

HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

History Research Paper Study

for The Concord Review, Inc.

Will Fitzhugh, Editor and Publisher

Early in 2001, The Concord Review approached the Albert Shanker Institute for funds for a study of the state of the history research paper in United States high schools.

With the Shanker grant, the following study was conducted for The Concord Review by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut.

I had a concern that, with all the emphasis on state tests to measure progress on state standards, the research paper, which cannot be measured on a standardized test, would be forgotten. College professors had been complaining for years that incoming students had no idea how to write papers, and some employers were setting up writing courses for their new college graduate employees.

While I had read and heard many anecdotes about the dominance of creative writing and the personal essay, I believed it would be useful to conduct a study to see how many teachers were assigning history research papers, and what some of the problems with such assignments might be.

The Concord Review study found that while 95% of those teachers surveyed believe that writing a research term paper is important or very important, some 62% of the teachers never assign a paper of 3,000-5,000 words in length, and 81% never assign a paper of over 5,000 words.

Candidates for the International Baccalaureate Diploma must complete a 4,000-5,000 word Extended Essay, and The Concord Review has published 572 history research papers (average 5,000 words with endnotes and bibliography) by high school students from 42 states (and 33 other countries) in the last 15 years.

Many of these essays were from private school students, but many were also from the students of overworked public high school teachers, including a number who were preparing their students for AP and IB and ACT exams.

The principal obstacles cited by those surveyed for this study were the amount of time required for reading and grading long research papers, and the fact that this time almost always had to be taken from personal time in the evenings, on weekends, early in the morning, and so on. There seems to be no provision given in the school day or the school year for teachers to give the attention to serious research papers that they inevitably require. High school teachers have no Reading Days at the end of term, but perhaps they should, if we want students to learn how to write a decent term paper once before they graduate. In addition, 31% of the high school teachers said that assigning and correcting term papers would take too much time away from other tasks, for instance preparing for AP or state assessments, or simply covering course material.

Many people do not consider the fact that if a teacher in a public high school has five classes of thirty students each and he/she assigns a 20-page paper to each one, then when the papers come in, he/she will have 3,000 pages to proofread, correct, and comment on. Any simple calculation will reveal that this would be prohibitively time-consuming for anyone who has to continue teaching five classes, give tests, and so on.

What is lost, then, if 81% of high school teachers never assign a 5,000-word history research paper? It may very well mean that a majority of our high school students never read a complete nonfiction book on any subject before they graduate. They may also miss the experience of knowing a fair amount about some important topic—more, for instance, than anyone else in their class. They may also miss a fundamental step in their preparation for demanding college work.

The Concord Review study indicates that this may now be the case for the majority of our high school students. We must consider supporting teachers, 95% of whom think research papers are important, by giving them the time during the regular school day and the regular school year to allow them to offer this essential academic exercise to all of our candidates for the high school diploma.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Almost 90% of schools across the U.S. require at least two years of history or social studies coursework. Across socio-economic levels and achievement abilities, high school students will likely be assigned a variety of research assignments during their careers, from short essays to major research papers. This survey seeks to examine how teachers view these assignments, why they value research papers and why some teachers choose not to assign them at all.

The vast majority of history teachers in the U.S. consider writing research papers to be an important part of learning history and the social sciences, with 95% saying that research papers are very or somewhat important. Their top reasons for assigning research papers are:

- To improve research skills
- To encourage studying
- To improve analytic and thinking skills
- To improve writing skills

In addition, teachers believe that school administrators place value on research papers. Among those teachers surveyed, nearly 8 in 10 said that they believe that school and district administrators consider research papers to be at least somewhat valuable.

Among those teachers who do not assign research papers, the predominant factor is time. Namely, the time it takes to correct and grade the assigned papers and the time research papers can take away from other curriculum priorities.

The majority (82%) of teachers say it is difficult to find adequate time to devote to reading and grading the research papers they assign. Almost half (49%) of teachers say that is very difficult to find the time, one third (33%) say that it is somewhat difficult.

Underscoring that difficulty is that grading papers cuts into teacher's personal time—more than six in ten specify non-school time, or personal time, as the place where they grade papers. Specifically, one in five (20%) grades papers at home or outside of school, 10% do so on weekends and 15% on their own time, 8% say they use evenings or late nights, 3% use time in the early morning and 1% assign papers over a holiday or break.

