Meaningful Work

How the History Research Paper Prepares Students for College and Life

By Will Fitzhugh

"Without history, there is no way to learn from mistakes or remember the good times through the bad. History is more than a teacher to me; it's an understanding of why I am who I am. It's a part of my life on which I can never turn back.... In a sense, history is me, and I am the history of the future. History does not mean series of events; history means stories and pictures; history means people, and yet, history means much more. History means the people of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. History means me."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAUL ZWOLAK

Will Fitzhugh is the founder and editor of the Concord Review, *a quarterly journal of history research papers by high school students, available at www.tcr.org. Previously, he taught history for 10 years at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School in Concord, Massachusetts. His education writing has appeared in* EducationNews.org, *the* Washington Post*'s* The Answer Sheet, *and the* New York Times' Room for Debate.

A junior from a public high school wrote these words as part of her grand-prize-winning essay in a national civics competition. The competition asked students to write about what history meant to them in 500 to 700 words. What it did not ask students to do was read any history books or journal articles or primary sources on which to base their writing, nor did it ask students to give references for the works they used. The competition did not ask students to develop a thesis statement or a narrative, support it with research, or write numerous drafts—all hallmarks of good writing. And so, the prize-winning essay excerpted above is really no prize. The student who wrote it read nothing to prepare for her short "essay" and so wrote nothing substantive.

Our students' academic writing will rise, or fall, to the level of our expectations. Competitions like this one have low expectations. In so doing, they convey the idea that academic, expository writing based on research is neither valued nor necessary to a good education.

Writing competitions like this do not require so little of stu-

dents in a vacuum; they base their standards on those set by our schools. All too often, students are required to read far more fiction than nonfiction, and to write no more than five paragraphs about themselves, their families, or their neighborhoods. As a result, reading and writing have become diluted parts of the curriculum from elementary through high school. This is especially true in history, a discipline that requires close reading of sources (even an occasional actual history book) and carefully researched writing that seeks to understand, inform, and persuade.

For the lack of serious academic writing by our students, teachers are not to blame. A study I commissioned in 2002 found that 95 percent of U.S. public high school history teachers consider it important for students to write research papers in history and the social sciences. But the focus on standardized tests and superficial writing skills has left educators with little time to teach students how to write serious research papers and even less time to correct and grade them. As a result, this same study found that 81 percent of history teachers never assign a 20-page paper, and 62 percent never assign a 12-page paper, even to high school seniors.

Yet college professors continue to assign research papers. And they complain when the majority of students turn in mediocre (or abysmal) work. When college professors were asked in a 2006 survey conducted for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about students' preparation for college-level writing, reading, and research, only 6, 10, and 4 percent (respectively) said students were very well prepared. For many colleges and universities, this lack of preparation has shifted their focus from higher education to remediation. According to *Diploma to Nowhere*, a report published by Strong American Schools in 2008, more than one million of our high school graduates take remedial courses at our colleges each year. Periodically, the U.S. Department of Education tracks the percentage of students nationwide who are required to take remedial writing courses at two- and four-year colleges. According to recent estimates, between 7 and 14 percent of students take such classes. In fact, postsecondary institutions aren't the only ones offering them. A report published in 2005 by the National Commission on Writing found that state governments spend nearly a quarter of a billion dollars each year on remedial writing instruction for their employees.

By not preparing students for academic reading and writing, we set them up for failure in college and in the workplace. When we only ask that they read textbooks and write journal entries, we are not educating them. We are cheating them. We deny them the opportunity to see that reading is the path to knowledge, and that writing is the way to make knowledge one's own. The history research paper can help restore the importance of academic reading and writing in our schools, and in turn, refocus the purpose of education.

In 1987, I founded the *Concord Review*, the only quarterly journal that publishes history research papers by high school students from across the country and around the world. The papers, which average 5,500 words with endnotes and bibliographies, focus on a variety of topics and times, such as the hijab in Islam, the Bar Kokhba revolt, the Alaska pipeline, Irish nationalism, and Chinese immigration. I receive nearly 400 submissions for each issue, and I have the pleasure of selecting the best to publish. So far, essays in the *Concord Review* have come from 44 states and 38 foreign countries.

When I graduated from Harvard in 1962 with a degree in English literature, I had no idea that one day I would edit a unique journal. I'm a former corporate manager who worked for Polaroid, Pan Am, and North American Aviation. After 11 years in industry, I became a history teacher at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School in Concord, Massachusetts. While on sabbatical in my 10th year, I started the *Concord Review* with $100,000 of an inheritance and the principal of my teacher retirement account. The exemplary work of some of my own students suggested that there were many others in the English-speaking world who were doing academic papers their peers might learn from. I wanted secondary students to see that they might be capable of serious historical scholarship.

