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Renaissance of Teaching and Learning



Tales from the Reference Desk: Helping Students Find and Evaluate Information

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Booklet Eight

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The Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series is a publication of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning at Western Carolina University. The Series is intended to stimulate and support both scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching & learning by drawing contemplative attention to various aspects of the methods, goals and visions of teaching and creating learning opportunities with students.

Through their experience and wisdom about learning, the writers in the Series want to open a continuous dialogue among colleagues about the always ancient, always new profession of teaching. If the Series acts as a catalyst for a new renaissance of teaching & learning at WCU, it will be serving its purpose.

Alan Altany, Editor

Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series
and Director, Coulter Faculty Center

Tales from the Reference Desk: Helping Students Find and Evaluate Information

Heidi Buchanan

Reference Librarian, Hunter Library

- “On an average weekday the *New York Times* contains more information than any contemporary of Shakespeare’s would have acquired in a lifetime – ANONYMOUS (and ubiquitous)” – quoted in the *Social Life of Information* (Brown, 2002, p.11).
- According to the *Bowker Annual*, “It will not be long before U.S. title output exceeds the once-unimaginable total of 200,000 new titles and editions [in a single year]” (Bogart, 2005, p.521). There were 171,000 new titles published in 2003 alone. For perspective, Elon University has 250,000 book volumes in their entire collection (*American Library Directory*, 2005, p.1674).
- There are over 1500 television broadcast stations (most of which are affiliated with 5 major networks) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2005).
- There are 158.722 million cell phones in the United States (Central Intelligence Agency, 2005).
- There are 159 million Internet users in the United States (Central Intelligence Agency, 2005).
- There are so many sites on the World Wide Web that there is actually a game called Googlehacking. The challenge? To search for something that only gets one hit! A difficult game! (<http://www.googlehack.com>).

In a world where we are bombarded with this much information, it can be difficult to decide what we should pay attention to. Information Literacy is the ability to find, evaluate, and use information effectively (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2005). I chose to write this booklet for two reasons. The first is practical; part of my role as a librarian is to encourage faculty to integrate information literacy into their classes in order to improve student learning — in the classroom and throughout students’ lives. The second reason is that when a colleague and I attended

the Summer Institute for Teaching and Learning at WCU, several people remarked that they liked hearing librarians' perspectives. So, the purpose of *Tales from the Reference Desk* is to give faculty some advice from librarians about information use. I have gleaned this advice from my colleagues, the literature, and my 6 years of experience behind a reference desk. I will share some thoughts about information and how students use it, provide examples of good research projects, give practical tips from reference librarians, and share how librarians can help faculty teach information literacy to their students.

I think it is probably time to give my disclaimer. It is important to note that I am not complaining about students in this essay. My fellow librarians and I all enjoy working with students and faculty. As Ann Hallyburton says in her orientation tours, "it's why we get up in the morning!" Most of the students we work with are friendly, intelligent, and want to do well. I should also point out that I don't think students need to learn to think like librarians. They don't need to be experts at finding information; they just need to be able to recognize when they need it, have a general clue as to how to find it, and be able to use it for a specific purpose. We do not expect anyone to know the ins and outs of subject heading subdivisions or obscure references sources in a myriad of fields.

"Bad Research"

In the deluge of information there will always be *misinformation*. This is why critical thinking skills become, well, critical. There are many real-life examples of people who made mistakes because they did not evaluate the information they used. A participant in a Johns Hopkins study *died* because the researcher did not find enough information about a certain drug (Perkins, 2001). In 1999, the *Times* of London quoted a study about drugs. The study was actually a fake study from the satirical website, *The Onion*, whose tagline is "America's Finest News Source." The journalist thought the story was true (Umansky, 2000).

More recently, town officials in Aliso Viejo, California, nearly banned the use of foam cups because a paralegal said that they contained a dangerous chemical. This paralegal found a website warning the public of the dangers of "dihydrogen monoxide" (we know this better as H₂O or water). According to the *Ottawa Citizen*, the city manager "called the incident

'embarrassing' and put the blame squarely on an overanxious paralegal 'who did bad research'" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 2004, para. 3).

Other victims of bad research include the *New York Times*, who trusted Jayson Blair, a columnist who fabricated many of his reports. These incidents illustrate the challenges we face in the information age and illustrate *everyone's* need for information literacy skills.

Reference librarians do hear our share of stories about college students, though. The students who use questionable sources such as white supremacist sites, webpages written by elementary school students, or a magazine they found at the gym – all for a scholarly research paper about Thomas Jefferson. There's the student who uses one book, copyright 1977, about genetics. There are the students who take an urban legend as cold hard fact.

We get a lot of interesting questions at the Reference Desk, and we help a lot of students with their research papers. We get our share of procrastinators. (Question: When is your paper due? Answer: Noon). We get the very rare rude patron. But these are the students who make our hearts sink: the ones who say, "I have already written my paper; I just need a couple of sources for my bibliography." These students need information literacy skills!

