

Researching, or How I Fell In Love With Post-It Notes

Susana Rodriguez

After years (oh so many, *many* years) of trying to figure out what her teachers wanted when they handed out writing assignments asking for a literary analysis, Susana Rodriguez came up with a three step process for herself to help get her from starting idea to finished paper. Starting by outlining the supplies needed for conducting research, then walking through how to read texts to come up with ideas, the article uses a metacognitive approach to explain why the writer makes the decisions they make in the process—basically writing about writing analytical papers analytically. Written in a casual, tongue-in-cheek tone, Rodriguez aims to recreate a writer's thought process in action to show how one idea leads to another, offering one method that can be customized to fit other writing needs calling for interpretation, analysis, and reflection to try and say something new: brainstorming, journal responses, reflection essays, editorial and opinion pieces, blog posts, lab reports, science projects, stand up comedy routines, and response text messages to current crushes.

I don't remember ever learning how to research in school. Hell, I don't remember ever even being *taught* how. I just know that for every writing assignment handed out by my teachers throughout middle and high school I spent a lot of time scratching my head trying to figure out 1) where to start and 2) how they all managed to take the same class on neatly typing out and printing said assignments on half-slips of paper.

When the first slip was put in my grubby little post-Phys. Ed. hands in sixth grade, I felt like my teacher had carved out a chunk of the Rosetta Stone and expected me to translate the hieroglyphics on it. I only spoke English and Spanish at the time, but even in high school when I picked up Italian the slips still made little, even less sense. I tried to rationalize with them (obviously translating was out of the question since I could only read and write in letters, not pictographs). I tried flattering them (I could try working the words on the slips into my writing and then I was for sure getting an A!). I even tried bargaining with them (if I was nice enough to them, making sure never to get them crinkly and bent in my backpack, taking them out and reading them

often, then they would totally start making nice back by letting me understand them, right?!). Zero, zilch—*nada* worked.

See, what's funny is the writing goals were always clear: write from this many to this many pages using x-amount of sources to talk about such and such topic using this, that, or the other font with only so many spaces between the lines. Oh, and it's due sometime in the near-ish future. But where to start? What to do? *How* I'm getting from point a (the assignment) to point b (the final paper)? Nowhere on those little half-slips of paper was there ever a hint or sign or hidden message to decode!

Over the years—and many, many, *many* C and B minuses—I've come up with my own strategy for writing out papers. And because this article is in this journal, I'm hoping it'll help others who don't have the time to wine and dine their own half-slips of papers throughout the semester. Good karma? Sweet revenge? I don't know. But I *do* know this is one way of writing that's worked for me, and that's as good a place to start revising and tweaking this process to customize it for different learning styles.

So *HA!* Take *that*, half-slips! You'll rue no one's writing day(s) no more!

Step 1: Load the Research Guns

Those beastly little half-slips weren't completely evil: they *did* have a topic to start getting writing ideas from. But they were usually so general that I really could write about anything and everything I wanted to and never get anywhere near finishing a good, focused paper the first time around. For example, let's say one of my professor wants me to write six double-spaced pages in Fines Blue Nomen font about Whimsy's *Pretty and The Beastie*, a popular story for youngish peoples about Pretty, an intelligent and aesthetically arresting person, who ends up cohabiting in a castle with Beastie, a formerly aesthetically arresting person turned creature-like being for having a piss poor attitude towards those they considered aesthetically inferior. See? Where in that last sentence is there any remotely definitive direction?

Obviously this means war! But I can't go into this with just my little, balled fists swinging all over the place—this calls for big guns. Big little guns, actually, in the form of strategic office supplies:

- A pen (or three)

To, of course, scribble all over book margins with. I've found that while I read I react to the story as I go: either laughing at something that happened or thinking something was a stupid idea and wanting

to put in my two cents. But if I don't write those thoughts down when I have them I don't remember them by the time I get to the end.

I don't rest my eyes in the margins so much anymore as I jot down what comes to mind as I read.

