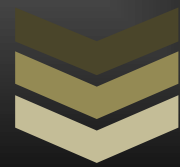


RESEARCH, CREATIVE WRITING & THE WORLD OF WORK



This is an account of the development of an introductory research module as part of the second year on the Creative & Professional Writing degree at University of Derby. Here students set up, plan, prepare and undertake a short research project. In their 3rd year students develop their knowledge and skills with an independent research project of their own devising.

Carl Tighe

Other aspects of this topic are covered in *Creative & Professional Writing @ University: Frequently Asked Questions*.

There were several background factors that fed into the design of this module: the requirements of the university, academic structures and student perceptions. Another important consideration in designing the module was in relation to the kind of students who elect to study for a Creative and Professional Writing degree. Many of these students claim to be ‘refugees’ from English and do not want to be involved in anything that smacks of literary analysis or criticism. Many are ‘mature students’ and came to university without formal qualifications. As such we could not rely on them having picked up the basic research skills – even cut ‘n’ paste - that students studying literature and writing academic essays on a regular basis might be expected to demonstrate. Also, since Creative and Professional Writing students expect primarily to develop their writing rather than academic skills, it was clearly not advisable to plan for the kind of research project available in traditional subjects. Nevertheless the module had to be a response to both academic and professional needs since:

- Project management is an important skill and an increasingly important area of the job market
- Project management is an important part of a writer’s life
- Writers often need to apply for money for creative projects
- Writers often need to research ‘bread and butter’ articles for the press
- Writers often have to ‘pitch’ ideas to editors and agents in order to get a commission for articles, scripts, novels, writing projects etc.
- Creative and Professional Writing students have an independent research project to complete in their final year.

Developing the Module

I wanted a module that asked students to focus on independent planning and time management, which combined elements of self-directed learning and the acquisition of research skills with a step into the world of contemporary professional writing. I wanted the module to be an opportunity for the students to work at their own pace towards a clearly identified deadline with a minimum of teacher contact and without close supervision. As part of their preparation students would be required to identify the research skills and strategies they would need to complete their project. If possible preparation and the project itself should both be tied into the practicalities of a writing life, a widening understanding of professional practice and a developing knowledge of the subject.

I also felt that project planning should be part of student life in Creative and Professional Writing, and that research should not be seen as an ‘academic’ exercise. I was keen to emphasise that project planning is an increasingly important feature of the workplace and that writers often undertake research. A significant feature of the thinking behind the module was a consideration of the necessity for professional writers to apply for project funding and the negotiation of substantial and rather daunting application forms. As writers I was certain our students would eventually be applying for project funding from the ESRC, AHRB, Leverhulme Trust, local council, Arts Council or their Regional Arts Board. At each and every application they would have to reveal a great deal about their project and the thinking and planning that underpinned it. They would have to fill in substantial and detailed application forms and might also have to make a ‘pitch’. Since an application for

funding could also be seen as a form of project proposal, this seemed like a sound professional element and a good practical starting point.

My aim was not only to persuade students to see beyond the basic application form to what the funder would be trying to establish, but also to encourage students to make the project clearer by asking themselves detailed questions about it in advance – as any funding body would. Basically a funding body (like a research supervisor) would seek to establish whether:

- the project is feasible
- the applicant is the best person to do it
- the applicant is likely to deliver on time and (preferably) under budget
- the applicant wants a lot of money to complete the project
- the applicant could complete the project on less money
- they will recoup their money (or tick their boxes) with what the applicant produces.

These elements are important whether the project is to write a textbook, pitch for a play with the BBC, pitch a film to Steven Spielberg, get an article into a newspaper or apply for funding for a big research project.

The Module and its Definitions

The module had to be set up within the usual parameters of university guidelines on learning outcomes and assessment, with reference to the university's mission statement and its guidelines on the ethics of research. In particular it had to develop the student's understanding of their subject, encourage them to become more independent of tutors and also provide them with a skill that would be useful after university.

The module learning outcomes made it clear that by the end of the module students should be able to demonstrate that where necessary they knew how to use the new technologies to underpin their basic research; that they could formulate, in the approved format, a research project clearly relevant to contemporary creative writing; that they had understood the nature of research and had begun to develop clear strategies for conducting a research project based on their own original primary research. For their course work students were required to submit a Project Proposal of no less than 2500 words, for a research project to be based on their own primary original research.

I started the module by asking: what is research and what kinds of research do writers undertake? It was then possible to outline the basic elements of a research project, emphasising particularly the professional, subject specific, skill specific and employability components and identifying four basic elements of all research.

