Archival Research for Community- and Skill-Building in the Online Writing Classroom

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Abstract

This low-stakes assignment invites students in an online corequisite first-year writing course to explore the archives of a local historic African American newspaper as an alternative to more conventional research-based writing tasks. This course is taught at a large public community college with a predominantly white student population in Louisville, Kentucky. For this activity, students first are introduced to the concept of archives through a reading and a video. Next, they are invited to freely explore the digitized newspaper archive, choose one article that captures their interest to read in full and sharing a short summary of it along with a reflection on their experience of navigating the digital archive on a discussion board. Finally, each student is asked to respond to at least two classmates, looking for harmonies and tensions between their and their classmates' summarized articles and experiences in the archive. The local focus of this assignment encourages students to see research as personal and quite literally close to home, while the focus on reflection and response encourages students to work collaboratively to overcome challenges when navigating difficult digital sources. In an online writing classroom, which can often be an isolating and unfamiliar space, particularly for the historically underserved populations most likely to be in a developmental writing course, this assignment encourages students to embrace their roles as researchers in community with other researchers.

Placing the Online Writing Classroom

"Archival Exploration: The *Louisville Leader* Archive" is a low-stakes assignment that invites students to thoroughly explore the digitized archive of a local historic African American newspaper, choose an article of interest to read and summarize on a discussion board, and reflect in conversation with other students on the different versions of the city described in their articles as well as their shared experiences of navigating the unfamiliar space of the digital archive. This assignment allows me as a teacher-scholar-activist (Toth et al., 2019) to bridge the gap between my own daily experience of research, which is primarily archival and historical, and my students' prior experience of research, which is all too often Google-searching for sources to support predetermined positions on preset topics. It allows students to gain experience as researchers and as digital communicators—both important outcomes for many first-year writing classes—but perhaps more importantly, it invites students to see research as being closely connected to their own lived experience and the experiences of people like them. Exploring the local archive allows students to critically consider the city they live in and their place within it, and by doing this in conversation and collaboration with other developing researchers, these students can forge community ties that are often difficult to create in online contexts.

I initially conceived of this assignment to solve a place-based problem of my own. In 2022, I was hired to teach ENG101/100, a corequisite first-year writing (FYW) course, online for Jefferson Community and Technical College, a public two-year college in Louisville, Kentucky. While I have briefly visited the city, I had never (and still have never) visited the campus or met any

prompt
a journal of academic writing assignments

Volume 9, Issue 1 (2025), pages 3–9.

DOI: 10.31719/pjaw.v9i1.205
Submitted January 2, 2024; accepted October 30, 2024; published February 25, 2025.

of my colleagues or students in the physical world. Like most other open-access two-year colleges, this school's mission is to serve a primarily local population. While not all of my students are originally from Louisville or currently live in Louisville, they all have some ties to the city or the surrounding region. My previous teaching experiences at other institutions had been exclusively in my hometown, and when teaching in person on other campuses, I had shared a local context with my students, walking the same campus sidewalks, eating in the same restaurants, experiencing the same weather, and so on. In this new remote position, I quickly realized that I had very little context for my students' lives, and they had little context for me or for the college itself, given that most of them are first-semester students taking courses partially or exclusively online.

To better serve my students, I felt sure that I needed to better understand where they were coming from, literally. Additionally, as was widely reported during the pivot to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, online classes can lead students to feel more isolated and disconnected from their peers and their community (Birmingham et al., 2023). By encouraging students to make a familiar place the focus of their first foray into research, I aim to ground the class in their personal and communal experiences and create opportunities to bond with one another over shared places and discoveries about the city itself. Further, as Lisa Mastrangelo (2022) notes, "[s]low research in the archives...invites students to become voices within the local communities where they participate," and "the students are seen and come to see themselves as trusted authorities on their topics" (p. 41). This is particularly important for students placed into a corequisite developmental writing course at an open-access two-year college like Jefferson Community and Technical College, as these students often express anxiety about being in academic spaces and knowing what to write or say. Inviting these students to see themselves as important voices and capable researchers can have major impacts in their academic development both within the FYW course and beyond it.

