complete Parts 1, 2, and 3 to capture their interest and enthusiasm, and only after they finish these sections do I give them the actual assignment sheet; this way I avoid the groans that usually accompany the research paper assignment.

## *The Process*

Students complete the Part 1 list in class by responding to every question; it’s helpful to do this step at the end of class so students can ponder topic choices overnight. The next day, in Part 2, they pick one topic for further research and write a paragraph telling what they already know about it. For example, Denise hopes to buy a used Honda Accord; she knows she likes the shade of blue Accords come in, they have four doors, they’re supposed to be reliable cars, and they cost around \$5,000 for an older used one. She wants to know more about them because she will be getting her license in the next year, and her father has agreed to help her pay for a car. When students’ purposes are individually delineated and when they list their research questions themselves, they are also less likely to resort to plagiarizing whole essays. Choosing and defining their topics gives them ownership.

Students often know more than they realize about a topic; however, they don’t seem to trust their own knowledge since it didn’t come from a book or the Internet. In fact, this aspect of the project is an added bonus because students realize that they do know something about a topic—a surprise to some of them. Violet, who wanted to research Hawaii, claimed that she didn’t know anything about it. With prompting, she wrote a paragraph explaining that Hawaii was a bunch of islands in the Pacific Ocean, the people did hula dancing and had luaus, and they grew pineapple and macadamia nuts. This paragraph becomes the first one for the paper. Of course, in the revision process, they can revise to make sure the introduction includes an attention grabber and clear thesis, if these elements aren’t already there.

The Part 3 paragraph, where students list questions they have about their topic, becomes the next paragraph; students are often pleased to realize they already have a portion of their papers done before they’ve even started the research. To begin Part 3, students brainstorm questions about the topic. What do they want to find out? This is an important step because students learn how to ask pertinent questions that narrow their topic. Does the . . . student really want to learn about Hawaii’s gross national product, information that she’ll surely come across in the encyclopedia? Or does she want to find out how to plan a great two-week vacation there? Now I hand out the assignment sheet and introduce the complete list of requirements and due dates.

TABLE 6.1 *I-Search Paper Assignment Sheet***Directions:**

1. Answer the “List of Ten” questions from Part 1.
2. Choose the one topic you are most interested in and write paragraphs for Parts 2 and 3.
3. Then begin your research. Look on the Internet, in magazines, in books, or interview people to gather information. Take notes for each source, and keep track of bibliography information. Keep these notes to turn in with your final project. Notes should be in your own words; if I have doubts, I may ask you to present me with the book or website copies to prove that you didn’t plagiarize. Please do include any quotations (with page numbers) that you plan to use in the final paper.
4. Next, write the paper itself, using your notes and quotations. It should include an introduction, body paragraphs that contain all the research you did, and a conclusion paragraph. Use first person point of view; in other words, tell about your search as well as the facts that you found out, with commentary and analysis to show your learning.
5. Meet with a partner to read each other’s papers. Use the response sheet to give each other feedback, and be sure to review the feedback you received when you revise.
6. Turn in the final paper with the outline and notes and a Works Cited page. This is an “All-or-Nothing” grade, which means that if you don’t complete all required sections, you will have to re-do each part until you meet the standards. It is essential that you have these research skills before you leave this class.

**Requirements:**

- Parts 1, 2, and 3 (20)
- Notes (in your own writing and words, not just photocopies or downloads) (30)
- Rough draft (20)
- Response sheet completed by partner (10)
- I-Search paper: at least three pages, with at least three quotations from your sources; typed, double-spaced (40)
- Works Cited page in the correct MLA format (on a separate page) (10)
- One visual aid (downloaded image, magazine cutout, photocopy, picture, etc.) (If you download images, be sure to list the source on your Works Cited page.) (10)
- A folder with cover art and a title page.
  - i. Include the final draft, visual aid, Works Cited page, rough draft, response sheet, and notes in your folder.
  - ii. Title page includes title, your name, teacher name, course title, and date. (10)

Points Possible: 150

Due Dates      Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

Rough Draft: \_\_\_\_\_

Final Paper: \_\_\_\_\_

TABLE 6.2 *The List of Ten***Part 1:**

1. Where do you want to travel?
2. Where do you want to go to college?
3. What kind of car do you want to own?
4. What kind of job or career do you want to have?
5. What do you like to collect/shop for/buy?
6. What sport are you interested in (playing or watching)?
7. What is one of your hobbies?
8. Who is a person (living or dead) you want to know more about?
9. What is your favorite band/musician?
10. What else do you want to know more about? This can include things in history, science, health, other hobbies, people, places, and so on, or any big question that you want answered.