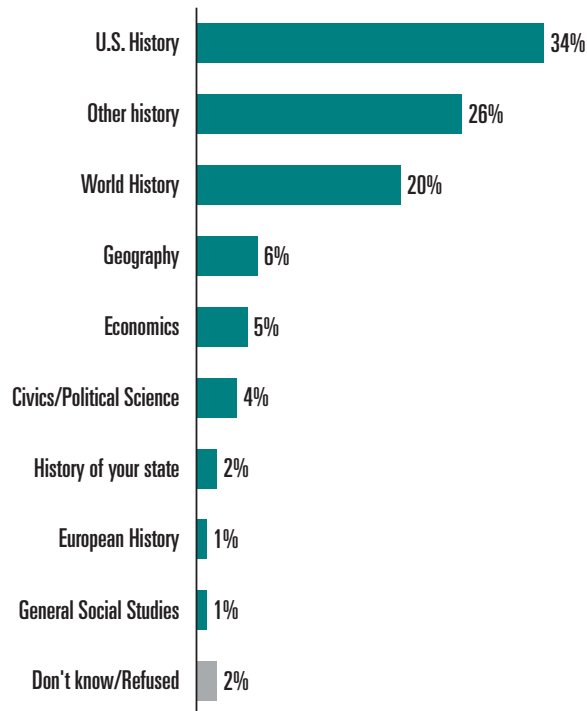
Since time is such an important consideration, it is not surprising that teachers value the timeliness of paper submission. On a scale of one to ten, 70% ranked submitting the paper on time as a “9” or a “10.” In terms of grading importance, timeliness is followed by the quality of written expression and a well-defined, important thesis or hypothesis.

COURSES, ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS AND CLASS SIZE

On average, the teachers surveyed teach 4.0 courses in the current semester. Of all the teachers surveyed, 34% teach at least one U.S. History, 26% teach at least one general Social Studies, 20% World History, 6% teach Geography, 5% teach Economics, 4% teach a Civics or Political Science course.

When it comes to class size, more than half of the faculty surveyed (58%) teach a class size of between 21 to 30 students. About one-third (34%), report teaching a class size of between 10 and 20 students and 7% report teaching between 31 and 40 students. On average, the teachers surveyed have a total of approximately 80 students.

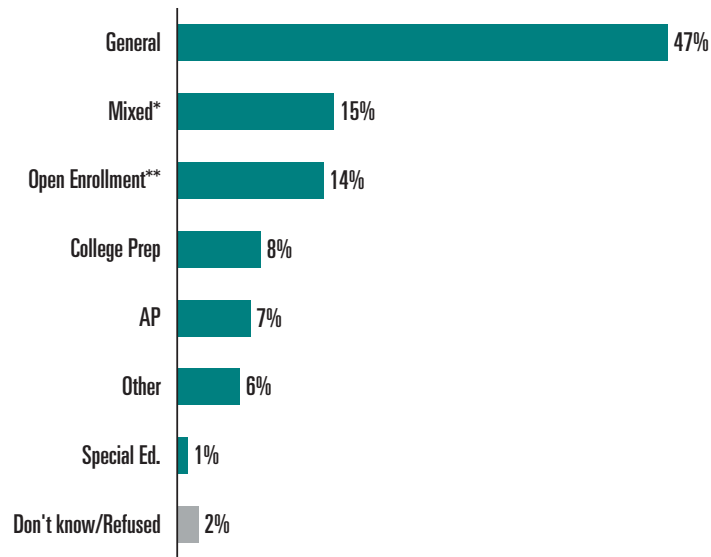
Classes Taught



The teachers surveyed teach a comparable number of 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grade classes, with the most teaching 11th grade classes. Seventeen percent of the History or Social Studies classes taught are in the 9th grade, 25% in the 10th grade, 32% in the 11th grade, and 24% in the 12th grade.

In terms of the achievement levels, the majority of teachers (47%) teach a general level achievement course. Nearly one in six (14%) teach an open enrollment or (15%) mixed achievement level course. Fewer (8%) teach College level or AP (7%) level courses.

Achievement Levels of Courses Taught



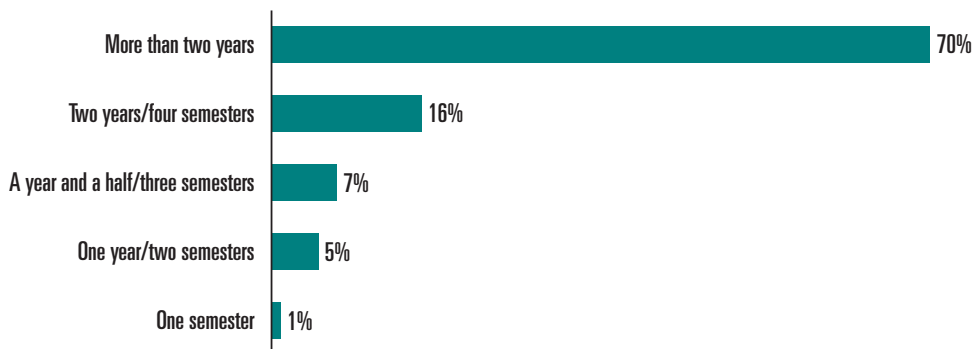
*Mixed classes are those that are heterogeneous in nature.