Reimagining The Research Requirement

Like many first-year writing courses, ENG101/100 requires that students complete some sort of research-based writing (RBW) assignment during the term. In fact, of the 24 learning outcomes (that span state-, system-, and college-level competencies required of students) included in the course description, seven address on research skills in some way. In many cases, these outcomes are fulfilled by a traditional persuasive "research paper." The issue with the ubiquitous research paper assignment, as outlined by Elizabeth Wardle (2009), is that it is a genre unique to the FYW classroom. It does not introduce students to the kind of RBW they might do in their chosen discipline, nor does it acquaint students with the kind of methods and RBW that might be employed across multiple disciplines. While composition programs often claim that their courses prepare students to write in other academic and professional contexts, Wardle's study suggests that many standard FYW genres have little or no application beyond our classrooms.

The assignment presented here, which is a low-stakes, week-long activity, is not intended to be a one-to-one replacement for the kinds of research papers that Wardle critiques in "Mutt Genres"—for a start, students are not producing any formal academic essay at the end of it. Rather, this assignment is an invitation for students to see research as far more diverse and expansive than they often realize it can be. Ideally, this activity would be taught alongside other explorations into different kinds of research. While working in archives may initially seem like an odd choice for students' first experience of academic research, Pamela VanHaitsma (2015) argues that "this [archival research] process is most beneficial, though, not because students will become professional archival scholars (most will not), but because primary archival work involves students in inquiry-driven research and writing" (p. 36). Though few of my students are

likely to become archivists or researchers, they do stand to benefit from engaging in a research process that starts with a deep exploration of sources rather than one that encourages them to begin with an opinion and only later seek out limited evidence to support it.

While such immersive experiences of research are beneficial both to students and to teacher-scholar-activists working at two-year colleges, this institutional context often makes doing research difficult. Two-year colleges across the country are facing mounting budget cuts, resulting in fewer and fewer resources (Whitford, 2021). Often, libraries and other academic supports bear the brunt of these austerity measures. While the Research 1 university where I am a PhD student has multiple physical libraries, an enormous selection of online resources, dedicated subject area librarians, and multiple unique archival collections, two-year colleges often have smaller libraries, fewer digital resources, and no archives for students to explore. This lack of resources is especially noticeable for online students, who may struggle to navigate limited and/or outdated databases with inadequate remote support. For faculty, these meager resources make it difficult to maintain a research output, a situation exacerbated by heavy teaching loads and little institutional support or expectation for such work (Suh et al., 2021). These conditions create a situation in which teachers who have little research experience are expected to teach research skills to students who have little to no research experience, all without the necessary resources or institutional supports. Open-access digital archival collections present an opportunity to bypass these common institutional limitations and allow both students and faculty to engage with sources that might otherwise be inaccessible to them.

Students in the (Digital) Archive

The *Louisville Leader* was a weekly African American newspaper published from 1917 to 1954 by I. Willis Cole. Original editions were copied to microfilm in 1978, and in 2011, the University of Louisville digitized that microfilm to make the full collection publicly available online. In total, there are 900 issues preserved in the collection, a substantial but incomplete record of the paper's 37-year tenure. The *Louisville Leader* archive offers multiple features that make it ideal for this kind of low-stakes archival exploration. First, as noted, it is open access, avoiding paywalls or institutional logins. Second, the scans are high-quality and presented in an online viewer that allows users to zoom and scroll easily. Third, the entire collection is keyword-searchable, allowing students to find issues with articles relevant to their interests. Given the few locally focused and open-access options available in Louisville, the *Louisville Leader* archive was a logical choice for this activity, though as my students attest, it is not without its navigational challenges.

My students are assigned this activity in the seventh week of our 16-week course. By this point, they have already written one essay, a literacy narrative, and have even briefly explored another archive, the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), to identify possible models for that previous essay. Before diving into this collection, students are introduced to archives and archival research through two contextualizing sources: a chapter on archival research and place-based writing from *Writing Spaces 4* (Gaillet & Rose, 2021) and a video "Brief Introduction to Archives" from the university library that digitized the collection (University of Louisville Archives & Special Collections, 2020). While students may be able to capably explore a digital archive without these supporting texts, I have found that few first-year students have a clear sense of what archives are or how archival research differs from other research, and these sources help address those foundational questions. In a course with a synchronous component (on campus or online), these sources could potentially be replaced with an in-class lesson on archives, though I do think it is valuable for students to hear directly from working archivists and researchers.