**Part 2:**

Pick one topic for further research. Write a paragraph telling what you already know about it.

**Part 3:**

Now state what questions you have about that topic or what you want to find out about it (in paragraph format).

### *Teamwork: The Write-Around*

So far, students have completed each step individually, but the next step takes place in triads. Students take turns telling each other their topics and then brainstorm sources for information. Instead of relying solely on the Internet, as many students are wont to do, this step encourages them to access other sources. Alternatively, students can generate more ideas by doing a “write-around.” The process looks like this: All students as well as the teacher sit in a big circle, writing their topics on pieces of paper. Each hands the paper to the right, and the next student adds suggestions or ideas to it, signs it, and sends it on. Having students sign their comments keeps them accountable for writing helpful answers, and then the writer can also find that student later for clarification if necessary. During the write-around, which lasts about 15 to 20 minutes, students may skip topics for which they have no suggestions.

### *The Search Begins*

Generating all these ideas sends students to primary sources, people, brochures—all sorts of places—so that the research process becomes more than just a library or Internet exercise. For example, students may read music magazines, interview family

members about Grandpa's life, or talk to a travel agent, car dealership, or the career center staff. Gathering sources and doing their actual research requires a variety of sources and encourages them to be creative. For instance, the student who is researching Grandpa's life may interview a family member, search genealogy websites, consult the encyclopedia about Grandpa's country of origin, watch a movie about that place's history or culture, and so on. In an I-Search focused solely on family history with the junior class, some of the students even contacted other countries or made trips to history centers. Students are addressing core standards for the research process—they access and synthesize information from print and digital sources. Common Core Standard W.9-10.7 states that students should be able to “conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem, narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate, synthesize multiple sources on the subject, and demonstrate an understanding of the subject under investigation.” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2011). The I-Search, while less formal than other research, meets the standards while allowing students to integrate their personalities and choices.

Is it a disservice to have students write a first person rather than a traditional third person paper? Does it prepare them for further academic writing? Consulting with colleagues and college students has confirmed the value of the I-Search for several reasons. One, students are still developing questioning, researching, and writing skills that will serve them in other courses. Changing to the third person point of view is a minor adjustment if the student has solid research skills. Two, the analysis, commentary, and metacognition inherent in the I-Search process outweigh the fairly minor change in point of view. Three, more college professors in many disciplines are requesting first person papers. Four, there is an increase in first person research-based writing in the mainstream market—from journalism to nonfiction books. Books by Michael Pollan (2007), Marion Nestle (2003), Samantha Power (2008), and Mary Roach (2004), as well as bestsellers such as *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot (2010) and *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher (1995), all show that first person research can be scientific, instructive, informative—and have a personal voice and connection.

### ***Scavenger Hunt: Modeling the First Person Perspective***

While students have a week or so to conduct their research and take notes, in class we practice the first person perspective they'll be using in the actual I-Search paper with an in-class scavenger hunt activity. Table 6.3 provides the list of items.

A few rules of the game: Teams consist of three to four students. The group must find all 20 items as quickly as possible. Groups will be disqualified if they steal from another group or damage anything in the room. All items must be found in the room, generally in their backpacks or on their persons; however, if they find a book on a shelf, it has to be returned properly to its place. Each item may count for only one category. Finally, if a group

TABLE 6.3 Scavenger Hunt Items

1. autograph of someone wearing blue
2. book by an ethnic author
3. thumbtack
4. #2 pencil
5. grammar book
6. something soft
7. picture of a famous person
8. an "A" paper
9. a word in another language
10. magazine article about another country
11. something red
12. a bottle
13. piece of gum or candy
14. makeup
15. paperclip
16. the word "English"
17. something round
18. an earring
19. a poem
20. tissue

claims to win but does not have all 20 items, it is disqualified. The prize for the winners is small: an eraser, pencil, candy, or extra credit.

The real learning takes place after the room is restored to order and students are back in their seats. Then, each of them must write the "story" of what happened during the hunt: where they found the word "English," who had makeup in her purse, how Emilio tried to steal their tissue, when Nancy had the great idea of looking on the back of *House on Mango Street* for a picture of a famous person (the author), or when Jason removed his new diamond earring and the group promptly misplaced it. The students write these narratives in first person, not realizing at this point that they are practicing the steps of a process that will mirror their I-Search papers: what they needed to find, where they thought to look for it, their successes and failures in the process, and what they gained in the end. Students who have never written a research paper before (or have only written the copy-from-the-encyclopedia variety) experience a process that models their final papers. Though describing this search seems less formal, this is a good opportunity to talk to students about using more formal language rather than informal vocabulary and structures in their final papers.