**Open enrollment refers to those that are homogeneous.

Required Courses

Across the board, more than two thirds (70%) of students are required by their school to take more than two years of history or social studies courses. Schools that offer Advanced Placement or other college level history courses are somewhat more likely to have a higher (73%) requirement than those schools (67%) that do not offer such courses.

Length of Time Students Required to Take History/Social Studies

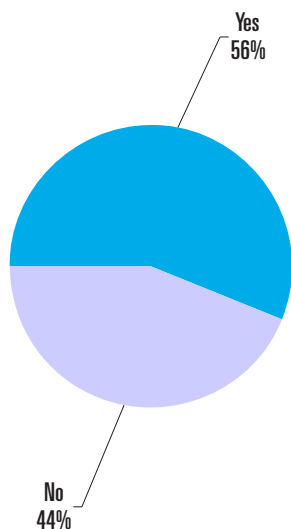


More than half (56%) of the schools surveyed offer some Advanced Placement level history courses. Schools in the Northeast part of the United States are more likely (77%) to offer these types of classes than those in other parts of the country. Six in ten schools in the West (61%) and South (60%) offer AP level courses, compared to 39% of schools in the North Central region of the United States.

Not surprisingly, schools with Middle (62%) or High (89%) Socio-Economic status are more likely to offer advanced placement courses than those with Low (44%) socioeconomic status.

Overall, thirty-seven percent (37%) of teachers estimated that between 1 and 10 percent of their students take an Advanced Placement or other college level history or social studies course.

Advanced Placement Offering: Schools that offer AP/College Level Course



Assignments

When it comes to assigning papers, shorter essays and summaries are assigned with the most frequency. Two-thirds (68%) of the teachers surveyed report assigning short essays to high school students at a rate of once a week or more. Similarly, about six in ten (59%) report assigning summaries of assigned readings or (61%) opinion papers on assigned reading at a rate of once a week or more.

The task of conducting research may be contributing to the infrequency of assignment of research papers. Six in ten (61%) of teachers assign concise-length research papers, those with a length of between 2,001 and 3,000 words, more than once a semester—27% of teachers report that concise-length research papers are never assigned. Less frequent are extended-length research papers, defined as papers with a length of 3,001 to 5,000 words—62% never assign such papers. Even less frequent are the assignment of major research papers, defined as papers with more than 5,000 words—81% say they never assign such papers.

There is little difference on the assignment of extended-length research papers by socio-economic status: 61% of Low; 62% of Middle; and 63% of High never assign such length papers.

However, those teachers in districts with High socioeconomic status are far less likely (63%) to respond that they never assign major research papers, than those in Middle (80%) or Low (85%) socioeconomic status districts.

Frequency of Classroom Assignments In Typical Class

	Several Times a Week or More	Once a Week	Several Times a Month or Less	Never
Short essays	27%	41%	31%	1%
Summaries of assigned readings	31	28	26	15
Opinion and/or analysis of assigned readings	26	35	33	6

Frequency of Research Assignments In Typical Class

	Once a Month or More	Once or Twice a Semester	Once a Year	Never
Essays that require outside research/reading (2,000 words or less)	47%	35%	2%	12%
Concise research papers (2,001-3,000 words)	11	50	9	27
Extended length research papers (3,001-5,000 words)	3	27	6	62
Major research papers (over 5,000 words)	0	9	7	81

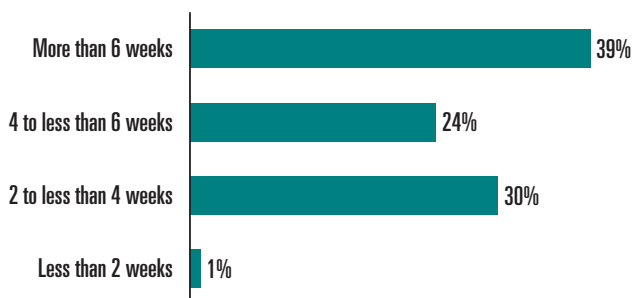
Frequency of paper assignments increases with more advanced classes. In higher level classes, fewer teachers responded that they “never” assign extended length papers (44%) or major research papers (61%).

Frequency of Classroom Assignments in an Advanced Placement Class

	Several Times a Month or More	Once a Month	Once a Year or More	Never
Concise research papers	6%	10%	46%	14%
Extended length research papers	0	4	32	44
Major research papers	0	0	19	61

For papers more than 5,000 words in length, major research papers, the amount of time given to students to complete the assignment varies. Nearly four in ten teachers (39%) give six weeks or more to complete the paper, nearly one quarter (24%) give between 4 and six weeks and one third (30%) give between 2 and 4 weeks.