Reading is the path to knowledge, and writing is the way to make knowledge one's own.

When I first began teaching in 1977, I assigned five- to seven-page papers in my 10th-grade classes. Often, a couple of students would find a topic so fascinating that they would read and write more than I had asked them to; they would turn in longer papers that were based on serious study and were well written. One 28-page paper that I still remember focused on the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. I figured there were students elsewhere who could also produce papers of that caliber and who would jump at the chance to have them considered for publication. I also hoped that by publishing the very best papers by high school students, I could motivate their peers to do similar work. Indeed, more than a few students over the years have told me that reading the essays in the *Concord Review* inspired them to try writing research papers themselves.

Students who wish to be published in the *Concord Review* often submit papers they have written for the few classes that still require them. For instance, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme, a rigorous curriculum for the junior and senior years of high school, requires that students write a 4,000-word research paper. Students choose a question to investigate for the paper, known as the "extended essay," that relates to one of the six academic areas they study in the IB curriculum: language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, experimental sciences, mathematics and computer science, and the arts. The IB program provides explicit steps, such as constructing an argument, referencing sources, and setting deadlines that students must take to complete the essay, the purpose of which is to help them "develop the skills of independent research that will be expected at university," according to the program's website. In addition to teachers in the IB program, some Advanced Placement (AP) teachers still assign research papers, even though the College Board, which runs AP, does not require them.

While I have published many such IB and AP essays, I often publish papers that students have spent several months, even an entire year, working on outside of class, usually with the guidance of a teacher. I have found that the more students learn about something, the more likely they are to want to write about it—and to strive to do it well.

While I admire these self-starters, I don't believe we should leave high standards for academic writing up to the students who set them for themselves. But this is what we have done in many of our public schools, where overburdened teachers do not have the time to guide students in writing history research papers. Having talked to hundreds of teachers over the years, I can attest that while many teachers may not have the time to devote to such papers, they do have the interest.

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Last summer, I gave a three-day workshop on student history research papers for middle and high school English and social studies teachers in Collier County, Florida. I showed these teachers how to assess four high school students' research papers using the procedures of the National Writing Board, a service I created to provide high school students with independent assessments of their history research papers. The board employs a few high school teachers we have trained to assess each research paper for the author's understanding of the topic, use of sources, evidence, and language. After reviewing each paper, the board provides each student with a four-page report of the paper's strengths and weaknesses. Students often ask us to send this report to college admissions officers if the students believe the assessment will strengthen their college applications.

The Florida teachers and I discussed the advantages students have in college—strong research and writing skills, deep knowledge of a historical topic—if they have researched and written a serious paper in high school. Still, the teachers could not fully commit to assigning their students a 20-page history research paper, the typical length of the ones I publish in the *Concord Review*. Each teacher had six classes of about 30 students, and one teacher was asked to teach seven classes that year, with more than 30 students in each class. If teachers with six classes were to ask for 20-page research papers, they would have to guide 180 students in researching 180 individual topics. Who knows how many thousands of pages of rough drafts they would have to read, correct, and comment on? At the end of term, each teacher would have to assess 3,600 pages of final papers. The one teacher with more than 210 students would have at least 4,200 pages of final papers to grade.

It frustrates me that these willing teachers, who want to prepare their students for higher education by assigning them research papers, may not be able to do so. I share this story to illustrate that our educational priorities and practices must change. I applaud these public school teachers who invited me to Florida and the ones elsewhere who work with students on history research papers outside of class. Their predicament explains the dearth of public school students published in the *Concord Review*. Of the 11 papers published in each issue, usually two to four are written by students in public schools. The rest come from students in private schools. This was not always the case. In the first 10 years of the *Concord Review*, more than a third of the papers I published came from public school students. I have published and continue to publish several excellent papers by students from public schools where teachers through the years have been able to encourage academic research and writing. These schools include Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville, Maryland; Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, New York; and Hunter College High School in New York City, for instance. But all too often, private school teachers seem to have more opportunities to engage students in this kind of work. As a result, publishing few public school students is one of the criticisms I continually face, but I can publish only the papers students send me.

