

# Folklore and/of the Research Paper

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When I first began to teach folklore I had already been teaching writing for a long time. I had become aware that there had taken shape in the composition classroom what folklorists call a monster legend. A group of stories, rumors, and beliefs had developed and clustered around that piece of writing usually assigned by composition teachers as the final project of the semester: the research paper.

Students envisioned this final effort as monstrously large: four or five times the size of an ordinary paper; as terrifying: it could determine the final grade; as supernatural: humans had better learn the proper magical formulas--"Single-space within the footnote, double-space between the notes"--if they wished to survive. Above all, it was mysterious: What was the meaning, the purpose, the very nature of the Thing called Research?

Research becomes less fantastical if we examine how researchers in a particular discipline work. I ask the members of my folklore class not only to read about what folklorists do, but also to become folklorists, to conduct original research in the field.

My students collect items of folklore from "informants" or "tradition bearers"--friends, family members, colleagues, or strangers who have some lore to pass on. The lore can be stories, songs, jokes, riddles, beliefs, customs, or any of the long list of items that interest folklorists. As collectors, students use a variety of techniques and sources to learn as much as possible about the function and context of the lore. They have collected such wide-ranging materials as: "Haunted House Tales," "Pregnancy Lore," "College Pranks," "Theater Folklore," "Traditional German Recipes Spanning Four Genera-

tions," "Cures for the Common Cold," "Supersitions of Athletes," and "Place Legends of Ann Arbor's Arboretum." This collection project enables students to learn about research as they engage in the complex of thinking/inventing/investigating/writing activities that comprise the research process.

Students begin the process by choosing a topic, which I ask them to discuss with me to ensure that the project has a reasonable scope and a clear purpose. Often a student has a personal reason for selecting a subject: "I want to learn how and why the religious beliefs of my family have changed over four generations," or, "I want to understand a very strange series of occurrences that made certain members of my family conclude we might be living in a haunted house." From his or her statement of purpose, the student researcher develops a series of questions and one or more hypotheses. These questions and suppositions determine the particular research to be done. For example, the student who wished to understand her family's religious views decided to interview family members about how they celebrated or remembered they used to celebrate the religious holiday of Passover. As the research progresses, students' questions or hypotheses may change, be added to or discarded. The student whose house was the scene of extraordinary events speculated at one point that her home might have been disrupted by a poltergeist.

At any stage in their investigations students may discover they need information from secondary sources. I suggest that before beginning their fieldwork they read background material on their subject in order to feel more confident and be more competent to do their observing and interviewing; check a fieldwork hand-

book<sup>1</sup> to help them develop a set of questions and a plan for getting the most useful material from informants; and read selections from an archive I maintain of student collection reports. The archive not only offers ideas and models to students beginning their research but also assures them of a potential audience of future researchers.

The assignment sheet<sup>2</sup> I give students offers a model for the written research report, but students may adapt the model to suit their own needs. Indeed, the form of the research paper both shapes and is shaped by the complex of activities that comprises the individual research process.

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<sup>1</sup>Suggested reading for doing folklore field work: Kenneth S. Goldstein's A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1964) remains the classic in the field. Includes important chapters on Problem Statement and Analysis, Pre-Field Preparation, and Rapport Establishment and Maintenance. Richard M. Dorson's Folklore and Folklife (University of Chicago Press, 1972) is an excellent collection of essays and includes advice on Collecting Oral Literature, Recording Material Culture, and Recording Traditional Music. Barre Toelken's The Dynamics of Folklore (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979) includes sections on Being a Folklorist and on Folklore Research, plus a very useful nearly-verbatim "Fieldwork Transcript."

<sup>2</sup>Atelia Clarkson, a former member of the English faculty at Eastern Michigan University, generously shared with me her ideas and materials for a collection project when I began to teach folklore. Teachers interested in using folktales in their classes should consult the anthology she edited with Gilbert B. Cross, World Folktales: A Scribner Resource Collection, which contains appendixes on "Folktales in the Elementary Classroom" and "Folktales in the College Classroom."

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The Assignment Sheet  
for the  
FOLKLORE COLLECTION PROJECT

AREAS OF FOLKLORE STUDIES:

- I. Traditional Verbal and Performed Art
  - A. Prose Narratives  
folktales, legends, memorates, myths, jokes, anecdotes
  - B. Folk Poetry  
rhymes, toasts, etc.
  - C. Folk Songs
  - D. Proverbs
  - E. Riddles
  - F. Folk Speech  
proverbial similes and metaphors, curses, the dozens, etc.
  - G. Music and Dance
- II. Traditional Products and Processes: Arts, Crafts, Architecture
  - A. Visual Arts  
such as Pennsylvania Dutch decor and designs
  - B. Crafts  
quilts, toys, furniture, etc.
  - C. Architecture  
barns, weathervanes, fenceposts, etc.
  - D. Foods
  - E. Occupational Techniques  
farming, fishing, hunting
  - F. Instruments  
fiddles, dulcimers, special tunings, picking styles
- III. Traditional Attitudes: Beliefs and Associated Custom and Ritual
  - A. Folk Medicine
  - B. Stereotypes
  - C. Taboos
  - D. Magic
  - E. Festivals  
(and the costumes, food, dances, narratives, etc. associated with them)

PLEASE NOTE:

The above list is, of course, incomplete.