- The field of study.
- Developing professional practice.
- The ability to communicate.
- The researcher's awareness.

Since this module would lead on an Independent research project in the 3rd year I thought it best to start by defining terms. I wanted students to engage with issues connected to contemporary Creative and Professional Writing and I wanted them to come up with primary original research. I did not want them to research long dead authors and I did not want recycled materials from published articles. The research project had to be about some aspect of contemporary Creative and Professional- not Literature, History, Sociology or Psychology. It also had to be focused on some practical, creative, personal, professional, economic, religious, ethical, legal or political aspect of the business of contemporary creative writing. Clearly we needed to define what we meant by 'contemporary' and by 'primary original research'. I also asked students to complete a research proposal – in essence a trimmed down funding application form – to get them to focus on what exactly they were going to do. We looked at several funding application forms and project proposals to establish basic parameters and common ground. We discussed the key features of a proposal/application, namely: basic questions, context and methods.

Choosing a Topic

In general students were advised to plan a research project they would like to undertake. Ideally the project should build on something they already knew a little about and should be something they would be happy to develop into a real research project in their final year of study – though if they changed their mind nobody would force them to run that particular project. At this stage they were advised to pay particular attention to choosing a topic, adequately defining the subject of research, adequately resourcing the project, planning the research and submitting a carefully thought out research proposal.

Ideally the topic should be something that already interests the student, something they would like to study further, be something they would have an interest in even if they were not writing a project, should be an extension of something they have already studied, be something that will hold their interest for more than twenty weeks, be something they are happy to research, be within their capabilities, given their existing knowledge and the time available, be financially viable,

I ruled out 'how to' articles – e.g. how to write a script, write a best seller, get an agent, get into TV etc. The only exception to this was where a student had already demonstrated that they knew how to do these things by actually achieved something in the area they planned to write about.

This element of the module always took a long time to establish. While some students fell into a choice without difficulty, others struggled. Usually those with a wide range of interests and reading agonised over precisely which topic to choose while others found that being asked to choose a research topic revealed proved to be an embarrassment. Often these students changed their topic several times and finally decided on a topic only after being guided away from several unsuitable or un-doable suggestions.

Reading for Research

Students were given detailed advice and handouts on building their own research resources and they were referred to standard texts, particularly A. Hoffman's

Research for Writers. Four main areas were identified around which students were advised to direct their reading:

- Reading as background for the research topic.
- Reading about the requirements and style of the national broadsheet newspaper where they proposed to publish their research.
- Reading about research methodology and research techniques.
- Reading about how to write an article.

In general the underlying message to students was that often writers are thrown back on their own resources. If they have no resources this can be a disaster. If students suspected they did not have sufficient intellectual, academic and personal resources to get them through a year long Independent Project, then now would be a good time to start developing some. Most students grasped this message and took it seriously.

However, what proved difficult for students to grasp was that no one could tell them exactly how to go about their research. It is possible to explain that each researcher is different, that each project has its own dynamic and that all research is a complex problem solving exercise in a shifting and unpredictable environment. However, until they have actually tried their hand at research these explanations do not really make sense.

Other Elements

The module includes a session on using the internet for research purposes. I am still surprised at how many students are resistant to the new technologies. On the other hand it is tempting and convenient for a student to suppose that the Internet is *the* major source of information. Certainly it is a growing resource for researchers, but I have taken great pains to stress that it is only a useful *additional* source of information: and even then, it is not always very useful, up to date or reliable – particularly in this subject.

Many lecturers are reluctant to accept references, information or downloaded material from the worldwide web. This often puzzles students and the reasons – that it is difficult to be certain that material from the web comes from an authentic literary or academic source or that it is accurate information: that the person who launched the web site may be a fraud or prankster putting up misleading information – are not ones that all students readily accept. I advise students never to rely solely or substantially on material from the Internet, but I admit that some research topics cannot be completed without reference to the Internet. However, it is a rare topic that can be researched only via the Internet. Most topics, I insist, will probably need references to a combination of websites, books and articles.

Generally when a research proposal or project arrives with only references to the Internet, and no reference to books and articles, tutors are immediately alert to the possibility that the student has not done sufficient background reading, that the reading they have done may not be reliable or that the work has simply been downloaded. Conversely when a research project arrives without any reference to the Internet, tutors often feel that either the student is a technophobe or that they have not exhausted all the research possibilities available. I discuss all these

possibilities with students and I offer handouts on reliable websites along with advice on publications about effective use of the web for research.

