

My Hip-Hop Homework Helper

BY DANA CRUM

How I Taught Myself to Write a Research Paper

My lips fell apart as I read the research-paper assignment my seventh-grade English teacher, Mrs. Rodriguez, had just handed out. She wanted six typewritten pages! Was this lady crazy? The longest paper I'd ever written was a two-page report about dinosaurs. This was a totally different ball game. My stomach turned as I imagined myself handing in an unfinished paper.

"Write about whatever you want," Mrs. Rodriguez said. "But choose something you like because you'll be the one living with this paper for the next eight weeks."

I doubted there was anything I liked enough to write six pages on.

"I will explain the basic steps and let you figure out the rest,"

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Mrs. Rodriguez said. "The assignment is (1) choose a topic, (2) collect information, and (3) write the paper."

I bit my fingernails. Not only would I have to write a long research paper but I would also have to teach myself how to do it. She made it sound so easy! But it wasn't going to be—at all!

Without raising my hand, I blurted out, "How are we supposed to learn how to do this?"

Mrs. Rodriguez's lips tightened. "You can search online. And you can get help from any-and-everybody. Except me."

My shoulders slumped.

When class was over, I asked my friend Jake what he was going to do his paper on.

"I dunno," he shrugged. "I'll worry about it later."

STARTING WITH WHAT I LOVE

I was in my room that evening, listening to Kanye West's single "Diamonds," when I realized what I should write about: hip-hop! That was a topic I could live with for a lifetime.

Now that I had chosen my topic, I felt better. But I started biting my fingernails when I realized I still had to figure out how to complete the paper. Then I remembered the "Writing Process" poster from last year. Luckily, it was still in my sixth-grade notebook.

I pulled it out and reread it. It was a great step-by-step guide for writing short, basic papers, but it said nothing about how I should research, take notes, or organize

my information before I started writing the paper.

And it definitely didn't define primary and secondary sources. Mrs. Rodriguez had said we would need them, but she hadn't explained what they were.

THE SOURCES I NEED

At school the next day, I asked Mr. McDaniels, my sixth-grade language arts teacher, to define primary and secondary sources.

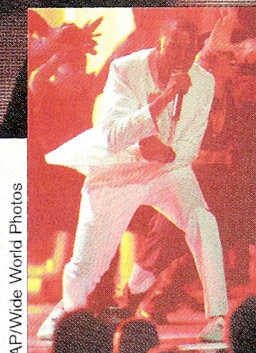
"Primary sources are firsthand," he said. "They come directly from the people or things you're researching. If your topic is hip-hop, your primary sources will be hip-hop songs. Your secondary sources are second-hand—they're a step removed from the people or things you're researching. Your secondary sources will be music reviews and articles in magazines like *VIBE*, *The Source*, and *XXL* and any relevant books you can find."

I wrote down all the sources he'd mentioned. I'd read *VIBE* and *The Source* before, but I never would have thought of using them for my paper. I'd never even heard of *XXL*.

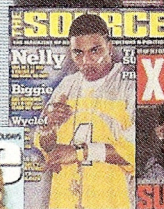
I imagined myself listening to my favorite songs while writing the paper. I was so excited that I stopped paying attention to what Mr. McDaniels was saying—something about sources and



John Stanton/Getty Images



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narrowing my topic. Later, I would wish I'd been listening more closely!

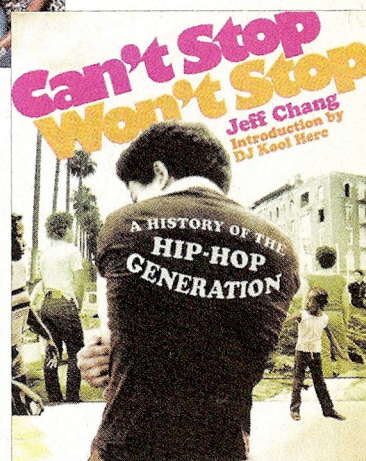
I started thinking that this paper wouldn't be so hard after all. I already had some secondary sources. And finding primary sources would be easy. At home I had loads of hip-hop music, some of it on CD, a lot of it on my iPod. Any song I didn't have I could download through iTunes.

"Hey, Jake," I said, when I passed him in the hall. "I'm going to do hip-hop as my topic! What are you doing for your paper?"

"Huh? What paper?"

"You know, English class."

"Oh, yeah, right," he said. "I'll



worry about that later."

On the subway, I listened to cuts I could write about. When I got home, I searched through my CDs and my iPod for more cool songs. I decided to use songs by Kanye West, Black Eyed Peas, and 50 Cent. Now my bibliogra-

Primary sources come directly from the people or things you are researching. Secondary sources are things that have been written or said about them.

phy included primary and secondary sources. I could examine my primary sources anytime, but to examine my secondary sources, I would need to visit the public library. I decided to go immediately instead of waiting until tomorrow.