I often wonder what insightful history papers students like Laura Arandes could have written had their teachers had time to challenge them with reading nonfiction books, analyzing dozens of primary sources, and writing history research papers. Arandes graduated from a public high school in Los Angeles where she never wrote more than five paragraphs. About a decade ago, when she arrived as a freshman at Harvard, she was shocked at how poorly prepared she was.

"I thought a required freshman writing course was meant to introduce us to college paper-writing.... In reality, the course was a refresher for most of the other students in the class," she wrote in a letter to me. "At a high-level academic institution, too many of the students come from private schools that have realized that it would be an academic failure on their parts to send their students to college without experience with longer papers, ... exposure to non-fiction literature, and knowledge of bibliographic techniques.

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A Closer Look at Meaningful Work

As Will Fitzhugh makes clear in his article (which begins on page 32), educators tend to agree that writing history research papers is an important learning experience for students. It compels them to think deeply about a topic, conduct detailed research, formulate an argument, and organize their thoughts into a coherent and persuasive piece of writing.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the dedicated teachers who guide students through the months of work needed to research and write a serious paper. One such teacher is Richard Luther of Tenafly High School in Tenafly, New Jersey. A 40-year veteran teacher who is retiring this year, Luther (at right) always assigns his Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History students an extensive research paper and integrates their research into their coursework and preparation for the AP exam.

For teachers interested in learning how they, too, can challenge students with such an assignment and better prepare them for college-level work, American Educator *asked Luther to explain how he guides students through the research and writing process. And, to show both the fruits of Luther's process and the high-quality writing in the* Concord Review, *we have reprinted roughly half of "Young Hickory: The Life and Presidency of James Knox Polk," which Rachel Waltman wrote for Luther during the 2009–2010 school year and which appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of the* Concord Review.

–EDITORS

COURTESY OF DAVID DI GREGORIO

Editors: You've spent the past 40 years guiding students through the difficult tasks of researching and writing a historical essay. No doubt you've honed your methods over time, and other teachers will benefit from learning about your process. Let's start with your basic requirements.

Richard Luther: In AP U.S. History, each student writes one major research paper on an American president. The paper, which must be between 25 and 27 pages, excluding bibliography, is a yearlong project. I actually discuss the paper with students during their sophomore year before they begin the course junior year. At a March meeting after school, I meet with all students interested in taking AP U.S. History. I explain the goals, expectations, and requirements for the course, including the research paper. I then tell the students that there is a June meeting where they will all receive their textbooks and course assignments. At this meeting, they will also select a president for their research paper. Between the March and June meetings, the students have to come up with a list of the top five presidents they would like to research. Several students do some quick reads concerning presidents before this meeting. By June, the master schedule for each section of AP U.S. History is complete, and I obtain student rosters from the guidance department so I know which students are in which section. At the June meeting, I select students at random from each list, and they announce their choices. Students in each section of AP U.S. History must pick a different president; we don't duplicate. While a few students may be upset at first because they don't get to research their top choice, by the end they would not have wanted to research another president.

Editors: Many students find writing an extensive research paper overwhelming at first. How do you help them structure their research?

Richard Luther: I give them the following 15 questions/topics to address about their president. This not only breaks the research project into manageable chunks, it also ensures that students will not overlook an important facet of the presidency and helps them spread the work over the year. And, this gives students a strategy for writing research papers that they can use throughout college.

1. Summary of family background and childhood. How does this influence him later as president?
2. Description of character and personality. Explain how these attributes help or hurt his presidency.
3. Nongovernment career (before and after the presidency). How does this prepresidency career prepare him for the presidency?
4. Government career (before and after the presidency). How does this prepresidency career prepare him for the presidency?
5. Detail and describe literary and other achievements.
6. Philosophy of life (provide examples). Relate to his presidency.
7. Philosophy of government (provide examples). Relate to the presidency.
8. Analyze how the president handled major problems/crises during his term of office (describe problems/crises, rank order them from most severe to least severe, and then analyze solutions).
9. How would you have solved these problems if you were president?
10. Analyze the impact on the country (both long- and short-term) of the president's successes.
11. Analyze the impact on the country (both long- and short-term) of the president's failures.
12. Analyze his relationships with the American people and Congress.
13. Was he a mirror to the age in which he lived? Explain!
14. Imprint on U.S. and world history.
15. Evaluate why and how your president did or did not change the power of the presidency. Explain!

According to Daniel T. Willingham, well-crafted questions can increase learning. See **www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2009/Willingham(2).pdf**.

Editors: Addressing these 15 questions would require a lot of research. How do you keep students focused throughout the year? Do you integrate their research into the rest of the course?