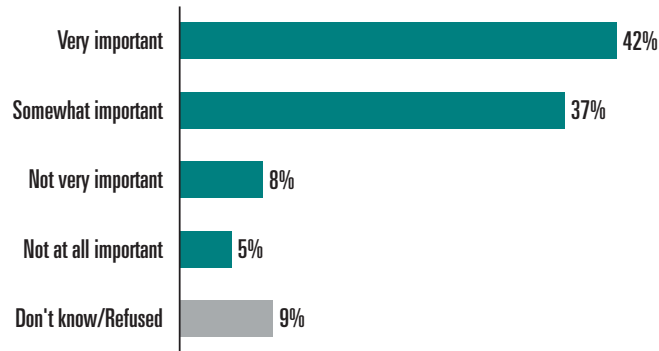
How much time given to students to complete a major research paper



IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

The vast majority of teachers feel that district and school administrators consider research papers to be an important part of learning history and social sciences. Nearly eight in ten (79%) of teachers report that, in their opinion, they would say district and school administrators believe the assignment of research papers is very or somewhat important.

Do district and school administrators believe that research papers are important to learning history?



In terms of their own perspective on importance of assigning research papers, 95% of teachers say that research papers are very or somewhat important to a student's learning of history and the social sciences.

Importance teachers place on students writing research paper to learning history

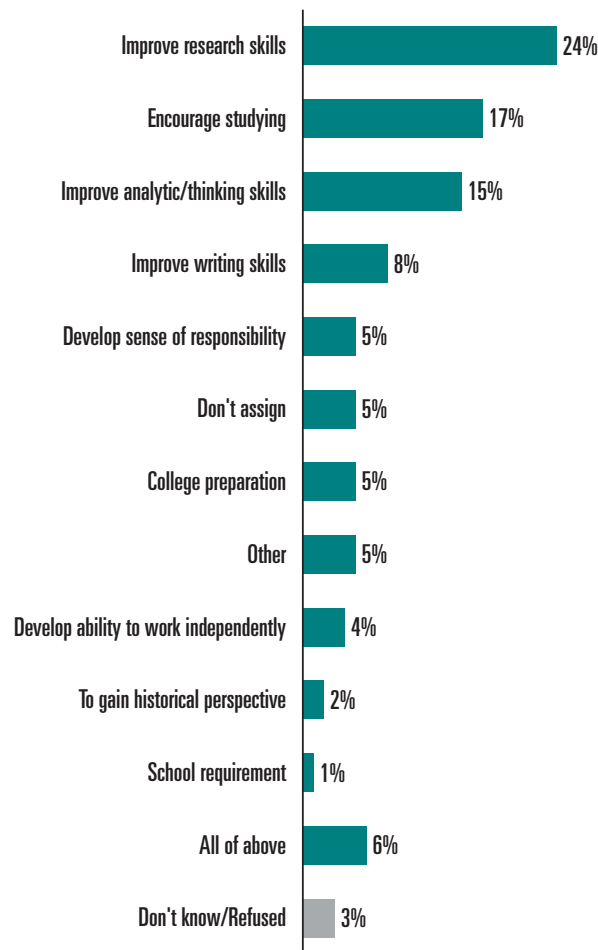


Improving research skills (24%) is cited as the top reason why assigning papers is important, one teacher put it this way, “papers are assigned to encourage reading of advanced sources for the purposes of making a compelling argument.”

Improving students analytic and thinking skills (15%) is also viewed as important, one teacher stressed these critical thinking skills by stating, “to ensure they get a variety of opinions on a topic so they realize there could be more than one answer.” Another teacher emphasized the importance by phrasing it this way, “to cover a specific topic more thoroughly and to get their thoughts into writing.”

Encouraging students to develop the habit of studying (17%) is also high on the list, especially when it comes to college preparation. One teacher said research papers are assigned “to check reading and writing levels, and to establish their research level for college preparation.”

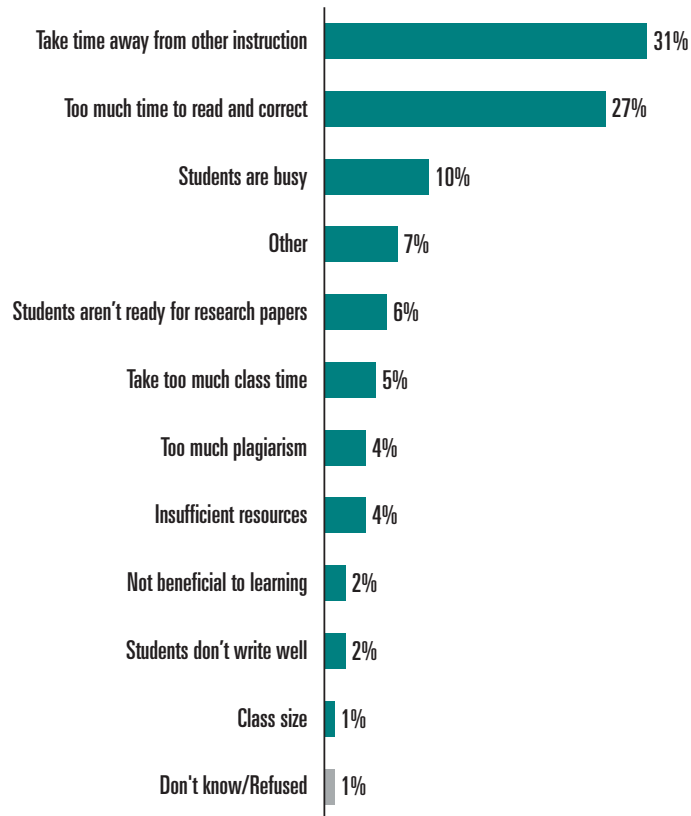
Most important reason research papers are assigned