A FUN FIELD TRIP

At the library, I went to the periodicals section and got the last two issues of the three magazines. In the November 2005 issue of *VIBE*, I learned that rapper Bow Wow and singer Ciara were dating. That was news to me, so I took notes. After reading the two issues of *XXL* and taking more notes, I checked out the September 2005 issue of *The Source*. I was struck by "A Woman's Worth," an article on Miami rapper Trina, who hopes her latest CD, *Glamorest Life*, will help her recover from sophomore slump.

The author of the article talked about the challenges Trina faced while completing the album.

I got to learn about stuff like that while working on a paper? How cool was this?

But I had to leave after reading about Trina. The library was closing.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD!

After two weeks and countless follow-up visits to the library, I'd read six issues of each of the three magazines and most of *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, a

book by Jeff Chang (see www.cantstopwontstop.com). My 100-page notebook was crammed with notes. I'd done a lot of research, but I felt like I was just scratching the surface of my topic. Something was wrong.

I went back to the library and asked Ms. Enright, a librarian, for help. She stood over me, her gray hair in a bun. After I explained the situation, she said, "Your topic is too broad. You must narrow it."

"Huh?"

"You could write a 600-page

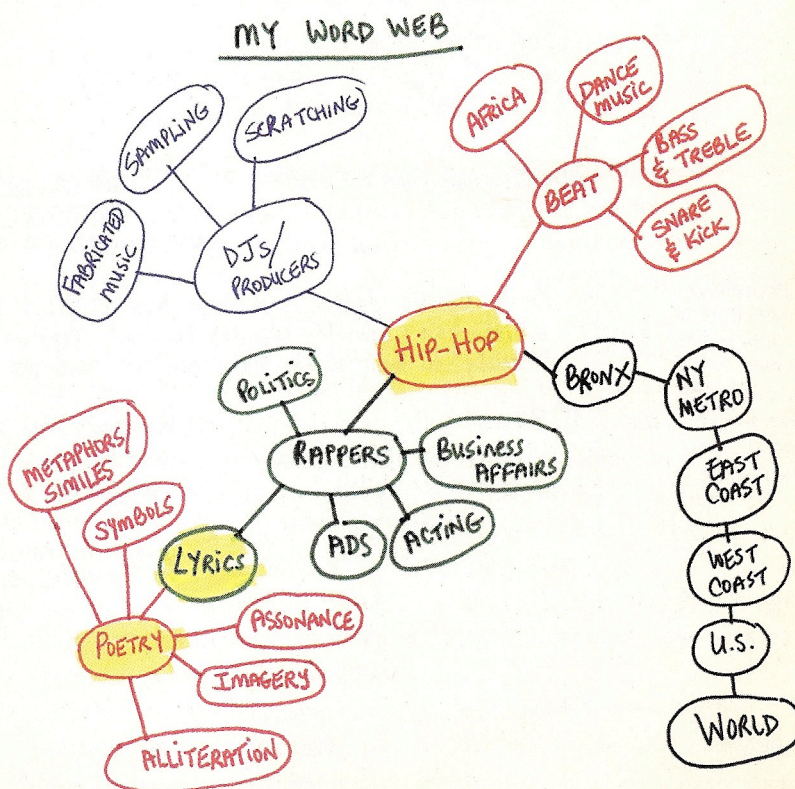
book on hip-hop. You need a topic that's small enough for a six-page paper. You need a subject—a slice of your original topic that you can focus upon. You want to write about that. Here. I'll help you."

She had me brainstorm everything I could think of about hip-hop in a word web. Then she had me highlight the parts of my web that interested me most—hip-hop, lyrics, and poetry.

"Why did you choose that?"

I shrugged. "Lyrics are cool. They're sort of like poetry."

I made a word web about hip-hop. Then I highlighted the parts that interested me most.



"What do you mean?"

"Well, when most grown-ups hear the word *hip-hop*, they say,

'That's not music!' or they freak out about the bad language. But actually some of the lyrics are pretty cool. They're sort of like poetry. They rhyme and stuff."

"Why don't you write about that? That could be your subject. You can discuss that in six pages. Just focus on lyrics that don't use inappropriate language, please."

Yeah, I could do that! What I love about poetry is what I also like about hip-hop. Both rhyme and use things like similes and

Note cards will help you organize your information so it's at your fingertips when you need it.

metaphors. For example, in "Public Service Announcement" Jay-Z says: "Whenever there's a drought, / Get your umbrellas out / Because that's when I brainstorm." That's a metaphor right there.

I grinned, but not for long. "But I don't think I can use any of these notes."