Student responses to this assignment reflect the diversity of topics covered by the *Louisville*

Leader. While I initially imagined that students would gravitate towards the main focus of the paper (race relations in the city and nationwide), I have been consistently surprised by how many students alight on other interesting features of the newspaper to summarize on the discussion board. For example, multiple students in the two sections of ENG101/100 who have done this assignment have shared not articles but advertisements from the newspaper, describing how the products or services offered compare to those available today or how the needs or aspirations of the paper's readers compare to their own experiences today. Other students have highlighted articles about familiar places in the city—schools, churches, neighborhoods, and so on—and described how their experiences of these places compare to the narratives presented a century ago in the paper. Of course, this is not to say that students ignored the paper's focus on issues relevant to Louisville's Black community—many students have highlighted articles about civil rights movements, changing legislation, and particularly articles on local crime. In these responses, many students noted that they were not accustomed to reading history from this era written by Black authors, emphasizing a key value of this collection and of primary source research more generally.

Students' enthusiasm and interest in the content of the archive often has not extended to their reflections on the process of *navigating* the archive, however. In these, many students expressed frustration, noting the many ways in which the somewhat rudimentary navigability of the archive fails to meet the standards set by current search engines and other webpages. Here, students acted almost as User Experience professionals, identifying issues and making recommendations for how the archive's interface might be enhanced to more easily connect researchers to the sources they are seeking. In their responses to one another, students were notably supportive, offering suggestions to solve their peers' navigational problems and positing possible avenues for future research based both on the archive and their own experiences of the city. While discussion boards can often feel like a poor substitute for "conversation" in online asynchronous courses, I was impressed by the extent to which these students engaged with one another's ideas and worked to forge connections with their peers through shared experiences of the city and the archive.

Changing Contexts

As shown in the previous section, students engage with these tasks in part because of the clear connection between the content of the archive and their own lived experiences. For any instructor hoping to use this assignment in a different context, it will be essential to keep as much of this place-based approach as is possible. While few cities may have an archive exactly like the *Louisville Leader* collection, many research libraries have similar digitized collections of local or regional publications that might be suitable for engaging students in a similar research project, and many of these collections are open access. I am currently adapting this assignment to suit students at another institution in another city, and in that case, I have selected the college's digitized student newspaper archives, which span nearly 100 years of student writing. That collection has a different focus but still offers useful connections to students' lived experiences of the city and the institution. Finding a suitable collection may be time-consuming, but the payoff is significant when students can connect their archival explorations to their own lives.

For students in English classes outside of the first-year writing sequence or in other disciplines, this assignment still offers a valuable opportunity to engage in situated forms of research that mirror the work being done by scholars in various fields. As described, this assignment could be valuable to students in courses covering topics including journalism, history, or research methods. Modified versions of this assignment focusing on other archives might be employed in an even broader range of contexts, and I myself have taught a similar assignment

in an upper-level grammar course that guided students through various texts in the Lucille M. Schultz 19th Century Composition Archive, a digitized collection of 19th century grammar manuals and writing textbooks. In that case, students used the archival sources alongside their course textbook as a catalyst for conversation about changing methods of writing instruction as well as social norms around formality in speech and writing.

For on-campus classes, it may be valuable to have students explore a physical collection, though this could be logistically challenging depending on institutional context, class size, and other factors. Additionally, students in courses with synchronous meetings might complete this activity during class, with small group discussions taking the place of the online discussion board.

Future Plans

As I prepare to teach ENG101/100 again the next semester, I am considering multiple revisions to this assignment, including expanding this assignment from its current low stakes format into a unit of its own that invites students to produce an analysis essay focused on an article (or another artifact) from the *Louisville Leader* archive. I believe that such an expansion could provide a place-based alternative to common rhetorical analysis or researched argument assignments that would allow students to build skills as archival researchers while also using their local knowledge to provide context, support, and insight for one another's' projects.