Todd Refalovich

Kathleen González

### Other Mini-Lessons

I teach a number of other mini-lessons while students are conducting their research outside of class; for example, how to take notes or embed quotations and cite sources, and how to write a Works Cited page, thesis, and introduction paragraph. This is a good time for students to take their first paragraphs, the ones where they chose their topics, and revise them to follow a more standard introduction format with attention grabber and thesis statements. At this point, I distribute copies of the rubric (see Table 6.4) used to score their finished projects so they can integrate this information into their writing, making sure they meet all requirements.

Finally, it is a great time to discuss plagiarism—its temptations and how to avoid them. A helpful resource on this topic is Barry Gilmore’s book *Plagiarism: Why It Happens and How to Prevent It* (2008). He discusses the reasons students plagiarize, ranging from laziness to pressure for grades to ignorance (37). One of his most salient points, though, is that the teacher has a responsibility to show students how to paraphrase information and cite sources correctly (28–32). Gilmore offers classroom-ready lessons to teach paraphrasing plus numerous sections listing “Teaching Opportunities” related to ethical research practices. Furthermore, NCTE offers a three-part lesson plan on their Read/Write/Think website (<http://www.readwritethink.org>), and the Purdue Online Writing Lab (known as the OWL) also offers lessons and practice (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>). Following the OWL example, I created a PowerPoint tailored to my students’ interests showing the original paragraph, a poorly paraphrased paragraph, and then a properly paraphrased one. I asked my students to select a sentence from the original paragraph, first making sure they understood the idea conveyed by the sentence. I then had them cover up this sentence before writing their paraphrase, so that they were not tempted to use the exact words the author had used. This time spent practicing paraphrasing often prevents instances of plagiarism.

Also, during this time I show students a couple body paragraphs on a topic I am interested in, such as buying a new camera or visiting Venice. Since students may only be

TABLE 6.4 Rubric: I-Search Paper

	5 Advanced	4 Proficient	3 Basic	2 Developing	1 Beginning
<b>Report of Information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thorough understanding of subject with clear focus</li> <li>• Strong synthesis of ideas; presents interesting &amp; sometimes surprising details</li> <li>• Provides specific textual examples and quotes to support the thesis; uses them effectively and cites them correctly</li> <li>• Four or more sources, which are varied and reliable; works cited correctly</li> <li>• Demonstrates mature use of stylistic devices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused topic that shows understanding of the subject</li> <li>• Shows synthesis of ideas; presents interesting details</li> <li>• Provides sufficient textual examples and quotes to support the interpretation; uses them satisfactorily and cites them correctly</li> <li>• Two to three sources, which are somewhat varied and reliable; works generally cited correctly</li> <li>• Demonstrates proficient use of stylistic devices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally focused topic that shows some understanding of the subject</li> <li>• Attempts synthesis of ideas; presents basic facts</li> <li>• Provides some textual examples and details to support the interpretation; uses them adequately; may have some citation errors</li> <li>• One to two sources; may be similar or of questionable reliability; works cited showing some formatting errors</li> <li>• Demonstrates some use of stylistic devices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideas are sometimes unclear or off topic</li> <li>• Facts listed with little connection between them</li> <li>• Provides a few textual examples or quotes to support the interpretation; their use does not always enhance the flow of ideas and writing; has citation errors; sometimes plagiarizes</li> <li>• One source, which may be unreliable; works cited inaccurately or incorrectly</li> <li>• Demonstrates little use of stylistic devices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unclear topic or focus</li> <li>• Few facts listed in random order or unrelated to each other</li> <li>• Does not support arguments with textual evidence or often plagiarizes</li> <li>• One or no sources, unknown sources, or unreliable ones; works not cited or with many errors</li> <li>• No use of stylistic devices</li> </ul>

(Continued)

TABLE 6.4 Rubric: I-Search Paper (Continued)