Richard Luther: The answers to these questions ultimately form the basis for the research papers. But throughout the months leading up to the AP exam, students give what I call "recitations" or oral presentations in which they share answers to these 15 questions with the rest of the class. In this way, the research project serves as a preview to, or review of, material in the too few months we have prior to taking the AP exam. So, if it's September or October and one of the students is talking about Bill Clinton or Ronald Reagan, that's really a preview of material that we're going to be studying later in the course. In January and February, recitations by the students who have chosen people like Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, or McKinley are reviews of material. So this research paper helps to reinforce their knowledge of American history in preparation for the AP exam.

Editors: How do the recitations prepare students for the research papers?

Richard Luther: The recitations allow students to bite off a little bit of the research project as they go along. I tell them to consider each question like a chapter in a book about your president. So the first question about family background and childhood would be chapter 1. I always admonish them, "Make sure you write your sources down. After the recitation is over, you can write it as an essay and bring it to me if you want. I can look at it for you and make suggestions." Some students just write notes. Others will transform the recitation into a short essay that can stand on its own. By the time they're done, one may say the research paper is a collection of 15 essays, each answering one of those questions.

After the AP exam, students have three to four weeks to work on their papers before the final paper is due, usually at the end of May or beginning of June. During this time, students spend class time using computers at school to polish their papers. Good writing doesn't happen with the first draft. It happens after several drafts. Some students ask me to read and comment on their drafts, but I grade only the final paper. Some students work on their papers in the classroom; some go to the library. I'll walk around to make sure everyone is on task and to answer questions. Administrators at Tenafly High School have been very good at carving out time for this project.

Editors: What do students get out of this assignment?

Richard Luther: The recitations motivate students to dig further into their research, which in turn makes them well prepared to write. The best papers provide analysis. That's what I look for. I want the students to think and evaluate what it is that this president has done. They don't have to be this president's chief cheerleader, so to speak. It's all right to say this president made a mistake on this particular issue. I want the students to be able to think about and evaluate their sources. I believe that it's very important that they learn to question their sources: Is this author biased or not? So that way, whenever they're doing research in the future, they can be critical thinkers. That's what I'm really after. ☐

Young Hickory: The Life and Presidency of James Knox Polk

The following unedited sample from the Concord Review *is not quite half of the essay Rachel Waltman wrote for Richard Luther's AP U.S. History class. We regret that we did not have room to reprint the whole essay; to read it in full, go to* ***www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1112/Waltman.pdf****. For more essays from the* Concord Review*, go to* ***www.tcr.org/tcr/essays.htm****.*

–EDITORS

BY RACHEL WALTMAN

In May 1844, Democratic Party leaders met in Baltimore to nominate their candidate for the presidential election to be held later that year. They passed over leading contenders, including Martin Van Buren, Lewis Cass, John C. Calhoun, and Thomas Hart Benton, and instead nominated James Knox Polk, a relatively unknown former Congressman from Tennessee.[1] Many people thought Polk's political career was over following his second failed bid to win reelection as Governor of Tennessee just nine months before.[2] The nomination of this "dark horse" candidate—which surprised no one more than Polk himself—was met with ridicule and derision by the opposing Whig Party.[3] "Who is James K. Polk?" they jeered.[4] The Whigs considered Polk no match for their candidate, Henry Clay, a popular and influential politician from Kentucky. Even Clay, in a moment of "arrogant candor," expressed regret that the Democrats had not selected a candidate "more worthy of a contest."[5] The Whigs should not have been so smug. Buoyed by the popularity of the Democrats' expansionist platform, Polk won the election by a narrow margin.[6] At age 49, he became the 11th President of the United States, the youngest man up to that time to be elected to the position.[7]

For the next four years, Polk tirelessly devoted himself to achieving *each and every one* of the goals he set during his presidency. Yet, despite his many accomplishments, Polk did not escape his four years in office with his reputation unscathed. Despite America's victory in the Mexican War, the Whigs, led by Abraham Lincoln, harshly criticized Polk for his role in the outbreak of the war, which led to his censure by the House of Representatives in 1848.[8] Several years later, Ulysses S. Grant concurred with Lincoln's assessment of Polk in his memoirs, referring to the Mexican War as "the most unjust war ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation."[9] These attacks on Polk negatively affected history's view of him. However, attitudes about him began to change in the 20th century, as presidential historians took a fresh look at Polk's accomplishments, and consistently included him in their rankings of America's "great" or "near great" presidents.[10] As a result, many Americans were again asking, "Who is James K. Polk?"