#### SOME TITLES OF PROJECTS IN THE ARCHIVES:

Folklore of Magoffin County, Ky.; Haunted House Tales of Adolescents; What Happens on Hell Night: How They Scare the Pledges; Theater Folklore; College Pranks; Ethnic Jokes; A Stereotype: Cruelty of Catholic Nuns in Parochial Schools; Folklore of Beauty Aids; How to Cure a Cold.

#### SUGGESTED STEPS TO FOLLOW IN DOING YOUR PAPER:

1. Choose a topic carefully. Choose one that you think will be fun or (preferably and) useful. Consult with me and hand in a written Project Proposal. Be prepared to change to another topic if the first one doesn't work out.
2. Look at a book or article on your subject. You will feel more confident and be more competent when you do your field work if you have some background on your topic. Look at some of the papers in the archives in my office to see what others have done before you. You may want to use some of the materials you read in making your analysis of the data.
3. Consult a book on field work and write up a plan of how you intend to proceed. Make sure you have a good set of questions to ask your informants.
4. Think about yourself in relation to the project. Try out some of the questions on yourself, on your friends. Do your first interview with the informant you know best and feel most comfortable with.
5. Write up the project (see model below). As you write, you may find you need to do additional field or library research.

#### SOME THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN DOING FIELD WORK:

Try to find out where, when, and from whom the informant learned the custom, tale, belief, etc.

You might want to ask:

What is the use (function, value, meaning) of this to you?

Can you describe the situation in which you tell (sing perform) this item?

#### THE COLLECTION PROJECT SHOULD CONSIST OF:

1. Title page. Please hand in two copies of this page. I will return one with comments and grade. Keep a copy of your paper. Unless you specify otherwise, the paper you hand in will become a part of the Archives.
2. Table of Contents.
3. Introduction. Explain what you have tried to do, describe the group you are studying, give local history. See Introduction to South from Hell-fer-Sartin for a model introduction to a collection of lore.
4. Description of Field Methodology, brief narrative of general collecting experiences, problems, etc.
5. Proper Documentation of Informants. (see informant sheet).
6. Data on Collector. (see collector sheet).
7. Transcription of representative samples of the lore you have collected together with any tapes, photographs, charts, etc. you have.
8. Analysis of Traditions Collected. Although you may refer to secondary sources in your analysis, remember that your main job is to write about the raw data you have collected. You should sort or categorize your material in some meaningful way and discuss the function of the material. Why do the informants do this, believe this, remember this? How does this fit into their lives? Why does this kind of lore continue to exist? Look for a pattern.
9. Bibliography of library and archives materials consulted.

#### PLEASE NOTE:

We can discuss in conference variations of the above suitable to your project.

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When term after term I found the research reports submitted by my folklore students so much more enthusiastically and competently written than the research papers of my composition students, I decided to bring folklore into my composition

course.<sup>3</sup> I hoped that by assigning my composition students some modified version of the collection project, that none the less leads them through a step-by-step process of inquiry, I could make the Monster Research less mysterious.

I begin by conducting a workshop on collecting techniques, and then students practice interviewing each other before going out to collect information from friends, roommates, fellow workers, and others. I use data collected by the class to teach such skills as classification-division and basic elements of analysis. For my composition students I limit the choice of lore they study to superstitions and folk remedies since these items are among the easiest to collect. One of my students collected theater superstitions from members of her drama class; a hockey player collected superstitions about winning and losing from his teammates; several students collected cures for colds or hangovers. These students became actively engaged in their research; this is too often not the case when students do only library research for a traditional term paper assignment. The following is a composite sequence of several exercises and assignments for using folklore to teach research and various writing skills as well.

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#### FOLKLORE IN THE COMPOSITION CLASS

##### An Assignment/Exercise Sequence

(meant to be shortened or otherwise modified to meet individual needs and tastes)

##### On Collecting Folklore

(a subject about which teachers and students learn they already know a great deal).

