Writing the Resource Paper

By the end of the course, each student must produce a four – six page paper that demonstrates the ability to move beyond merely summarizing or rearranging the information found in common printed and online material. This final paper must reflect a student’s ability to communicate a concise idea that reflects careful analysis and evaluation of the information and its meaning for a specific audience—a key skill future workplace professionals will be ill-prepared without.

This four - six page paper presents a cause and effect claim in its thesis that is thoughtfully examined through analysis and evaluation of evidence drawn from reputable sources. In turn, the final product presents new meaning or insight for an academic audience. The assignment also requires students to compile a ten-entry bibliography as they gather and examine information including multiple sources from an electronic database.

The first critical step toward preparing a successful paper involves choosing the right topic and forming a thesis around which to focus the research. As a rule, students at SFCC are allowed to pursue their own interest for this final paper within the instructor’s guidelines. Unfortunately, some students set themselves up for failure when they choose broad and unchallenging topics like those listed in the left-hand column below. Hundreds of articles have been written on these subjects, and many of these students are so overwhelmed by the volume of information they either can’t get started or they have difficulty sorting through all of the facts and figures and testimony from experts.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Poor Topic Choice</th>
<th>Better Topic Choice</th>
<th>Possible Thesis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Alcoholism and its effect on children</td>
<td>The growing number of young adults who abuse alcohol as a means of dealing with post-traumatic stress syndrome</td>
<td>In spite of the wave of recent films glorifying teen binge drinking, mounting evidence exists that some teenagers turn to alcohol as a means of self-medicating the mental anguish left over from traumatic childhood events</td>
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<td>Methamphetamine addiction in the United States</td>
<td>Methamphetamine addition in Pettis County Missouri</td>
<td>Although many readily dismiss the abuse of methamphetamines as an inner-city issue, the problem poses a significant threat to our quality of life here in rural Missouri.</td>
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Super-sized Americans and their love of fast food | The correlation between the obesity epidemic and high fructose corn syrup. | The obesity crisis in the United States can be directly linked the presence of high fructose corn syrup in the majority of convenience foods on grocery store shelves.

Another misstep some students make as they gather evidence to support their thesis is merely “reporting” what they have found in the first few general articles that surface with the help of the Google search engine. They do not take the time to dig deeper, hunting for more specific insight that comes from experts who have experienced or studied the topic intently. Consequently, these papers often fail to earn a passing grade.

Other students gather an abundance of information from reputable sources, but they underestimate the significance that primary sources and first-hand accounts contribute to the validity of an effective piece of writing. A good resource paper provides a balance of facts, commentary from experts, and the writer’s interpretation of both.

**One Student’s Experience with the Resource Paper**

For instance, Katelin Ritchhart is intrigued by the hardship many Americans endured during the Dust Bowl Days and decides this topic is an appropriate subject of her research.

In her initial attempt to provide an engaging introduction to her paper, Katelin draws from information she has read in a number of digital and printed material to create her impression of what she assumes dust storm victims surely experienced.

Note how the first paragraph of Katelin’s second draft is improved when her research uncovers the actual words of dust bowl survivor, Imogene Glover. When Katelin replaces her own imagined scenario with Imogene’s actual memory of the event, this passage adds credibility that draws her readers closer to the reality of the experience and the peril this era presented to those who suffered through it.

<table>
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<th>First Draft</th>
<th>Second Draft</th>
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<td>Imagine a black cloud rising above your head and descending upon your back. You turn to run, but it is too late. The dust has already reached you, burning your eyes and knocking you down. Unable to see in front of you, you call out for help, but dirt fills your mouth. You try running, but the dust has already swallowed your legs. You now know Imogene Glover, the daughter of a migrant farmer during the Dust Bowl era, recalls, &quot;When those dust storms blew and you were out in ‘em, it would just coat the inside of your nose literally. And sometimes your mouth would just get cottony dry because, well, you spit out dirt sometimes. It looked like tobacco juice, only it was dirt,..</td>
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that if you do not find shelter soon, you will be buried alive. From dawn to dusk and day to year, this was the life and fear of the farmers in the 1930’s. In “The Great Plow Up,” a televised documentation, causes of the Dust Bowl are exposed for the Southern Plains. Throughout Texas, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, this nightmare became a reality after The Great Plow Up of the 1920’s. During this time, millions of acres of buffalo and natural grasses were plowed up causing dirt the size of New Hampshire to be tilled, removing tons of topsoil with it (“The Great Plow Up”). In Peter Roop’s article “Covered in Dust,” he explains that as the rain stopped, wind started, and plowing continued, these tons of topsoil simply blew away, causing drastic, harmful changes to the world once known. Ranked in the top five of environmental catastrophes, the Dust Bowl had long-lasting negative effects on the land, people, economy, and migration.

when you’d spit. It was pretty awful. But I just thought that was part of livin’. Everybody else was in the same boat. So I didn’t think anything about it.” From dawn to dusk and day to year, this was the life and struggle of the farmers in the 1930s. In “The Great Plow Up,” a televised documentation released in 2012, causes of the Dust Bowl are explored and explained. Throughout Texas, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, this nightmare became a reality after the immense plow up of the 1920s. During this time, millions of acres of buffalo and natural grasses were cultivated causing an area the size of New Hampshire to be tilled, removing tons of topsoil with it. In Peter Roop’s article “Covered in Dust,” he explains that as the rain stopped, wind started, and plowing continued, these tons of topsoil simply blew away, causing drastic, harmful changes to the world once known. Ranked in the top five of environmental catastrophes in American history, the Dust Bowl had long-lasting negative effects on the land, the people, the economy, and migration.