Ms. Enright rustled through the pages of my notebook. "No, you can't."

I blew air through my teeth.

"Don't start taking notes," she said, "until you know your topic is narrow enough. Otherwise, you'll

waste time."

I wanted to yell. Mr. McDaniels had tried to warn me, but I had not been paying attention.

Ms. Enright handed me my notebook. "Have you ever used note cards?"

"No."

"You should. Weeks, and sometimes months, pass between when you take notes and when you start writing. Your notes need to be organized and thorough. Otherwise, writing the paper will

This is the topic of your card. It will help you organize your notes. Color-code.

SAMPLE NOTE CARD

This is the name of the book, magazine, Web site, or newspaper in which you found your information.

ALLITERATION AND HIP-HOP

HIP-HOP POETRY AND THE CLASSICS BY

ALAN SITOMER and MICHAEL CIRELLI

Both classic poets and hip-hop artists use alliteration (similar sounds) to add rhythm and "beauty" to their work. Here are two examples:

① Brazen bells!
What a tale of terror, now,
their turbulency tells!
- Edgar Allan Poe

② Representin' the West,
relevant to relentless sentences.
If renegade rebels resent this
wicked syntax
Revert to revolution...
- Ras Kass

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Summarize or paraphrase the information you plan to use. This will make it easier for you not to accidentally plagiarize.

Examples are always helpful.

You will need your page numbers for your citations and bibliography.

be hard. Note cards will help you organize your information so it's at your fingertips when you need it. Let me show you what note cards should look like."

She went to her desk, then returned with some handouts. As she handed them to me, she said, "Use note cards to record facts, interesting quotes, lyrics, and other information. Color-code them, and always include the title of the source as well as the page number."

In the weeks that would follow, while researching my narrowed topic, I would fill up about 80 note cards. One of them appears on page 16.

I thanked Ms. Enright for her help but added, "I wish I'd known all this earlier."

"That's OK. Next time, you'll know. Things could be worse. At least your notes were thorough."

I smiled. I'd done something right.

Out in the hallway, Jake was bending over the water fountain, taking a drink.

"Hey, man, look! Note cards!" I said, holding them up to his face.

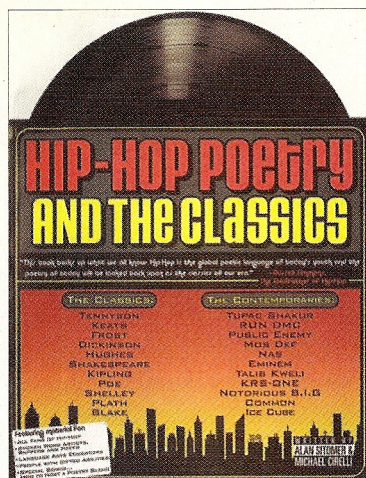
"So?" Jake said.

"They're for organizing your notes. You know, for the paper," I said.

"I'll worry about that later," Jake said.

I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW ...

After narrowing my topic, the first thing I did was get rid of some primary sources. My focus was lyrics now, so I kept only



songs that had good lyrics—for instance, Jay-Z's "Public Service Announcement," Mos Def's "Close Edge," and Eminem's "Lose Yourself." And since I'd heard that old-school rappers like Rakim, Chuck D, and Inspectah Deck were great lyricists, I thought I'd discuss them too.

Do an outline. Otherwise, you'll write an unorganized paper. Reorganizing a paper can be like rewriting it.

After downloading and listening to some of their songs, I chose the ones that represented the artists well.

I went through my secondary sources too. Jeff Chang's book introduced me to the social history of hip-hop, with its roots in the post-civil rights era on the streets of the Bronx in New York City and in Kingston, Jamaica. But it wasn't enough, so I did some more searching. I really thought I'd hit the jackpot when I found *Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics*, by Alan Sitomer and Michael Cirelli. It was just what I needed. It compared great poets

of the past—Robert Frost, Shakespeare, and Edgar Allan Poe—to hip-hop stars like Eminem and Public Enemy. Even though I wasn't writing about those artists in my own paper, the book gave me ideas for how to make my comparisons.

My work wasn't over, though. I still had to get my hands on back issues of magazines that had reviews of albums.

My friend Robbie had told me about an online library called **Questia.com**, so I checked it out. I found some really great articles—for instance, "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop." On the site, I was even able to take notes and highlight passages.

Two weeks before the deadline, I finished my research. I wanted to get some pointers on how to write a research paper before starting.

My sister Nicole was an A student, so I went to her.

"First," she told me, "you need to write an outline."

"I have to do an outline too? How much work do I have to do for this paper?"

"You should always do an outline. Especially for a paper this long."

"This is a lot of work."