I. Polk's Background and How it Influenced him as President

James K. Polk was born on November 2, 1795 in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, a place "where men lived simply on the fruits of their own labor without expectations of easy wealth and dealt honestly with each other on a basis of rough equality and mutual respect."[11] Polk was the first of 10 children. His father, Samuel Polk, was of Scots-Irish descent, and was a slaveholder, a successful farmer, and a surveyor. His mother, Jane Knox Polk, was the great-grandniece of Scottish Reformation leader John Knox.[12]

Polk's childhood was marked by several distinct influences that would later affect him as President. Significantly, Polk's grandfather, Ezekial, and his father Samuel, were staunch supporters of Jefferson's

Republican philosophy, which undoubtedly influenced Polk's later political views. As one historian notes, "As Polk grew into adulthood, everything he had grasped about the conflict between Federalist and Republican values seemed to reinforce a basic and logical argument that the country would be better served if national government was the declared servant of all the people (or all those who were not slaves) and was barred from acting chiefly as the agent of the rich and powerful constituencies."[13]

While the Polk family may have agreed on politics, they did not agree on religion. Polk's mother, Jane, was a devout Presbyterian. Raised under the influence of her strict Presbyterianism, Polk derived a rigid self-discipline that would govern his actions throughout his life.[14] His father, however, was not deeply religious. During Polk's baptism ceremony, Samuel Polk refused to affirm his belief in Christianity. As a result, the Reverend James Wallis refused to baptize the infant Polk.[15] Perhaps due to this religious tension within his family, Polk was not known to "speak on his religious commitment" during his presidency, nor is there anything in his presidential diary to suggest "that he prayed for guidance or heavenly intervention in his life—not even during the war with Mexico."[16]

When Polk was 11, he and his family moved to the Duck River region of Middle Tennessee. There, the family grew rich, with Samuel Polk turning to land speculation and becoming a county judge and respected civic leader.[17] His family's desire for land and the success they encountered after moving west no doubt influenced Polk's later commitment to the large-scale expansion of the nation's borders during his presidency.

During his childhood, Polk suffered from extremely poor health. As a result, his early education was delayed "in consequence of having been very much afflicted."[18] When he was 17, his illness was diagnosed as urinary stones, which required major surgery.[19] His father sent Polk to Philadelphia in the back of a covered wagon to be operated on by Dr. Philip Syng Physick, who was known as "the father of American surgery."[20] However, Polk's pain became so severe during the journey that his father instead turned to Dr. Ephraim McDowell of Danville, Kentucky to perform the surgery. Polk was awake during the incredibly painful surgery, in which a sharp instrument called a "gorget" was forced through his prostate and into his bladder to remove the urinary stones.[21] Despite excruciating pain, the surgery was a success, although it may have left Polk sterile, as he never had children.[22] One historian concludes that surviving this encounter gave Polk the characteristics of "courage, grit, and unyielding iron will" that he later displayed in dealing with his opponents as President.[23]

After he was cured of his bad health, Polk was determined to get a proper education. Following his recovery from the surgery, he enrolled at a Presbyterian school near his home. A year later, his father agreed to send him to the more distinguished Bradley Academy, located in Murfreesboro, a small town near Nashville. Polk excelled at his new school, where he was adjudged "the most promising boy in the school."[24]

In 1816, Polk was admitted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He majored in mathematics and the classics, "subjects he felt would best discipline his mind."[25] At the University of North Carolina, Polk joined the Dialectic Society, one of the school's debate clubs, where he honed both his debate and leadership skills. Polk held a succession of offices in the Dialectic Society, and twice was elected as its president.[26] Polk's participation in the Dialectic Society led to an interest in a career in law and politics. According to historian Walter R. Borneman, "it was here that he learned to speak, write, and formulate an argument."[27]

II. Polk's Character and Personality

With respect to his character and personality, Polk was a man who was true to his beliefs, and who never seemed in doubt. As one historian notes, "On the first day when he strode onto the floor of the Tennessee House of Representatives, there was about him a moral certitude and self-righteousness that he carried to the White House."[28] Others have been less charitable of Polk's character and personality, referring to him as "colorless, methodical, plodding [and] narrow"[29] and a "stern task-master."[30]

Polk's adversaries often poked fun at his stiff and humorless demeanor. For example, John Quincy Adams once wrote in his diary that Polk "has no wit, no literature, no point of argument, no gracefulness of delivery, no elegance of language, no philosophy, no pathos, no felicitous impromptus; nothing that constitutes an orator, but confidence, fluency, and labor."[31]