Effective workplace writing requires a command of the English language and this final resource paper in Composition I should reflect the student’s effort to establish his or her own unique voice, moving beyond the ordinary word to find one more precise.

In paragraph after paragraph, Katelin carefully chooses words that effectively convey her intended message presented in her thesis:

Dust, the cause of many health problems, led to changes in civilians’ everyday lives as they tried to block out the penetrating particles. According to “Dust Storms and Health,” the young, the old, the weak, and the debilitated were the most susceptible to the damage of the dust; a single dust storm could burn the eyes, blister the body, and lodge particles deep into the lungs. In addition, as exposure to dust continued, children and adults suffered from fever, coughing, nausea, and dust pneumonia. Roberta Baxter explains in “Sifting Through the Dust,” that dust pneumonia, the most fatal health threat, led
mothers to start self-doctoring and place wet cloths over their sleeping child’s mouth and nose. Kerosene and a drop or two of sugar, was a mother’s self-doctored cough syrup which she prayed would help lessen the effects of dust pneumonia. In just one year, in one county, thirty-two people died from dust pneumonia, and one thousand-five hundred people were sick. Likewise, in some families, dust pneumonia killed as many as two or more children and overall affected fifteen-hundred people ("The Great Plow Up"). Because dust penetrated the tiniest crevices, and an average of five inches of dust was found in a home after each storm, parents took precautions to prevent their family from getting sick indoors. In “The Anti-Joads,” Timothy Egan reports that wet, oily rags were hung from every window as doors were taped and crevices stuffed to prevent the infiltration of dust. In cabinets and on tables, plates, cups, and glasses were kept upside down until the meal was ready to be served to prevent the glazing and consumption of dust. Parents, begrudgingly taking up these simple but maddening changes, created the fine line in their child’s survival. Health problems leading to severe sickness and death prompted civilians to make changes in their lives’ to keep out the dust.

In addition, this final paper should demonstrate a student’s ability to retrieve and process relevant information from other sources, and through synthesis, integrate it with his or her own commentary to bring new meaning and insight to the original topic. In the passages above and below, Katelin draws from the voices of experts including Roberta Baxter and James N. Gregory to help her round the focus of her paragraph:

As drought descended, sickness succumbed, and the economy eroded, families packed for California with high hopes of a better future. In “The Dust Bowl Migration,” James N. Gregory reports that from 1930 to 1940, 350,000 people from Texas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Arkansas moved to California with anticipation for relief. As the Southern Plains declined in population by thirty to forty-one percent, California’s population increased by twenty percent due to migrants. Often referred to as “exodusters” or “Okies,” these migrants moved to California to search for jobs, avoid sickness, and escape dust. However, when they reached California disappointment and hatred welcomed them. Returning like an old friend, with painfully low wages, shortages of work greeted them in California, as well as poor, unclean housing. Families lived in shacks made from tar-paper and in tents with no running water. Housing conditions worsened from dust filled floors to no floors at all. As hostility towards migrants increased, border patrols and vagrancy laws were enacted to discourage migrants from crossing state lines into California. Likewise, in 1933, California passed an act making it illegal to help migrants cross state lines. These oppositional measurements made the grueling journey even tougher and more disappointing. With no income, crops, or vigor left, families packed their bags, loaded their cars, and headed out to California where the despair of the Southern Plains mirrored in California.
As they move through the drafting and revising process, students learn that the final paragraph of the resource paper is as important as the introduction, leaving their audience with no questions about the paper’s purpose or the relevance the subject has to its audience. Katelin’s concluding paragraph effectively and eloquently communicates the message the dust bowl experience has for this generation.

With negative effects on the land, people, economy, and migration of the 1930s, the Dust Bowl is a hard-learned lesson that should be prevented. Caused by machines, greed, and ignorance, the world’s worst man made environmental disaster could return at any moment. Farmers to this day have timeless greed, yearning for large crops, and new machines that continue to till up the ground of natural grasses and roots. To stop history from repeating itself, farmers and congressmen should consider immediate action. We know that the removal of natural grasses results in millions of tons of topsoil to be blown away causing life threatening storms, sickness, and depression. We must take our knowledge of the past to our leaders of the future and help them in preventing irretrievable effects. Although topsoil has no commodity price, it is the richest resource on the earth.

When students submit the final copy of this five to seven page paper, their instructors expect to find the following objectives addressed as Katelin demonstrates in her paper above:

- An engaging introduction leading to a thesis that makes a judgment about the topic and its relevance to an academic audience
- A structured analysis of the thesis in which key components are developed in individual paragraphs.
- Ample supporting evidence in the form of examples, facts, data, first-hand accounts and testimony from experts who have intently researched the subject themselves
- A conclusion that reconfirms the writer’s thesis and the significance of the topic
- Compliance with MLA or APA standards for documentation