"Do an outline. Otherwise, you'll write an unorganized paper

that you'll only end up having to reorganize later. Reorganizing a paper can be like writing it all over again."

"OK. I'll do one. I've done outlines before." I opened my notebook to a blank page and put my paper's title at the top: "Hip-Hop Lyrics." I needed to write my thesis statement below that, but I couldn't.

Nicole grinned. "You don't know what your thesis is, do you?"

"Nope."

"What are you trying to prove?"

"That the best hip-hop lyrics are poetry!"

"There's your thesis."

"Cool."

While talking to the librarian, I'd done more than narrow my topic; I'd come up with a thesis. Below my topic, I wrote my thesis; and below that, my outline. I also revised my topic to "The Poetry in Hip-Hop."

I was revising my paper the night before it was due, when I realized I hadn't done a bibliography.

THE FINAL STRETCH

With the hardest part over, I sat down to start the paper. In the section where I argued that poetic devices such as alliteration (the repetition of consonant sounds) and assonance (the repetition of vowel sounds) proved that the best hip-hop lyrics were

poetic, I realized something: I needed to give the reader an example of such lyrics. Some of Inspectah Deck's lyrics had been constantly streaming through my head; I realized they were the lines to quote: "Not a role model, / I walk

a hard road to follow. / I sold bottles of sorrow, / Then chose poems and novels."

To bolster my points, I quoted from secondary sources, always keeping Ms. Enright's warning in mind: Whenever using an author's material, I had to give him or her credit, or else I'd be guilty of plagiarism.

The night before the paper was due, I finished it. Mr. McDaniels had always said we should revise anything we write.

I took a break from my work and called Jake.

"How's your paper going?" I asked.

"Well, I'm trying to think of a topic," Jake said. "You got any ideas?"

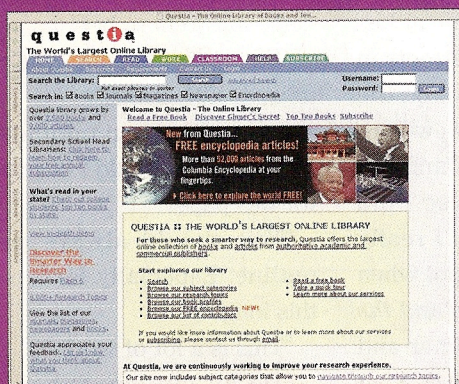
"Jake, man, how are you going

MY PAPER TOPIC:

The poetry in hip-hop.

MY THESIS STATEMENT:

The best hip-hop lyrics are poetry.



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to get the whole thing done in one night? I've been working on mine for weeks," I said.

"I work best under pressure," Jake said. "I'm not worried."

"Look, I've got to get back to work. Good luck." I hung up. I felt sorry for Jake.

I was revising my paper, when I realized I hadn't done a bibliography! I had no idea how to do one. Nicole wasn't at home, so I was on my own. To figure it out, I typed "bibliography" into Google. The first return was **EasyBib.com**, a free automatic bibliography composer. I went to the site. It was easy to use. I typed in the bibliographical info for each source, and EasyBib.com did the rest, formatting my bibliography, even alphabetizing the works.

After printing my bibliography from the site itself, I finished revising my paper and printed it too. Then I prepared to meet with Mrs. Rodriguez, who would want to know what steps I'd taken to complete the assignment. Looking back on the last eight weeks, I concluded there were six steps involved.

When I handed my paper to Mrs. Rodriguez and explained how I'd done it, she said, "Great job! That's exactly how you write a research paper!" And she gave me an A!

As for Jake, well, he looked awfully worried.

Dana Crum is a former English teacher who used his experiences as a teacher and one-time middle school student to write this story.



6 Easy Steps To a Great Research Paper

1. Choose a topic.

Brainstorming always helps, and there are several ways to do it. You can make a list of topics that interest you or freewrite using the words *What I'm interested in writing about is ...*

2. Narrow your focus.

After you choose your topic, pretend that you're examining it through a microscope. What part of your topic interests you the most? That's what you should write about. Collect your ideas using lists or word webs.

3. Collect information.

Go to the library. Get on the Internet. Find articles, Web sites, and books about your topic. Then skim your sources to see which ones will help you.

4. Organize your ideas.

Once you've narrowed down your sources, use note cards to take notes and get organized. Then make an outline to get started.

5. Write a rough draft.

Start writing! Use your outline to connect your ideas and turn them into paragraphs. Make sure you define your main argument (or thesis) and support it, using quotes and examples.

6. Revise the paper.

Before you turn it in, reread your rough draft and ask yourself: *Does each sentence make sense? Is that what I wanted to say? Have I plagiarized?* Proofread your spelling and grammar. Create a bibliography.