TEACHERS AND TIME: THE RESEARCH PAPER CONUNDRUM

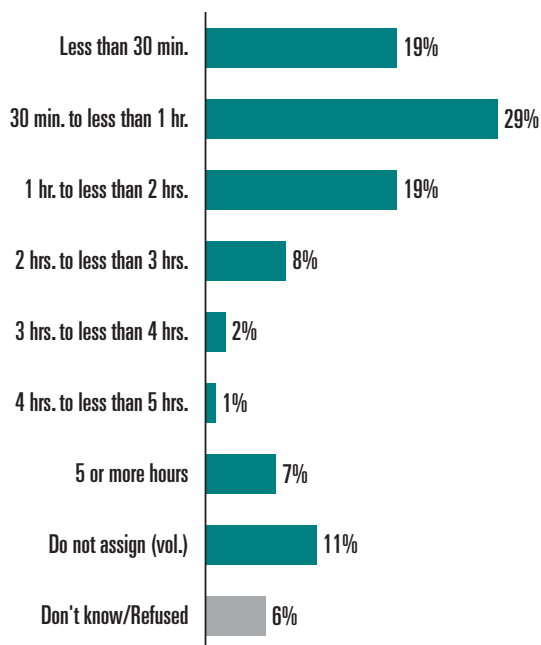
Teachers are sensitive to the amount of time that research papers take and the effect that an assignment may have on covering curriculum in the classroom. Nearly one third (31%) report that the most important reason that they do not assign more research papers is that it takes time away from other instruction. Another reason (27%) is that papers take too much time to read and correct.

Reason why more research papers are not assigned



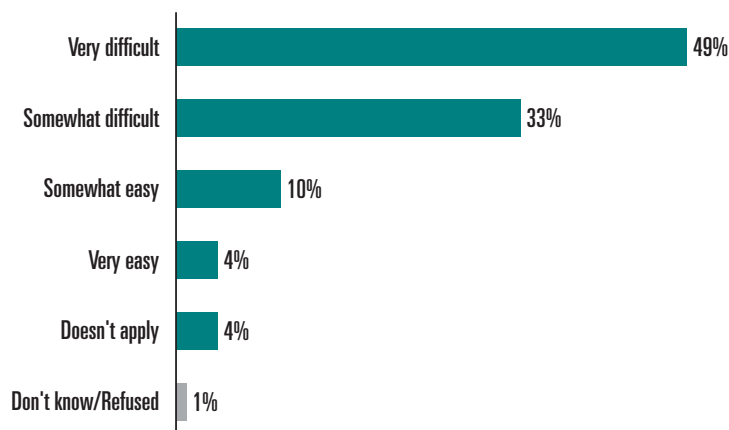
One of the main reasons teachers give for not assigning major research papers is the amount of time needed to read and grade a major research paper. This is not surprising considering that each teacher has an average total number of 80 students. Nearly one in three teachers (29%) spend between 30 minutes and one hour grading each paper. Some teachers take more time, with 19% spending between one and two hours, and 18% spend more than 2 hours correcting extended/major length research papers. Nineteen percent of teachers said they spend less than 30 minutes correcting and grading major research papers.

Estimation of Time to Read/Grade: Major Research Paper



When it comes to the difficulty level of finding the time to read and grade the papers, more than eight in ten (82%) say that it is very or somewhat difficult to find adequate time to devote to reading and grading the assigned research papers. Nearly half (49%) of the teachers surveyed said that it was very difficult to find the time to grade research papers and one third (33%) said that it was somewhat difficult to find the time.

