**Instructor’s Notes**

**Sara King**

**Research Interests Narrative**

**Overview**

The Research Interests Narrative Essay and related assignments employ class discussion, small group work, and in-class writing to help students develop and narrow a research question for their major research project, a literature review. The essay is assigned at the beginning of the semester and due in Week 4, providing the foundation for all other assignments in the course. The assigned readings at the beginning of the semester (suggestions for which are included below) are examples of narrative about research and writing, written by “experts” but written for a general audience. Full class discussion of such readings helps highlight the universal significance and multidisciplinary possibilities of many research questions, while small group work helps students investigate the methods and contributions of their particular disciplines. An in-class writing exercise that encourages students to reflect on experiences in their own education when they were most inspired or motivated to learn (or most frustrated by questions they could not answer) provides additional framework for the rough draft of the essay. Students peer review their drafts, and a majority revise the graded final essay at least once before the end of the semester.

**Purpose**

Many 302 students are transfer students who have just declared a major, and a growing number are international exchange students who had to (or took advantage of the opportunity to) change their majors when they came to Mason. Most have done little research or writing in their field and may have never chosen their own topic for research. They may not even have much experience with reading scholarly or professional articles.

Most students enjoy the assigned readings and connect to the writers’ passion for their topics even if they aren’t particularly interested in the topics themselves. They respond to the “story” and “the characters” and are often reminded of experiences that could be included in a narrative about their own academic or professional interests. The purpose of the Research Interests Narrative essay, along with the Discipline Awareness Project, is to help students identify research topics that truly interest them early in the semester so they are engaged and invested in the hard work required for the major research project in the class.

Students who do have some experience with research and writing in their major can use the assignments to reflect on how their interests have evolved, to focus their goals for an ongoing project (including a dual submission paper for 302), or to explore ideas for a more advanced research project. In fact, some students have revised the essay to use as part of an application for graduate school or an internship.

**Suggested readings and related materials:**

I make all readings available through E-reserves. The librarians ask for 3 weeks’ advance notice on requests, but I’ve rarely had to wait longer than 3 days, and once the library has the materials (which includes all books suggested below), the request can be fulfilled almost immediately. I choose readings each semester based on the majors of students in my classes and on feedback from previous students. Selections from the books listed below have been popular with students with a wide variety of majors. Although I usually teach 302M and tend to have a lot of health sciences, economics, IT, and criminology majors, many of these readings would be suitable for any version of 302. TED talks, author interviews, and other related content are easily accessible for most of these books.

**Alter, Adam. *Irresistible. The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked.* Prologue. “Don’t Get High on Your Own Supply.”**

**Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal.* Introduction.**

**Jones, Van. *Beyond the Messy Truth.* Introduction and Ch. 1 “America Betrayed—By Both Parties.”**

McGonigal, Jane. *Reality Is Broken. How Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World.* Introduction. “Reality Is Broken.”

Rose, Todd. *The End of Average.* Chapter 8. “Replacing the Average in Higher Education.”

Sheff, David. *Clean. Overcoming Addiction and Ending America’s Greatest Tragedy.* Preface.

Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.* Prologue. “The Woman in the Photograph.”

**Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy.* Introduction. “Higher Ground.”**

**Related Files:**

Assignment Prompt (KingAssignment)

“Using the assigned readings to help you prepare for the Research Interests Narrative essay” (KingActivity1): I post this on Bb at the beginning of the semester to help students prepare for class discussion and small group activities, but also to help them get the most out of the readings as they prepare for their own research and writing.

“Writing Exercise for Research Interests Narrative” (KingActivity2): Students begin this assignment in class, submit via e-mail, and receive feedback before the next class. Many students find it useful to reflect on how they became interested their major before they begin to focus on a specific research interest within the major. However, in such cases, they should be reminded that they won’t be able to use everything from the exercise in the final essay.

**Modifications:**

The assignment is intended for a F2F class, but the class discussion and small group work could be done through Blackboard, using the Discussion Board and/or wiki features. The in class writing exercise is already something that students submit and receive feedback on through Blackboard or E-mail. Please feel free to E-mail me with questions. sking@gmu.edu