- A pack of highlighters:

As much as I talk back to a book by writing in the margins, I also find words or passages that stick out for me from the text that I don't want to respond to so much as I want to look at again because something struck a chord in me. Sometimes that chord is a sweet note like a good quote I want to go back to, or it's a turn of phrase or rhythm of a sentence that I think is pretty neat and want to note for myself. That chord can also be sharp and flat, like when I read something I think is strange or don't understand—a word, a sentence, a description, a plot hole.

Highlighting cuts my search time down too when I'm flipping through pages to find what I was looking for since the neon colors sear my already naturally detereorating retinas.

- A semi-endless supply of post-it notes:

Ahhh, the humble post-it note! Sticky, writeable, light, and reusable, they're probably the best thing ever invented for the writer in need.² For a long time I used to fold over and dog ear pages to mark off passages I wanted to go back to, which eventually turned into sticking bookmarks and random pieces of paper to section them off, which evolved into joining those sections together with paperclips, then sticking pens and pencils inside the sectioned off groups to remember which were the most important notes. Almost anything I was reading to write about was held together with rubber bands to keep this method from falling apart at the slightest stumble.

Post-its and all the sizes and colors they come in saved me from myself. Do I just need to mark off a page? There's a little flag for that. Do I need to write something else that won't fit in the margins I've already scribbled up? There's a size for that. Do I need to section off pages in some kind of order? There are colors for that.

And because they're little slips of sticky paper, I don't have to worry about them falling out all over the place.

- A comfortable spot to work

This is probably the most important of the big little guns I arm myself with, if only because I *know* how I work. I know that I can only get any researching or writing done by blocking off a big chunk of time—usually anywhere between four hours to three quarters of

a day—to focus all my attention on a project. I’m *so* not someone who can sit down and read or write for an hour or two and then do it again the next day and the day after that in micro-slots until they’re done with their work. My brain needs to be swimming and floating and playing in open ocean, it just doesn’t do regulated laps around the pool.

I also know I can’t work at home at all because it’s too easy for me to get distracted by the simple fact that I’m at home and can go take a nap or read a book if I want to. Even better, I can’t work in absolute or only partial quiet—I *have* to have a steady stream of noise that doesn’t stop or start suddenly to focus, no matter how low or loud that sound may be. Ergo, I have a few options as to where I can get started: a main lounge area in a library, a bookstore, a coffee shop, out in a park, etc.

My decision on where to go will usually hinge on whether or not I’ve eaten before I settle down for the long haul, which is a must because I can’t think, much less see straight unless my stomach’s been taken care of first.

Now that I’m armed, I can go head to head with Whimsy’s *Pretty and the Beastie* and start knocking out some paper ideas.

Step 2: Fire without Aiming

The question now is: what do I write about—since my only strict directions are to whip up a specific number of spaced pages in a certain font. Here’s where I need to r.o.c.k. out some ideas to write my paper by reading critically, observing what’s going on, connecting what I see, and knitting it back to what other writers are saying about it.

The first part is I critically read the text I’ll be writing about. I couldn’t quite wrap my head around this the first time I was asked to do it because my default setting is to just dive into a story and read for fun. The thing is, Reading Critically isn’t a fan of cannon-balling into the pool like Reading For Fun is: it likes to put on its floaties, dip a toe in to test the temperature, then wade in slow and steady with a boogie board to keep its head above water. Reading Critically is careful, making sure every kick is full and measured to soak in every minute of an open swim session and keeping its eyes open to everything going on around them to neither paddle into or be paddled into by another swimmer. Reading Critically also takes everything into account, just as I should when I pick up *Pretty and The Beastie*. So I don’t start on the first page—I start with the book cover, summary, and anything else that comes

before the page one, taking my time to see the work as a whole and not just a story in a book. And I dive in with my own floaties and boogie board too, except mine are my research guns loaded with my pens, highlighters, post-its, and a comfy spot.