	5 Advanced	4 Proficient	3 Basic	2 Developing	1 Beginning
<b>Organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thesis idea is clearly understood and unifies the essay</li> <li>Each body paragraph contains a single, focused idea</li> <li>Body paragraphs are clearly supported the thesis</li> <li>Sequencing between ideas and paragraphs is logical and cohesive</li> <li>Graceful transition of ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thesis clearly stated and guides organization</li> <li>Each paragraph contains a single, focused idea</li> <li>Body paragraphs are appropriately formatted:</li> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Topic sentence</li> <li>Concluding statement</li> <li>Embedded quotations</li> <li>Smooth transition of ideas</li> </ul> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thesis adequately stated and influences organization</li> <li>Some paragraphs may lack focus or completion</li> <li>Body paragraphs generally contain:</li> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Topic sentence</li> <li>Concluding statement</li> <li>Embedded quotations</li> <li>Understandable transitions between ideas</li> </ul> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thesis is confusing or incomplete</li> <li>Paragraphs lack focus or completion</li> <li>Body paragraphs generally lacking:</li> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Topic sentence</li> <li>Concluding statement</li> <li>Embedded quotations</li> <li>Vague or missing transitions between ideas</li> </ul> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No thesis or guiding idea</li> <li>Shows a misunderstanding of paragraphs</li> <li>Body paragraphs are missing:</li> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Topic sentence</li> <li>Concluding statement</li> <li>Embedded quotations</li> <li>Ideas seem unconnected</li> </ul> </ul>
<b>Ideas and Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Main idea demonstrates <i>in-depth</i> understanding of the topic</li> <li>Displays superior critical thinking skills in: insight, analysis, synthesis of ideas, and/or evaluation</li> <li>Displays clear and thorough development and progression of ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Main idea demonstrates <i>sufficient</i> understanding of the topic</li> <li>Displays competent critical thinking skills in: insight, analysis, synthesis of ideas, and/or evaluation</li> <li>Displays development and progression of ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifiable main idea that suggests some understanding of the topic</li> <li>Evidence of understanding the topic but lacking advanced critical thinking skills; ideas tend to be formulaic</li> <li>Displays uneven or inconsistent development and progression of ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Main idea is unclear</li> <li>Thinking seems repetitive and/or general</li> <li>Ideas are underdeveloped</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thoughts in random order with little relation to prompt</li> <li>Thinking unclear and lacks analysis</li> <li>Ideas are undeveloped and unrelated to each other</li> </ul>

	5 Advanced	4 Proficient	3 Basic	2 Developing	1 Beginning
<b>Style</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposeful word choice</li> <li>• Precise, clear, imaginative language</li> <li>• Writes with reader in mind</li> <li>• Writing is individual, compelling, and engaging</li> <li>• Purposefully uses a variety of sentence types</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective word choice</li> <li>• Generally successful in using precise and rich language</li> <li>• Generally engages the reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptable vocabulary</li> <li>• Attempts to use precise language</li> <li>• Writing has discernible purpose but is not compelling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ordinary vocabulary</li> <li>• Some incorrect word choice</li> <li>• Author's purpose is unclear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simple vocabulary</li> <li>• Inappropriate/in-correct word choice</li> <li>• Language not suitable to purpose</li> </ul>
<b>Mechanics/Conventions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No spelling errors</li> <li>• No fragment/run-on errors</li> <li>• Correct use of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End marks</li> <li>• Commas, colons, and semicolons</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Quotation marks</li> <li>• Apostrophes</li> <li>• Correct use of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbs</li> <li>• Subject/verb agreement</li> <li>• Pronoun/antecedent agreement</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimal spelling errors (1–2)</li> <li>• Fragments/run-on errors do not inhibit understanding</li> <li>• Generally correct use of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End marks</li> <li>• Commas, colons, and semicolons</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Quotations marks</li> <li>• Apostrophes</li> <li>• Generally correct use of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbs</li> <li>• Subject/verb agreement</li> <li>• Pronoun/antecedent agreement</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occasional spelling errors</li> <li>• Fragment/run-on errors may distract the reader</li> <li>• Some incorrect use of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End marks</li> <li>• Commas, colons, and semicolons</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Quotation marks</li> <li>• Apostrophes</li> <li>• Verb errors distract the reader</li> <li>• Agreement errors distract the reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent spelling errors</li> <li>• Fragment/run-on errors distract the reader</li> <li>• Frequent errors in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End marks</li> <li>• Commas, colons, and semicolons</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Quotation marks</li> <li>• Apostrophes</li> <li>• Verb errors inhibit understanding</li> <li>• Agreement errors inhibit understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spelling errors obscure meaning</li> <li>• Fragment/run-on errors obscure the meaning</li> <li>• No control over: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End marks</li> <li>• Commas, colons, and semicolons</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Quotation marks</li> <li>• Apostrophes</li> <li>• Verb errors obscure meaning</li> <li>• Agreement errors obscure meaning</li> </ul>

familiar with the traditional research paper written in third person, using a model is critical. We read through this model together, and I ask them questions to help them see the process I went through, such as brainstorming and narrowing topics, listing what I knew, developing questions, and beginning the research. A sample body paragraph follows:

*I decided to start my search online since I had time to surf the net. The first interesting site I found was for Digital Photography Review at [www.dpreview.com](http://www.dpreview.com), where it reviews many different cameras. Most of the cameras on their site were larger than what I want, but I am interested in the Olympus PEN Lite and PEN Mini. Casio and Fujifilm also make compact cameras, which was perfect since I wanted a camera that would fit in my pocket. I read through the information for these, but it made me realize that I need to hold the camera in my hands and also talk to an expert about the features, since I don't really know the difference between things like LCD or OLCD or what it means when the camera has "the world's fastest AF" ([www.dpreview.com](http://www.dpreview.com)). This site left me with more questions than answers.*

### ***Writing the Initial Drafts***

Next, students bring their notes to class and begin to write their rough draft. While they write, I can check their thesis statements, help those who are stuck, review embedded quote formatting, and make sure they tell their search process. At this point, they also incorporate the writing they have already done, which includes the paragraphs on what their topics are and what they already know. They then write up all the paragraphs about their research process and findings. At this point, they may discover that their initial assumptions (from paragraph one) are false, and they can reference this and explain the new information they discovered. Finally, they write a paragraph summarizing what they learned during their I-Search, which becomes the conclusion. These steps are followed by the usual partner response, revision, editing, and final draft steps we would do with any other essay. (Table 6.5 provides the peer response sheet.) Students will turn in a folder, including notes and any brochures, downloads, and so on, as well as all drafts with the final paper, showing their process and proving that they didn't copy from a source.

### ***How the I-Search Prepares Writers for the Formal Research Paper***

This assignment, though simpler and less formal than a traditional third person research paper, equips students with all the skills they'll need when they complete a more formal paper. The basic format is the same: introduction with thesis, paragraphs focusing on what they've learned, conclusion, embedded quotations, cited sources, and a bibliography or Works Cited page. Because the I-Search is written in first person, students are much less likely to plagiarize, especially if the teacher takes the time to model and teach paraphrasing and embedded quotations in class. Finally, the I-Search process is often more personalized

TABLE 6.5 *Response Sheet*

<b>Response Sheet—I-Search Paper</b>	
Writer: _____	Responder: _____
<p><b>Writer:</b> What question do you have for your reader? Or what do you want your reader to check for?</p>	
<p><b>Directions:</b> After you have read the paper, check your reactions and write your comments. Remember to make corrections for spelling, punctuation, and grammar.</p>	
<p>1. Is there a title? Yes _____ No _____      Does it need improving? Yes _____ No _____</p>	
<p>2. What is the thesis statement? Copy it here: (Check that it has preview points!)</p>	
<p>3. How many paragraphs are used? _____ How many pages long? _____</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advise the writer if paragraphs are too long or are formatted incorrectly.           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there an intro? Yes _____ No _____</li> <li>• Conclusion? Yes _____ No _____</li> <li>• Is there an attention grabber? Yes _____ No _____</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<p>4. Did the author include quotations from the books/resources? Yes _____ No _____</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put an asterisk (*) in the margin where they are. (At least three required.)           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check to see that sources are cited.</li> <li>• Are book/resource titles given and always underlined or in quotation marks? Yes _____ No _____</li> <li>• Are quotations embedded into sentences? Yes _____ No _____</li> <li>• Are page numbers for the quotations given (if available)? Yes _____ No _____</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>(Mark these changes on the paper if they aren't done correctly.)</p>	
<p>5. Did the writer tell the process of the search? Yes _____ No _____</p>	
<p>6. Did the author use transition words? Yes _____ No _____ (examples: furthermore, then, first, in conclusion)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• List four that the author used or suggest where they can be added:</li> </ul>	
<p>7. Check for “you” and help the author eliminate it!</p>	
<p>8. Check the Works Cited page (separate page!) and make any necessary corrections.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many sources are used? _____ (At least three required.)</li> <li>• Is it alphabetical? Yes _____ No _____</li> <li>• Are all the necessary periods and commas there? Yes _____ No _____</li> <li>• Is all information given, not just a URL? Yes _____ No _____</li> </ul>	

than traditional research, giving students a gentler introduction to the process and a feeling of success that will propel them into formal research.

