Research Paper Self-Evaluation

1. Discuss at least three interesting facts or ideas that you learned about your topic through your research.

To me, the most interesting part of sign language research in great apes has been how the chimpanzee Loulis learned to sign. Scientists had taught several other chimps (beginning with Washoe) how to use sign language, and they gave Loulis to Washoe to raise as an adopted son. Loulis learned all of his signs from the other chimpanzees, not from the human researchers. He picked up sign language from observing those around him, just like how a human baby learns sign language. It amazes and fascinates me that language can be culturally transmitted from generation to generation by non-humans.

I was also intrigued to discover that something akin to sign language is used by chimpanzees in the wild. It had occurred to me before that it was odd that wild apes never used their aptitude for linguistic communication, so I was thrilled when I found out that researchers in Uganda have identified distinct hand gestures used by wild chimps there. It seems to me that this discovery could reveal a lot more about the minds of chimpanzees.

Even when in captivity, apes can still show innovation in their use of signs. I was fascinated by how various great apes have combined signs to refer to objects they have not encountered before. For instance, they have signed “water bird” upon seeing a swan and “drink fruit” to refer to a watermelon. These sorts of compound words seem to indicate that the apes do understand what they are signing and that they are using language to communicate about the world around them.

2. What was the biggest problem related to researching your paper that you had to solve? Describe how you solved it.

When I started to research my paper, I was frustrated to find that many of my sources offered only cursory explanations of the topic. Most of the articles I found would only briefly mention the fact that great apes had been taught sign language, but they would not go into very much depth about how they use it. Most of the more specific examples I found were cited in multiple sources, which gave me fewer specifics to mention in my paper. I had to read through many more sources than I actually used because most of them were not particularly helpful. By persisting and reading through so many sources, I was eventually able to find enough information to write the paper. One source that was particularly helpful was the interview. I talked with a graduate student who works at the Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute, so he was able to provide helpful specifics that I could cite in my paper. Also, I asked him questions that helped to clarify and expand upon anything I found in another source that was too brief.
3. If you were to write your paper over, what would you change? Why?

Knowing what I know now, I would have chosen a slightly broader research topic. Because my senior project was to learn sign language, I researched how sign language has been used by great apes. However, many of the sources I found talked a lot about other language studies with apes, such as their use of a system of lexigrams on a keyboard. If I had broadened my topic to include other forms of great ape language, there would have been more information at my disposal. I would have had an easier time finding examples to use if I had been willing to discuss more than just sign language.

4. Who or what helped you the most when you were writing your paper? How?

The method of organization suggested by Mr. Macy, my English teacher, was very helpful in my transition from raw research into a paper. He suggested to our class that we copy all of our digital sources into a computer document and highlight the important or useful facts with different colors according to how we intended to use them in the paper. I found this color-coding system to particularly ease my organization of my paper. This way, I could sort different parts of my sources according to the paragraph I wanted to cite them in. Each time I came up with a topic for a paragraph, I set aside the examples I wanted to use, and I could easily see which source the information came from and cite it correctly.

5. What was the biggest challenge related to writing your paper that you encountered? How did you overcome it?

The hardest part of writing my paper was synthesizing the different sources into a coherent argument in favor of a certain point of view. There are clearly different camps with regards to sign language research in apes: some people think that apes really can use language, both others claim that this is merely a complex form of conditioning. However, none of the sources I found really presented this dispute; they either stated as a fact that great apes can sign or stated as a fact that they cannot. This made it difficult to use the information to back up one side to an argument that none of the sources really admitted existed. I had to examine all of the evidence presented and see how it supported one side or the other. This challenge was actually the most enjoyable part of the research paper. For instance, I saw Chomsky claim that apes would use language in the wild if they had the ability, and then I found out that chimps have a system of gestures in the wild. I had to examine all of my sources to find out how the evidence addressed the claims of each side. By reading and rereading all of the information I had found, I was able to piece together an argument based on empirical data.

6. What are you most proud of regarding your research or your paper?
I am the most proud of the fact that in my paper, I make a case that had not been laid out in any of the sources I found. I am not simply rephrasing an argument that someone else already made, since the sources I used discussed the topic without treating it like a debate. None of the articles I read addressed the criticisms of the other side, so I had to figure out for myself how the examples they gave served as evidence for one side or the other. By fitting these facts together myself, I created a certain originality to my paper and my argument that I would not have had if my sources were supporting the same thesis as my paper.