Like Reading Critically doggie paddling, I read at a slower pace so I can observe what's going on in the text. And now, armed with the power of post-its, I can start noting and cataloging my observations for future reference as I go along. I start off in my notebook by making up a symbol and color-code for my little post-it flags that I'll use to mark off different things I start looking for as I read the text and notice patterns forming. Now when I say pattern, I mean something that shows up three times or more in the text—not once (because that's a fluke) or twice (because that's a coincidence) but three or more times and there's a regularity that establishes a pattern. In the beginning I'll only look at a couple of things, like everytime that anything related to Pretty or Beastie or their romance comes up since the story's supposed to be about them and their relationship. But as I read more and see more things in the text, then I'll grow my symbol and color-code list to keep track of what I've noticed.

If I'd been reading for fun, I wouldn't notice that Whimsy's *Pretty and The Beastie* isn't about Pretty cohabiting with Beastie so much as it's about Pretty being held prisoner by the Beastie. (Here I'll draw a little heart in a circle with a line through it for "No Romance" to keep track of this throughout the text, making a note on a post-it about what was weird about this instance and sticking it on the page just under the passage I'm looking at.) Or that Pretty's so awfully smart they can walk around with their nose in a book yet no one—at least none of the people's of a masculine persuasion—notices this so much as they notice how pretty Pretty is. (I could doodle a little brain or a face with big kissy lips to follow this thought everytime I see it and be able to count up how many times these references show up by the time I finish the story. I'll also probably highlight Pretty's descriptions and see if they change or stay the same.) Or even that Pretty may or may not be losing their mind what with being in semi-solitary confinement and starting to think the castle furniture is talking back since Beastie witholds dinner when Pretty refuses to deal with their pissiness any longer. (Definitely a doodle of a moon with spirals as universal code for "loony" here.) The hell is going on in this story? (I'll scribble a big, bold **WTF?!** in the margins every time I read something that makes me feel this way.) I thought Whimsy and their multi-bajillion dollar fairy tale empire had promised me an epic love story about two people from different worlds coming together against the odds?

At that moment right back there—the one where what I thought one thing was going on but I'm seeing something completely different—is when

I start making connections. Here I bust out the five w's and a y: who, what, when, where, why, and how. First then, who's this story about? So far my reading says it's mostly about Pretty, despite the story being called *Pretty and the Beastie*. I mean, sure, we get some of Beastie's story throughout but it's either stuff that happened before or in the background of Pretty's story. Also, who's this story meant for? Young-ish peoples, according to the description, which means then not exactly very young nor very non-young but peoples of an in-between age. I can even get more specific at this point and say it's meant for young-ish peoples also of the feminine persuasion since I've noticed the story's mostly about Pretty. Now what exactly is Pretty's story? They're a person of the feminine persuasion who gets pretty much sold off to Beastie by Pretty's Father-person, seeing as Father-person broke-in and entered Beastie's castle for shelter³. Other things about Pretty include the fact that they're very smart and most of the peoples of the masculine persuasion find Pretty aesthetically arresting, chasing after Pretty for their hand in cohabitation since Pretty's of a certain age that's ready to leave their Fatherly-person's abode and start their own life. Ooooh, fancy that little nugget back there: Pretty, much like their readers, is at an in-between stage too! Now, because of this little spark, I start to entertain thoughts like how Pretty's story ties back to its readers—with both being at in-between stages—and what it might be saying to them through the story. Behold, the seed of an idea is born!

Now I'm ready to knit this little idea onto other things people before me may have thought up to help mine grow. But before I even pull up Google or the library catalog on my browser, I get all my own notes together to kick start my warm-up draft. This is where the best thing about post-its comes in, see: I don't "write" my first drafts on a page. I throw them up on my kitchen wall. I like working this way because I don't feel tied to any one way of organizing the information I have so far. If I want to switch things around it's as simple as unsticking one, or even a few post-its from the wall and resticking them wherever I want them to go! I can put one under another if the ideas are close enough to make up a paragraph or two out of them, just like I can slap one next to another if the thoughts are similar but have potential to branch out in their own directions. And the best part is that I totally avoid the tiny panic attack I have when I open up a blank Word document to write. (Also, if I play my cards right and spring for the fancy colored post-its, the whole process turns into a cheap, living art installation that I never get bored of *and* brightens up breakfast in the morning, without ever making a trip to the Art Institute!)