How easy or difficult it is to find time to grade research papers

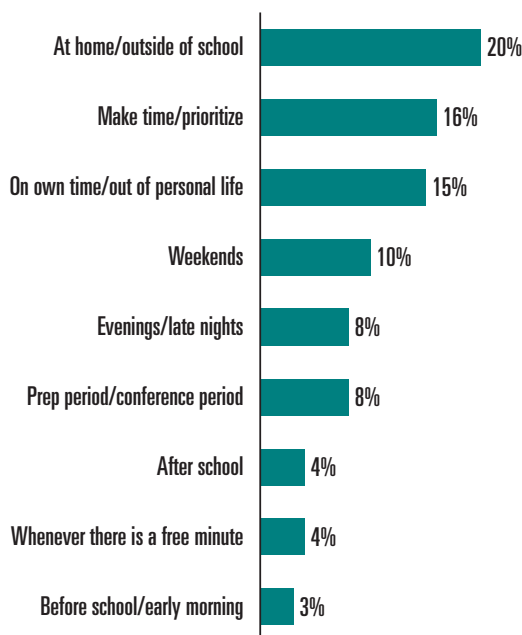


The difficulty in grading these papers may stem from the amount of personal time required to grade these papers. Fully, nearly six in ten teachers say that their time to grade papers comes out of their personal time. Less than one in ten, 8% use a preparatory or conference period to read and correct research papers.

When asked specifically how they find the time to read or correct papers, teachers take time at home or outside of school (20%), or on their own time (15%), sometimes, as one teacher remarked, interfering with personal time or hobbies, “it just takes up my free time after school...it messes up my fishing time.”

Many teachers multi-task, fitting time into their already busy schedules, 16% responded that they just make the time or prioritize their schedules. One teacher remarked, “I grade papers everywhere I go...at games...during my planning period...at night.” Other teachers were more specific, grading papers on weekends, one teacher said “(it) depends on the approach, but I usually devote a Sunday to correct them.” Others are early risers, “I totally abandon the notion of a contract day. I get to school at 5:30 a.m.”

How teachers find time for reading and correcting research papers



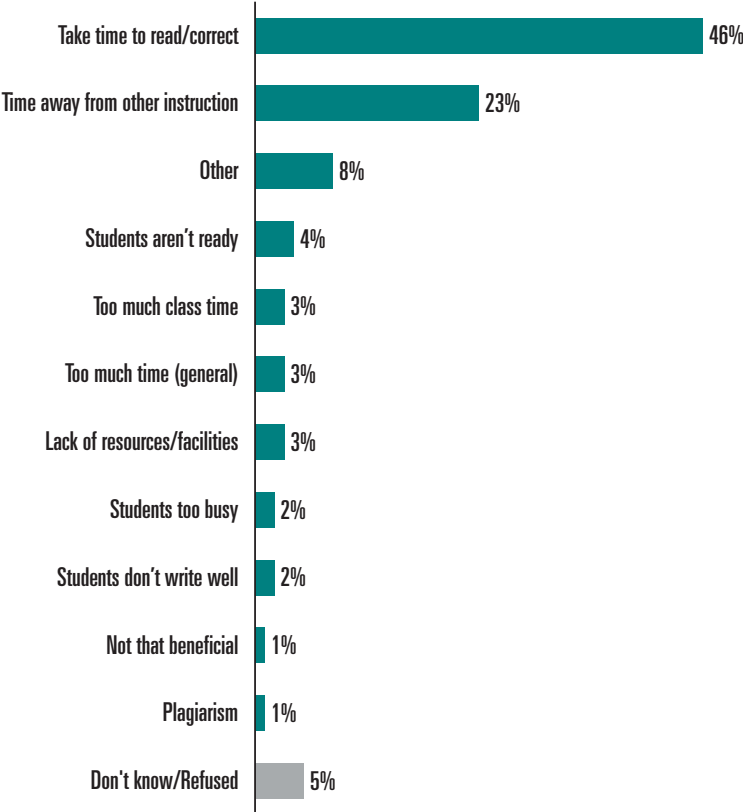
On the whole, more than half (56%) of teachers surveyed feel that teachers in their school assign about the right amount of research papers to students. However, more than one-third (38%) say that too few research papers are assigned. Only 2% say that too many research papers are assigned.

The amount of research papers assigned in your school



Among those who said too few papers were assigned, time is cited as why they feel too few papers were given to students. Nearly half (46%) of those saying too few papers are assigned say that they take too much time to read and correct and 23% say they take too much time away from other instruction.

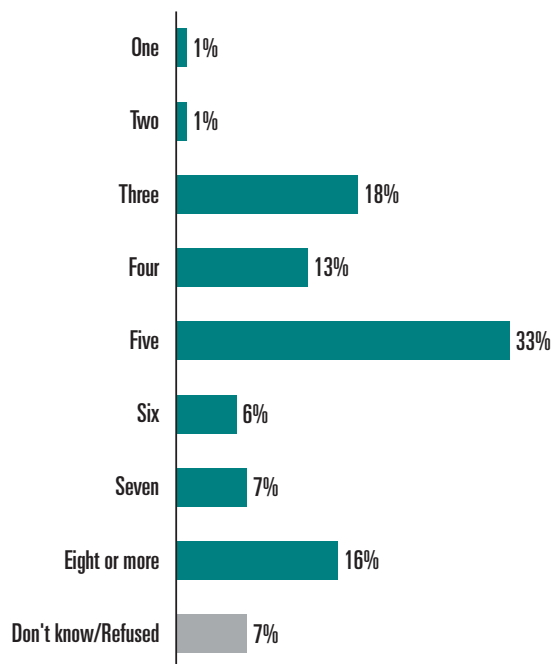
Most important reason more papers are not assigned



The Research Process

When it comes to assigning research papers, seemingly the minimum number of sources required is 3, with 18% expecting at least that many, 13% require 4 sources. One third (33%) of teachers surveyed require at least 5 sources.