As part of the practical preparation for research and professional writing we require students to do classroom presentations and pitches. On this module I added an element called 'Introducing Myself' specifically to help students who plan to attempt vox-pop, interviews, distribute questionnaires or conduct surveys. This element grew directly from student experience and runs as a self-awareness session, along the lines of the old maxim that you never get a second chance to make a good first impression.

I also include a session devoted to helping students to explain their research topic in which I ask students prepare a post-card sized introductory script which they then memorise. This too comes out of student experience and it is designed to help students present a fluent and polished explanation of themselves and their project which can be updated and revised as the project develops.

Inevitably few students had seen a project proposal or a funding application so this was another important part of their preparation. In addition we looked at various publishing house style sheets, examined several book proposals and discussed which ones we would award funding to and why.

Another element of the module was a consideration of the ethical dimension of particular topics. When students filled out their project proposals I asked them if they foresaw any serious ethical or moral issues connected with the research. For example, did the research involve minors, sex offenders, terrorists, prisoners etc? As some students proposed travel, visits to institutions, to conduct interviews and to start placements, I asked them about personal safety, whether their project actually required travel, and if so whether their project might put them in jeopardy? I also asked if their research might give offence or result in harm to someone. If so, I ask them to say what the issues are and also how they intend to address them. For most students the ethical dimension to research came as a shock.

Scope

The module ran for more than fourteen years and in that time students explored and researched a huge range of topics, for example:

- Benjamin Zephania and the OBE: writers and awards
- The band Slayer: Pop Lyrics can Kill
- The Devil is in Writing for Children
- Mills & Boon – romance, writing and publishing kitsch
- Violence in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*
- The trial of H. Selby Jnr's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*
- Are publishers really to blame?
- Sex and Children's Literature
- Crime Writers - Ruth Rendell & Barbara Vine
- The life and work of James Ferman
- Nabokov's *Lolita* – how can I write about paedophilia?
- The trial of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

- Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*
- Censoring Howard Brenton's *Romans in Britain*
- Shock tactics: Edward Bond's *Saved*
- Violence and sex in *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*
- Censoring *The Little Red Schoolbook* - The Oz trial
- Discussing the un-discussable: Alice Walker's *Warrior Marks*
- *South Park: The Movie* Who is to blame?
- Ghost writers – invisible or what?
- The duty to remember: *Fahrenheit 451*
- The truth about Special Forces: Andy McNab's *Bravo Two Zero*
- Literary Agents – who needs them?
- The lyrics of Eminem
- Is there a case for censoring Britney Spears' lyrics?
- X-Men and race relations in the US
- So Solid Crew's lyrics - confronting or supporting gun culture?
- Writers and 9/11
- Writers – what have they done and what can they do about the war in Iraq?

Key Issues and Questions

Students were often helped by a kind of flow chart dealing with related key issues and questions. For experienced researchers this seemed elementary, but for the undergraduates thinking about research for the first time they were often a challenge.

RESEARCH PROJECT: KEY ISSUES & QUESTIONS

The following questions and the accompanying chart will help guide you through some of the key issues and questions around your Project Proposal/Application. Start by thinking about the questions, then move on to the chart.

- What is a Project Proposal?
- What kinds of things have you learned about planning a project on this module?
- What are the most important things you have learned about planning a project and writing a Proposal?
- In what ways has your thinking about planning a project and writing a Project Proposal developed?
- Do you think these things are important? Are they important only to you?
- In what ways has your understanding of what you want to do as a writer and researcher changed as a result of this module?
- How might what you have learned on this module affect your future work?

Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Conclusion
Can you list some of things you have learned about on this module?	Can you discuss how these things have affected your thinking about your project?	What effect do you think this module has had on your development as a writer and	What do you think it means, to be a writer who undertakes research?	What makes a person want to undertake research - what makes you want to