After the post-its on my wall start looking like they have some kind of pattern going on more so than just being stuck up all over the place, then I'll actually start knitting. With the post-its starting to make some sense I can

run searches to see what other people have said about the topics I've come up with: Pretty's prettiness, their not so romantic story, and how these two things relate to *Pretty and the Beastie's* youngish readers. As I find out what other people are saying, I repeat the same process I followed for reading *Pretty and the Beastie*, applying it to these new texts that'll help shape my work. I scribble in the margins, highlight significant parts, and post-it note the living daylight out of them. I'll rework the "draft" I have thrown up in my kitchen wall, adding to or taking away from the post-its sticking on it, until it stops looking like a bunch of little squares with some kind of pattern to them and starts to look like there's a definite pattern with groups of post-its crowded around each other and trails leading from one group to another.

Here's where I need to run and take step three before I'm in too deep.

Step 3: Walk Away from Everything

Yes. Just like that. I watch a few videos. Run some errands. Do laundry. Take a day, or weekend trip to the city. Hike. Camp. Sail. Anything that does not even so much *look* like researching or writing. I do anything and everything I can to give my brain a rest and let my thoughts stew for a while—be that a few minutes, hours, or days depending how much time I have. Once I can see there's a pattern to the post-its on my kitchen wall, I have to walk away from them before I get stuck arranging and rearranging them forever. And I'm usually tempted to stay there unsticking and resticking them because it buys me a little more time away from the blank Word document even though I'm pretty prepared to write something down at this point.

I also need to take this step because I need to get some distance from what I've got up on the wall so far. Since by now I'll have been working on the draft long enough that I don't have to think about where I put up which sticky note and what I wrote on it, it means I'm too close to the work to look at it objectively to try and make any new connections between ideas, it's time to walk. Especially because this closeness also means my eyes aren't fresh enough to see what I've got up there in new ways. So I go and do something completely different to let all the reading and noting I've done settle down.

When do I come back to it all? When I start stopping in the middle of making breakfast to write down a thought that showed up all on its own really quick before it flies away again. When I get up before my alarm clock goes off because a couple of thoughts started arguing and couldn't wait to be heard any longer. When I start waking up in the middle of the night and reaching for the pad and pencil on my nightstand to write down as much as I can

remember about a new idea that came to mind when six thoughts decided to merge. That's when it's time for me to look back up at the kitchen wall, pull out my laptop, and start writing.

These three simple steps usually get me going somewhere, although it's not a definitive somewhere yet. But by the end I have enough material read and researched behind me that I get to enjoy seeing where the writing takes me.

Endnotes

1. Not even a lowly footnote. Pits!
2. Right after spellcheck and deadline extensions!
3. Although, to be fair to the story, I'm on shaky ground calling it breaking and entering for shelter as Beastie would contest private property rights, but that's neither her nor there. *Unless*, of course, I decide to write about how characters within *Pretty and the Beastie* interpret property law, which I *could* but so far my critical reading of the story is pointing more in the direction of focusing on Pretty and their unfortunate situation.



Susana holds a Master's degree in English Studies. She's an avid croquet player and ice cream cone enthusiast. When she's not staying up at all hours of the day researching or writing her latest scholarly opus for class, she enjoys curling up on her couch and reading a book until she falls asleep with it hugging her face. She spends her free time traveling on whims to new cities and exploring new places, always dreaming about where her next impromptu adventure might take her. When she grows up, she wants to sail around the world searching for the perfect cup of coffee and most decadent dessert. She hopes to retire to a yurt in the Galapagos, or join a nomad tribe in Morocco—whichever comes first.