Nonetheless, even Polk's detractors would surely agree that he was extremely disciplined and hard-working. He routinely worked 12-hour days, and rarely delegated responsibilities to others. "I have never in my life labored more constantly or intensely," he once said of his presidency. "I am the hardest working man in the country."[32] Polk's strong work ethic, self-discipline, and confidence would allow him to accomplish much during his presidency. In *A Country of Vast Designs*, author Robert W. Merry sums it up best:

> Small of stature and drab of temperament, James Polk was often underestimated by Whig opponents and sometimes by his own Democratic allies, despite his early political accomplishments in Congress. He struck many as a smaller-than-life figure with larger-than-life ambitions. But he harbored an absolute conviction that he was a man of destiny, and his unremitting tenacity ultimately produced a successful presidency.[33]

III. Polk's Non-Government Career

After graduating from the University of North Carolina with honors in 1818, Polk returned to Tennessee to study law. Polk never envisioned the law as a permanent career choice, but rather as a means to an end. His participation in the Dialectic Society had spurred an interest in politics, and for Polk, the law provided the most obvious path into the political arena.[34]

To gain admission to the bar in Polk's day, it was necessary to study cases under the guidance of a licensed practitioner. Polk was accepted to study under Felix Grundy, a prominent Nashville trial lawyer and experienced politician. Grundy had moved to Tennessee from Kentucky, where he had served both as a representative to the United States House of Representatives and

as chief justice of the Kentucky Supreme Court.[35] Grundy quickly became Polk's first mentor, and the two men would remain close friends and political allies in the years to come.[36]

After completing his law studies with Grundy, Polk was admitted to the Tennessee bar in June 1820.[37] He established a law practice in Columbia, Tennessee. His first case involved defending his father against a public fighting charge. He was able to secure a dismissal of the charge for a fine of $1 plus costs.[38] Polk's law practice was successful, since there were many cases regarding the settlement of debts following the Panic of 1819. In the courtroom, Polk was described as "wary and skillful, but frank and honorable [and] in addressing a jury he was always animated and impressive in manner."[39]

Despite his busy law practice, Polk still found time for socializing. During this time, he met Sarah Childress, the daughter of a wealthy and respectable family from Murfreesboro. While the details of their courtship are largely unknown, a favorite story among historians is that Andrew Jackson encouraged their romance:

> Supposedly, Polk asked his mentor, Jackson, what he should do to advance his political career. Jackson advised him to find a wife and settle down. Asked if he had anyone in particular in mind, Old Hickory replied, "The one who will never give you trouble. Her wealthy family, education, health and appearance are all superior. You know her well." It took Polk only a moment to suggest what should have been the obvious. "Do you mean Sarah Childress?" he asked. "I shall go at once and ask her."[40]

Polk and Sarah Childress were married on New Year's Day 1824. Polk was 28 years old; Sarah was 20. They remained married until Polk's death in 1849.[41] By all accounts, their marriage was a true love match, and Sarah was an "ideal mate" for Polk.[42] As John Seigenthaler notes in his biography of Polk, "Sarah's personality—outgoing, vivacious, and witty—was a natural complement to her husband's formal reserve. She brought out the best in him."[43]

IV. Polk's Government Career

In 1819, during the time Polk was studying law under Felix Grundy in Nashville, Grundy was elected to the Tennessee state legislature. He suggested that Polk accompany him to Murfreesboro, where the legislature was to meet, and seek election as clerk of the state senate. In September 1819, Polk was elected clerk of the Tennessee state senate. He was paid the sum of $6 per day to manage the paperwork of the senate, which was viewed as a very generous wage, since legislators received only $4 per day.[44] Polk quickly established a reputation as "a diligent and effective senate clerk."[45] He was reelected in 1821, and remained in the post until 1822.[46]

In 1822, Polk resigned his position as clerk of the state senate to run for the Tennessee state legislature. He won the election, defeating the incumbent, William Yancey, and became the new representative of Maury County, Tennessee.[47] In 1825, Polk ran for the United States House of Representatives for Tennessee's sixth congressional district. He campaigned vigorously, traveling throughout the district to court voters. Polk's opponents said that at 29 years old, he was too young to serve in the House of Representatives.[48] However, Polk proved them wrong and won the election.