These I-Search papers tend to be much more enjoyable for me to read: I also can track students' thought processes, knowing exactly what a student has learned. For example, Caroline wanted to discover how to become a veterinarian. She first visited websites for the American Veterinary Medical Association and Bureau of Labor Statistics to learn about types of veterinary practice and educational requirements. Following this, she wrote, "For the next part of my research, I thought it would be beneficial to interview an actual veterinarian." She learned more about euthanasia and dealing with neglectful owners, stating, "This showed me that being a veterinarian is not just about helping animals but also helping the people that care for them." Finally, she wanted other opinions, so she reviewed a Yahoo! Answers listing where veterinary students posted pros and cons for the profession. Caroline's thought process and learning were more clearly delineated than I would have seen in a standard research paper, and her metacognition will serve her as a student learning to ask questions as well as find answers.

I assess the final papers using two methods: one for points and one for feedback. The I-Search paper is an "All or Nothing" assignment. If students don't meet the standard on each portion, they will receive a zero and have to revise until they meet the standard, which will earn them an A or B. Once they have met the standard for ALL sections, they receive all their points. Table 6.6 shows the grade sheet. I use the rubric as a visual listing of requirements and a quick way to provide feedback to students by highlighting where their work falls on the individual bullet points. The rubric levels of one through five don't necessarily correspond to a particular grade; rather, the grade comes from completing each requirement in the project. Ultimately, students answer these reflection questions: "What research and writing skills did you improve on and how? What will you do differently next time you need to complete research?" Reflection such as this is, again, metacognitive and evaluative so that students may continually grow as writers.

The most gratifying aspect of this assignment is seeing what happens after students have completed it. Often, students are able to use the information they have found to actually reach a goal, such as choosing a college, making a big purchase, helping the family plan a vacation, or finding out more about a person who interests them. Since the requirements can be fulfilled in a variety of ways, this differentiation meets students where they are, whether or not they've done a research paper before and at whatever level they write. Plus, it's highly individualized in terms of topics and research venues, encouraging reflection and metacognition while avoiding plagiarism. Of course, with that kind of freedom, they are able to write with voice, personality, and heart.

**TABLE 6.6** *I-Search Paper Grade Sheet*

Student Name _____			
Topic _____			
	On Time	Late	Points Possible
• Folder/cover & title page			(10)
• Final draft			(40)
• Visual aid			(10)
• Works Cited			(10)
• Rough draft			(20)
• Response sheet			(10)
• Notes			(30)
• Parts 1, 2, & 3			(20)
		Total	(150)
Required Elements:			
• Folder/cover with artwork			
• Creative title			
• Title page			
• Typed/MLA format			
• Final draft: three pages. You had			
• Three embedded quotations. You had			
• One visual aid with a caption			
• Works Cited page			
• Three sources. You had			
• Rough draft			
• Response sheet			
• Notes with bibliography information and quotations			

**References and Resources**

“Avoiding Plagiarism.” Purdue Online Writing Lab. 2011. 14 Oct. 2011. <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/930/01/>.

Daniel, Clifton, Ralph Berens, & John W. Kirshon. *America’s Century*. East Rutherford, NJ: DK Publishing, 2000.

“English Language Arts Standards, Writing, Grade 9-10.” 2011. Common Core State Standards Initiative. 27 Oct. 2011. <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-languagearts-standards/writing-6-12/grade-9-10/>.

Feldbusch, Rebecca. “Seeing Academic Writing with a New ‘I.’” 5 July 2010. <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2371>.

Gilmore, Barry. *Plagiarism: Why It Happens and How to Prevent It*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008.

- Kardick, Maria. "Exploring Plagiarism, Copyright, and Paraphrasing." National Council of Teachers of English. 23 Oct. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exploring-plagiarism-copyright-paraphrasing-1062.html>.
- Macrorie, Ken. *The I-Search Paper*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. *Common Core State Standards*: Washington, DC, 2010.
- Nestle, Marion. *Food Politics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.
- Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.
- Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Power, Samantha. *Chasing the Flame*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008.
- Roach, Mary. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. New York: Norton, W.W. & Company, Inc., 2004.
- Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2010.