		researcher?		research?
Can you list the different ways in which you now see the planning of a project?	Can you give an example of how your thinking has changed?	Why and how does this particular example affect the way you think about writing and the way you plan now?	Can you compare this example with the work of any other research writer?	Can anybody do research or do writers have a particular relationship to research?
What do you think writers do when they plan a project?	Can you think of a book or a writer whose work illustrates the kind of point you want to make about planning research?	Can you discuss a particular book that had a positive (or negative) influence on your research planning?	What are the things you most admire / dislike about this book?	Do you think it is possible to say exactly what it is that writers do when they plan to research and write?
How is your thinking different about planning a project different from the way you thought at the start of this module?	Do you think that writing a proposal can help you to accurately predict how the actual project will go?	Can you give an example where a sense of planning has shaped how you see the development of your project?	What problems have you predicted for your project – are you happy with your plans to overcome them?	In what ways might hat you have learned on this module feed into your work on other modules?
In what ways are your feelings about planning a research project different now?	Can you say how your sense of yourself as a writer and researcher has changed during the course of your studies so far?	What subjects might you research in the future and in what ways has this module changed the ways you might approach them?	What has been the most significant change in your thinking as a result of this module?	Can you imagine how any change in your thinking might affect your writing and research over the next few years?

In order to make use of the work on funding application forms as a norm of project planning, students were required to complete their Project Proposal in a standard format. Their eventual aim was to research and write an article for a national broadsheet newspaper.

PROJECT PROPOSAL / APPLICATION

1) Your name.

- 2) The working title of the project.
- 3) A brief explanation of:
 - a) how and why this project is related to contemporary creative writing
 - b) what benefits it might bring in terms of knowledge or understanding
 - c) how you think it might benefit you as a writer
- 4) A description of the project. Some questions you might consider here are:
 - What exactly do you want to do?
 - What is the idea behind the project?
 - Why does it interest you?
 - What do you want to achieve with this project?
 - How does it fit in with your interests?
 - How you see your writing developing as a result of this project?
- 5) Have you undertaken a literature / net search for background reading?
Yes / No
- 6) If Yes give some indication of your progress. If No explain why.
- 7) Have you begun to compile a Bibliography?
Yes / No
- 8) If Yes give some indication of your progress. If No explain why.
- 9) Other sources - libraries, archives, institutions, agencies, private document collections - you plan to use.
- 10) Have you looked at G. Wells, *The Craft of Writing Articles* or a similar guide?
Yes / No
- 11) If No explain why.
- 12) How will you make this project happen?
 - a) Give an indication of the main research gathering techniques (interviews, survey, questionnaire or placement) you plan to employ.
 - b) Give an indication of what you think the main stages of the project will be.
 - c) Give some idea of the main problems you anticipate
 - d) Give some indication of how you plan to overcome them.
- 13) What books on research technique have you read or consulted?
Give details of what you found useful or interesting about each book.
- 14) How will you use your chosen research technique?
Give a substantial draft of the interview questions, questionnaire or survey you propose.
- 15) Does this project involve a placement?
Yes / No
- 16) If Yes please give details:
 - a) where is the placement
 - b) nature of placement
 - c) contact details

- d) start and end dates
- e) how advanced are arrangements.
- f) explain why this placement is relevant to your proposal
- g) describe how you will use the placement to gather research.

17) Do you foresee any serious ethical or moral issues connected with your proposed research? For example, does your research involve minors, sex offenders, terrorists etc? Does it require travel to places or countries where your safety might be in jeopardy? Could your research give offence or result in harm to someone? If so, please say what these issues are and how you intend to address them.

18) In which national broadsheet newspaper do you aim to publish your article?

- The Times*
- The Financial Times*
- The Guardian*
- The Independent*
- The Telegraph*

19) Why have you chosen this particular national newspaper and why do you think it will be suitable place for your researched article.

20) Date of Proposal.

21) Word Count.

Conclusion

Creative and Professional Writing students learn from the professional experience of their tutors. This is not limited to the processes of writing but goes beyond that into their experience of the business of writing: consequently the idea that writers have to starve in a garret in order to write is fast receding. Our students learn that in order to write creatively they will have to put their writing skills to use in earning a living. As students look to the market place and to the possibility of postgraduate study, they see with increasing clarity that good research, planning, project planning, funding application and presentation skills, are not only useful in academic life, but, along with other 'writerly' habits of mind and discipline, are valuable marketable assets in the world of work. A couple of clear points emerged from this module:

- Some students are thrilled at the idea of research. Others are terrified. Mostly they have very little idea what research is
- People only find out about research by doing it – theory and lectures cannot really prepare them for the reality of their particular project
- The use of 'realia' in the classroom - book proposals, proposal/application forms, interview questions, permission forms – helped link the idea of writing in a university to the 'real world' of professional writing
- The possibility of a choice in exploring some aspect of contemporary Creative and Professional Writing encouraged students to develop their own interests along with their research skills
- The module addressed issues of organisation and time management by allowing students to develop their ideas at their own speed but with a deadline in mind.