While these plans for expansion are still preliminary, I could see students using this additional time to develop substantial projects that combine personal narrative and archival research in interesting and innovative ways. Students might draw on journalism or narrative nonfiction for inspiration, using their present experiences to reflect on the opinions shared in the newspaper's pages or using the events described in the archives to give context to the culture and geography of the city they live in. Such a project could fulfill many of the traditional learning outcomes of a first-year writing class while giving students an opportunity to compose in a form that has more public utility than the "mutt genre" (Wardle, 2009) of the conventional research or analysis paper.

Whatever form future versions of this assignment take, I plan to provide more direction to students in their first forays in the archive. While my intent in framing the discussion prompt around "harmonies and tensions" was to invite a range of responses and not limit students' contributions, some students struggled to find an access point to the discussion with so broad a prompt. Future students will be given examples of what such harmonies and tensions might look like and will be given more guidance to prompt deeper engagement with the archive. Similarly, I have found that some students need more support on reading historic texts. The provided chapter and video help with this, but I would be eager to develop a video in which I walk students through the process of navigating the archive and reading a text or two on screen in real time.

Conclusion

Too often, the research done in the FYW classroom, whether physical or digital, feels very distant from the research done by professionals in the field, whether in writing studies or other disciplines. This gulf is further expanded by labor and institutional inequities—most research-based writing published in the field comes from tenure-track faculty at four-year colleges and universities who rarely teach FYW, and the non-tenure track, contingent, and graduate student instructors who primarily teach these courses, particularly at two-year and teaching-focused schools, have few resources to pursue research (Hassel & Phillips, 2022). While first-year students are not and should not be expected to be professional researchers, they

stand to benefit from exposure to archival and other research methods employed by researchers in a variety of fields. Though this assignment is ultimately a small curricular intervention, it demonstrates how valuable and impactful it can be for students to engage in a research process that is localized and contextualized, allowing them to see themselves in their work and use the tools of the writing classroom to make sense of the world around them.

ASSIGNMENT
Archival Exploration: The *Louisville Leader* Archive

As you learned from the "At Work in the Archives" reading, archives can tell us a lot about a place and the people who live there. To get you some practice doing archival research yourselves, this assignment asks that you explore an online archive that can give visitors an insight into the peoples and places of Louisville, Kentucky.

The *Louisville Leader* is an African American newspaper that was published from 1917 to 1950 in Louisville, Kentucky, by I. Willis Cole. The newspaper has not been published in more than seventy years, but the paper's archives were preserved and made available online by the University of Louisville. You can learn more about the newspaper, I. Willis Cole, and the process of making it available online through the UofL Libraries blog, and you can access the full digital archive through UofL special collections.

Before posting to this discussion board, please complete the following tasks:

1. **Access the Louisville Leader online archives through UofL Libraries.** Take some time to explore the archive by clicking to view different issues, searching for various terms, and exploring the other features of the website.
2. Using the search function, see if you can find any issues of the newspaper with articles that correspond to familiar places in the city or issues/topics that are still relevant to your life in and around Louisville today.
3. Choose one article that you find interesting and relevant to read in full and share on the discussion board.

Before Day 4, please share an initial post of at least 250 words addressing the following prompts:

- Share a link to one article from the *Louisville Leader* that you found interesting or relevant to your life/experience of Louisville. Briefly summarize the article for your classmates.
- Next, describe why you chose this source. How might this article (or others like it) help the people of Louisville to better understand the history and culture of the city?
- Lastly, reflect briefly on your process of exploring the digital archive. How did it compare to using other sites online to get information? Did you find navigating the archive intuitive? Confusing? Frustrating?

Before Day 7, please share responses of at least 100 words to at least two classmates addressing the following prompt:

- How does your classmates' experience of navigating the archive compare to yours?

- Do your articles tell similar stories of Louisville, or is there some tension between the versions of the city they present?
- What else do you find interesting or relevant about your classmate's post?

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v9i1.205.

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