Polk's congressional career lasted 14 years. Elected to the House of Representatives seven times, Polk learned campaigning techniques and strategies that would serve him well with the voters.[49] He was a loyal supporter of the policies of his mentor and fellow Tennessee Democrat, Andrew Jackson, who was elected the seventh President of the United States in 1828. Jackson was known as "Old Hickory"—as in "tough as hickory"—a nickname earned during the early days of the War of 1812.[50] Polk's support for Jackson's policies was so strong that he was nicknamed "Young Hickory" after his mentor.[51]

In 1833, after being elected to his fifth term in Congress, Polk became chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.[52] In this position, Polk was at the center of the major domestic policy debate over the nation's banking system. Throughout the crisis, Polk remained loyal to the position of his mentor and now-President Andrew Jackson, and was an outspoken critic of the Second Bank. After the Ways and Means Committee undertook an investigation of the bank at Jackson's request, the majority of committee members found no evidence of wrongdoing. Polk, however, issued a minority report that contained a stinging criticism of the bank, and recited a long list of justifications for removing federal deposits from it.[53] Polk would later deliver a speech on the floor of the House, in which he railed against the Bank and its head, Nicholas Biddle, calling them "despotic."[54]

In June 1834, Speaker of the House Andrew Stevenson resigned to become minister to Great Britain, leaving the position open. Polk ran against John Bell of Tennessee for the post. After 10 ballots, Bell won, handing Polk the first defeat of his political career.[55] However, in 1835, Polk ran against Bell for Speaker, and this time Polk won. A master of rules and procedures, Polk was an effective Speaker of the House.[56] He was the first Speaker to "promote openly a president's agenda," first endorsing the policies of Andrew Jackson, and then those of his successor, Martin Van Buren.[57]

The two major issues during Polk's term as Speaker were slavery and the economy, following the Panic of 1837.[58] As discussed in more detail herein, both of these issues, particularly slavery, would continue to plague Polk throughout his political career.

In 1839, concerned that the rival Whig party was becoming increasingly popular in his home state of Tennessee, Polk left Congress to return home and run for the governorship.[59] He defeated the incumbent Whig, Newt Cannon, yet after serving only one two-year term, Polk twice failed to be reelected.[60] Although his rivals assumed Polk's political influence had peaked, he continued to look for opportunities to revive his political career, and remained close to Andrew Jackson.[61]

In 1844, delegates to the Democratic Convention—who had not forgotten Polk's dedication to the Democratic Party over the years—viewed Polk as a potential vice presidential candidate.[62] However, when the party's leading presidential contenders, Martin Van Buren and Lewis Cass, failed to gain sufficient support to win the nomination, the deadlocked convention needed a compromise candidate. Polk was put forth as a "dark horse" candidate, and after nine ballots, the Democratic Convention

unanimously nominated Polk as its presidential candidate for the election to be held later that year.[63]

Challenging the well-known Whig candidate Henry Clay in the 1844 election, Polk promised to actively encourage America's westward expansion. He favored the annexation of Texas and the acquisition of the Oregon territory.[64] Although critics expressed concern that aggressive expansionism might lead to war with Great Britain or Mexico, a majority of American voters accepted Polk's vision, and in 1844, they elected him the 11th President of the United States by a slim margin. He was 49 years old, the youngest person up to that time to be elected president.[65]

After receiving his party's Democratic nomination in 1844, Polk announced that if he were elected President, he would not seek a second term.[66] Aware that the Democratic Party had been splintered into bitter factions, Polk hoped that by promising to serve only one term if elected, his disappointed Democratic rivals would unite behind him, believing they had another chance at the nomination in four years.[67]

True to his campaign pledge, at the end of his first term, Polk left office and returned to Tennessee in March 1849. However, he did not have much time to pursue a career after leaving the presidency—either in the public or private sector—since he died of cholera on June 15, 1849 in Nashville, Tennessee, only three months after leaving office.[68]

V. Polk's Literary and Other Achievements

Many people find Polk's election as President somewhat baffling, since he lacked the charisma of many of his fellow presidents. In addition, while Polk garnered praise for his oratorical skills—earning him the nickname "Napoleon of the Stump"[69]—he had no literary or other achievements during his lifetime. As one historian points out in his tongue-in-cheek essay on Polk, his most notable achievement was likely his utter lack of achievement:

> The trouble with Polk was that he never did anything to catch the people's eye; he never gave them anything to remember him by; nothing happened to him. He never cut down a cherry tree, he didn't tell funny stories, he was not impeached, he was not shot, he didn't drink heavily, he didn't gamble, he wasn't involved in scandal.[70]