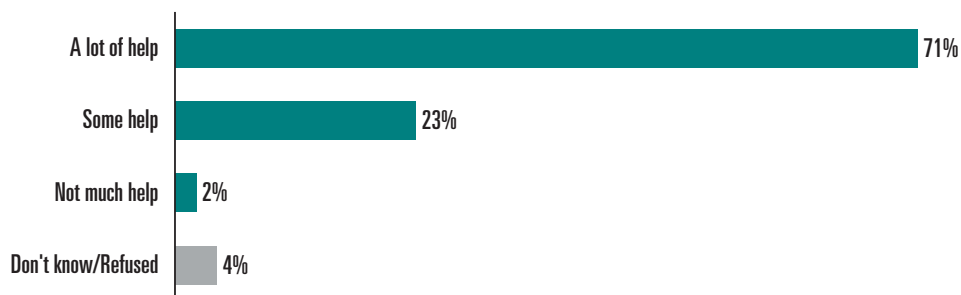
Sources expected in an average length research paper



Librarians and the teachers themselves are a major source of help for students on papers that have been assigned, more than seven in ten (71%) say that students get a lot of extra help from the teachers or librarians, 23% say that they get some help and only 2% say that teachers or librarians are not much help at all.

Socioeconomic status has no significant impact on the extra help students receive.

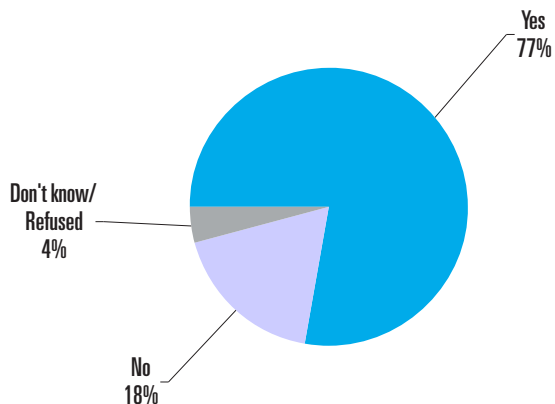
Amount of extra help students can get from teachers and other sources



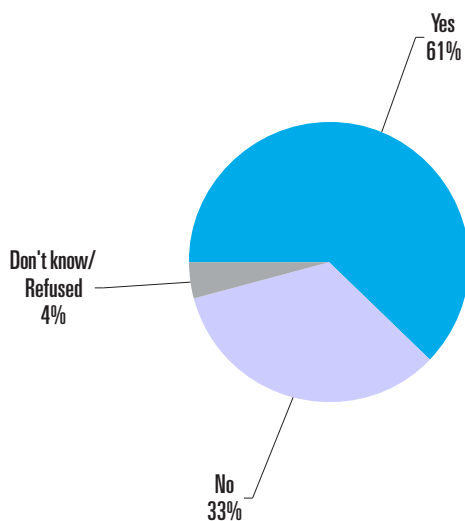
Structure of Research

When it comes to structuring the research, more than three-quarters (77%) say that a proposed topic is required. An outline is a common way for students to organize their papers with 68% of teachers requiring this for the paper. Fewer teachers, 61% require students to provide a source list.