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<sup>3</sup>I was encouraged to give a folklore assignment in a course in English composition by the enormously successful results that followed Eliot Wigginton's decision to send his high school English class out to find and record traditional materials in the area of Rabun Gap, Georgia. The magazine of the articles the students write and edit, Foxfire, continues to flourish, and anthologies of selections from the magazines continue to find a mass audience.

1. **Collecting Demonstration.** Instructor acts as Collector or Field Worker; students are Informants or Tradition Bearers. Superstitions and folk remedies are easy to collect in the classroom. During the course of the demonstration, students learn that they already know something about the subject. They do use home remedies (one teaspoon of sugar in a glass of water cures the hiccups), they do write with a "lucky" pen when they take exams (or know someone who does).

2. **Interviewing/Collecting Workshop.** Students in groups practice on each other before going out into the field.

3. **Library Research.** Folklorists, of course, usually do considerable research before going into the field. Some library research may be assigned in addition to field work, or the instructor may wish to bring to class something like the following from The Ann Arbor News. Articles on certain kinds of lore appear regularly in newspapers and popular magazines and confirm for students that folklore is available all around them.

### Sure-fire hiccups cures

By Joe Graedon

Q - At a dinner party the other night I got an embarrassing case of hiccups, and I went through a real torture treatment. Everybody and their uncle had a different cure:

One person had me gulping water until I spilled it, another one almost suffocated me making me breathe out of a paper bag, and one man gave me a bear hug guaranteed to cure my hiccups - or break my ribs. Nothing worked, so as a last resort they all outdid themselves trying to scare the hiccups out of me.

#### People's Pharmacy

Please tell me, is there a sure-fire simple cure for the hiccups?

A - You came to the right place with this question. I've got three dandy hiccup cures so if one fails you can always fall back on another and they're a lot less traumatic than the misery your friends put you through.

My favorite and most successful remedy is the spoonful of sugar trick. Swallow a teaspoonful of dry, white granulated sugar. Researchers theorize that the sugar granules stimulate the phrenic nerve in the neck and interrupt the hiccup reflex.

If that "sure-fire" treatment fails twice, you could try the vinegar cure. A jigger of vinegar down the hatch should do the job. But if that, too, fails short, the latest remedy I've discovered requires a lemon wedge well soaked with Angostura bitters. Gobble it down quickly (without the rind) and watch those hiccups disappear.

Let you think these treatments are a little weird or no better than your friends' attempts, we assure you they all come from the prestigious pages of the New England Journal of Medicine.

4. **Field Work.** Students go outside the classroom to do field work (they sometimes like to work in pairs). Informants can be friends, family, members of their theater, athletic, or social groups.

5. **Classifying the Materials.** The data collected by the class serves as material for a class session on classification-division.

6. **The Collecting Experience.** Class session on narrative writing. Assignment: Write a short narrative of your collecting experience that would make a suitable introduction to your collection of lore.

7. **The Informants.** Assignment: Write a descriptive sketch of one of your informants that emphasizes those details that would help a reader better understand the lore you collected.

8. **Point of View.** Assignment: Write on the relation of Collector to Collection. Reflect on how your own antisuperstition bias or your own hypochondria affects your view of the superstitions or folk remedies you collected.

9. **Analysis of the Collection.** Students' raw data is used for class session on analysis. Assignment: Write an analysis of your own data.

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The relative success of folklore collection assignments is due surely to a number of reasons including the charm of the subject and the step-by-step approach. But it is due mainly, I believe, to the nature of original field research. Such research gives the investigator--professional or student--the awesome responsibility of collaborating in the creation of the primary source materials; the quantity, the scope, and the quality of the data depend upon how compatible a working relationship exists between interviewer and informant. Such research gives investigators control over the source materials; when they evaluate and analyze their data, they work as "experts" with interviews they have conducted and materials they have collected. Indeed this sense of control and authority may be the key element in pro-

viding students with a successful learning experience.

#### REFERENCES

Clarkson, Atelia and Gilbert B. Cross, eds., World Folktales: A Scribner Resource Collection. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980.

A well-balanced selection of folktales from a broad range of countries that should appeal to readers from the elementary to the college level. Teachers will find the scholarly introductions to each section of the book and the appendices which include information on how to use folktales in the classroom particularly helpful.

Dorson, Richard M. Folklore and Folklife. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

A collection of essays which includes advice on collecting oral literature, recording material culture, and recording traditional music.

Goldstein, Kenneth S. A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore. Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1964.

An invaluable book for folklore collectors. It contains important chapters on problem statement and analysis, pre-field preparation, and establishing rapport.

Toelken, Barre. The Dynamics of Folklore. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979.

A great help to anyone who wants to understand the work of being a folklorist. It includes a section on folklore research and a very useful nearly-verbatim fieldwork transcript.