Similarly, in accounting for the fact that so few Americans are familiar with Polk, another historian remarked that "men are remembered for their unique qualities, and Polk had none."[71]

Nonetheless, while Polk never wrote his memoirs and had no literary or other achievements during his lifetime, he did keep a detailed diary during his presidency. It was discovered—along with a collection of his other personal correspondence and papers—in the attic of his widow, Sarah, after her death in 1896.[72] The diary was first published in four volumes in 1910, and reprinted and abridged in later editions. Today, it is recognized as "one of the most valuable documents for the study of the American presidency," since it provides a "rare behind-the-scenes glimpse of the decision-making process in the White House, and offers insight into the day-to-day administration of the government during one of the most critical and exciting periods in American history."[73] ☐

*To continue reading, go to **www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1112/Waltman.pdf**.*

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(Continued from page 34)

"It took me two years to gain a working knowledge of paper-writing ... where I was constructing arguments and using evidence to support them.... So here I am, about to graduate, with a GPA much lower than it should be and no real way to explain to graduate schools and recruiting companies that I spent my first semesters just scraping by."

Arandes, who graduated from Harvard in 2005, was unprepared for college-level writing because serious academic reading, research, and writing had been neglected in her K–12 curriculum, as it is in so many schools. In elementary schools, teachers rightfully focus on teaching students how to read. However, as E. D. Hirsch, Jr., an emeritus humanities professor whose research on comprehension inspired him to establish the Core Knowledge Foundation, and Daniel T. Willingham, a professor of psychology who focuses on applying cognitive science to K–12 classrooms, have written, teachers have erroneously been told to focus on reading comprehension strategies, such as finding the main idea and identifying the author's audience.* Such an approach is time-consuming and shifts the emphasis away from texts that build students' knowledge and vocabulary. As a result, students tend to spend more time practicing strategies with trivial fiction than acquiring the knowledge (found in serious fiction and nonfiction) that drives comprehension. In middle and high school, students are expected to independently read nonfiction science and social studies texts, but far too many of them struggle because they haven't acquired the necessary foundation in elementary school.

As for writing, many elementary teachers do teach students to write, but this writing tends to focus only on students writing about themselves or writing short stories. Because students don't spend enough time in the early grades reading nonfiction in science and history, they lack the knowledge—of both content and the nature of nonfiction writing—necessary to undertake research papers in middle and high school. Teachers who do assign research papers must begin with the basics of academic writing.

To really teach students how to write, educators must give them examples of good writing found in nonfiction books and require students to read them, not skim them, cover to cover. Reading nonfiction contributes powerfully to the knowledge that students need in order to read more difficult material—the kind they will surely face in college. But more importantly, the work of writing a research paper will lead students to read more and become more knowledgeable in the process. As any good writer knows, the best writing emerges from a rich store of knowledge that the author is trying to pass on. Without that knowledge and the motivation to share it, all the literacy strategies in the world will not make much difference.

The best writing emerges from a rich store of knowledge that the author is trying to pass on. Without that knowledge and the motivation to share it, all the strategies in the world will not make much difference.

I suggest that our schools start assigning a page per year: each first-grader would be required to write a one-page paper on a subject other than himself or herself, with at least one source. At least one page and one source would be added each year to the required academic writing, so that fifth-graders, for example, would have to write a five-page paper with five sources, ninth-graders would have to write a nine-page paper with nine sources, and so on, until each and every high school senior could be asked to prepare a 12-page history research paper with 12 sources.

Such a plan would gradually prepare students for future academic writing and could also reduce the need for remedial instruction in writing (and perhaps in remedial reading as well) when students enroll in college. If school districts adopted such a plan, it wouldn't take high school teachers nearly as much time as it does now to teach students to write history research papers; students could draw on the knowledge they gained in previous grades to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, formulate an argument or a narrative based on those sources, develop a bibliography, and write and revise numerous drafts.

As long as we leave it to chance whether students encounter teachers who somehow manage to carve out time to guide students through the research and writing process, students like Laura Arandes will continue to "scrape by" in college writing. "Modern public high schools have an obligation not to simply pump out graduates at the end of the year, but also to prepare them for the intellectual rigors of college," Arandes wrote in her letter to me. As she learned, there is no better preparation for college than having students write history research papers.

So I urge teachers to do their best to assign them. I look forward to reading them. ☐

*For more on why reading comprehension depends largely on knowledge, see the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2006/index.cfm.