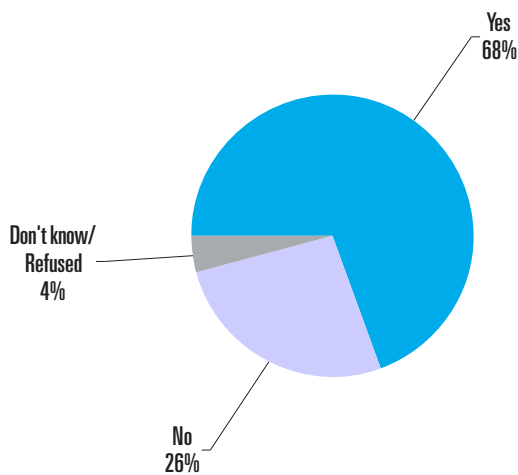
Proposed topic required



Source list required



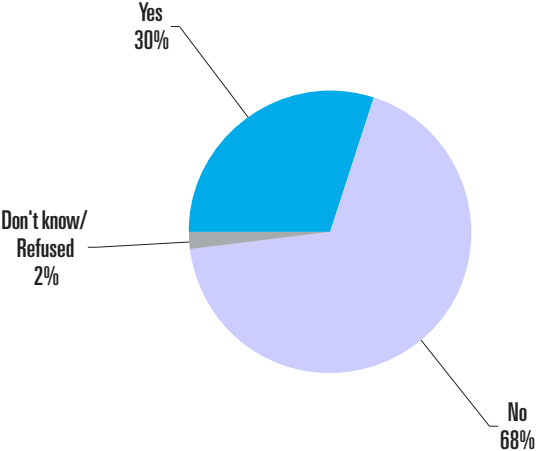
Outline required



Group research papers are less common, with only 30% of teachers assigning this type of project. More than two-thirds (68%) of teachers say that they do not assign research papers as a group project.

Teachers with an average class size of twenty or more students are somewhat more likely (32%) than those with under twenty students (25%) to assign group research papers.

Are research papers assigned as group projects

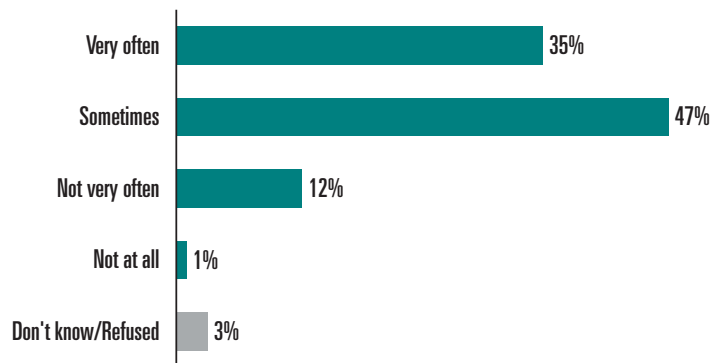


The Problem of Plagiarism

Unfortunately, teachers view plagiarism as a problem when it comes to history papers. More than one-third (35%) say that plagiarism occurs very often and nearly half (47%) say that plagiarism occurs sometimes. Only thirteen percent say that it doesn't occur very often or at all.

Teachers in school districts with higher socioeconomic status are less likely to cite plagiarism as a problem (69% say it occurs very often or sometimes) than those in Middle (85%) or Lower (81%) socioeconomic status districts.

How often does plagiarism occur with history research papers



Grading the Research Paper

Using a scale of 1-10, teachers were asked to rate the importance on a series of attributes relative to the grading of research papers assigned. Timeliness was rated as the most important, with a mean score of 8.90. Timeliness is followed by the ability of the student to communicate their thoughts and ideas, a mean score of 8.31 for a “well defined, important, and or interesting thesis or hypothesis,” and the “quality of written expression” is a mean score of 8.33.

Teachers give less weight to structural elements of papers such as an outline (mean of 6.81) length (6.62) and footnotes or endnotes (6.47).

Grading Factors

	Mean
Submission on time	8.90
The quality of written expression	8.33
A well-defined, important, and/or interesting thesis or hypothesis	8.31
Grammar	8.17
The depth of research in relation to the age and course level of the students	8.12
The depth of analysis and insight in relation to the age and course level of the students	8.06
A bibliography	8.03
An outline	6.81
Length	6.62
Using endnotes or footnotes	6.47

METHODOLOGY

In September 2002 a total of 400 interviews were conducted with high school history teachers from across the United States. Interviews were completed by telephone using professional survey research interviewers from Center for Survey Research and Analysis' facility on the University of Connecticut campus in Storrs, Connecticut.

Initial contacts with history teachers were conducted at the schools where they teach. If an interview could not be completed at the time of the initial contact, a callback was scheduled at a convenient time for the teacher. These interviews were conducted by telephone at school, home, or another location convenient to the teacher. Initial contact interviews were conducted from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Calling schedules were adjusted to compensate for time zone differences between CSRA and local schools, resulting in actual initial contacts being made between 9:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. EDT. Callback interviews were scheduled at a time convenient to the teacher between 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., including weekends. Multiple attempts were made to reach the respondents.

Random sampling methods were employed to select respondents. The sample frame for this project was developed from the National Center for Educational Statistics' *Common Core Datafile: Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey: School Year 1999-2000*. The Common Core of Data (CCD), a program of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, is a comprehensive, annual, national statistical database of information concerning all public elementary and secondary schools (approximately 91,000) and school districts (approximately 16,000). The sample frame was cleaned to exclude all schools that did not teach high school students, and schools not located in the contiguous US, and all Special Education, Vocational, and Alternative schools. The sample was geographically stratified. Within each stratum, schools were selected according to Equal Probability Selection Method (EPSEM) protocols. One history teacher was randomly selected within each school.