The Internet

I would like to take this opportunity to dispel two popular myths about the Internet.

Myth #1 – "Everything I need is on the Internet"

The Internet has changed the world, and there are a lot of wonderful things available via the World Wide Web, but not everything is available online. I think Craig Silverstein, Director of Technology for *Google* put it best when he said *Google* was just getting started, "My guess is, you know, [it will be] about 300 years until computers are as good as, say, your local reference library in doing [a] search. But we've—we can make slow and steady progress and maybe one day we'll get there" (Pogue, 2004).

It is also important to note that though many journals and scholarly resources have online formats, there is a lot of scholarly information that is **not available on the web for free**. Though *Google Scholar* promises

a lot, it is currently in a Beta (test) stage and provides a messy list of citations. Databases provided by libraries are still the best resources for finding scholarly journal articles. If the information was available via the web for free, the library would not subscribe to over 120 databases.

Myth #2 – Librarians don't like Google

We do like *Google* and we like to think we “Google” with the best of them! We sometimes **sound** like we don't like *Google* because we understand that there are times to use a search engine and there are times to use other resources. A web search engine is just one of many tools — like the microwave in a kitchen. The oven is still not obsolete because there are many things that cook better in the oven. The microwave is good for reheating things quickly and pops a great bag of popcorn. The web is often convenient for looking things up quickly. Librarians use web search engines for finding statistics, entertainment information, news, company information, directories, some primary documents from universities and museums, maps, travel information, etc. But as stated above, not everything is available for free online, so researchers will want to dig deeper in books, articles, library databases, etc. When a chef makes a gourmet meal, he or she does not just use a microwave. When a researcher writes a good paper, he or she should not just use a web search engine.

Students and Information

In her article “Desperately Seeking Citations” (1996) Gloria Leckie points out that 1) university faculty are expert researchers in their fields and 2) Students are not. In order to help students be successful information seekers, we must not make assumptions about their skills. Faculty know, and often subscribe to, the best research journals in their fields, and they know the major contributors to the field (Leckie, 1996). Faculty also communicate with peers via listservs, newsletters, conferences, and professional associations. For many disciplines, a lot of research takes place out in the field or in a lab; the research only begins with library resources. As experts in the field, faculty understand the jargon and how information is organized in their disciplines. When working with students who are looking for information, we need to keep these differences in mind. After all, there

was a point in each of *our* lives when we didn't know about peer-reviewed journals!

Another aspect of information literacy is the ability to evaluate the quality and the *relevance* of information. This is another challenge for students. A study by Nash and Wilson found that students had trouble simply reading citations from a database (Nash & Wilson, 1991, p.88). The problems were “rejecting citations whose titles did not fit the topic . . . ignoring titles with difficult words . . . [and] ignoring lengthy information in favor of one- or two- page articles. . .” (Nash & Wilson, 1991, p.88).

Though this study was released in 1991, we see the same problems at the reference desk today. We watch students skim over perfectly relevant articles in a list of citations. Students need to be armed with some basic knowledge of the subject, the ability or willingness to use alternative terminology, and an understanding of why scholarly journal articles (though lengthy) may be better sources for a research paper.

In our freshman library orientation with English 101 classes at Western, we have found the need to explain to students **why** scholarly journals and books are useful and important sources of information. We encourage students to seek out resources that demonstrate expertise and original research on a topic. Instead of simply telling students to find 5 books and 5 articles from a list of peer reviewed journals, professors could explain **why** using books and articles are important, and then have students choose -and defend- the **best** resources for their topics.

Faculty should share with their students their own approaches to accessing and using scholarly information. Furthermore, faculty should help students learn how to **read** scholarly information. Chances are professors do not read a scholarly book or journal article as they would a novel, but students have more experience reading fiction. We probably shouldn't assume that students know how to skim over an introduction, use an index, etc. The University Writing Center has a page that helps students summarize scholarly articles in order to avoid plagiarism (<http://www.wcu.edu/writingcenter/isource.asp?page=aplagiarism.html#examples>). This would be an excellent exercise to do in class.

Experts

One important aspect of being information literate is knowing when to ask an expert for help. When working on an academic project, this expert might be a professor, a librarian, a tutor, or someone in the Writing Center. A professor is an expert in the discipline; a librarian can find quality information and help students find it more easily. The Writing Center can help students communicate the information and help them use it ethically by correctly citing sources.

When dealing with a personal, real life experience, the expert might be a health care professional, lawyer, accountant, plumber, extension agent, nutritionist, contractor, counselor, etc. The information literate person knows when just reading up on something is not enough and recognizes the need to consult with an expert or professional.

Good research projects

I spent some time asking my fellow reference librarians for examples of good research projects. Two themes emerged: 1) a good project often has a practical or applied aspect and 2) a good project helps students work through the research process. Examples of applied research projects include preparing for debates and presentations, preparing for the undergraduate research conference, and designing an exhibit or a web page. This semester, a faculty member in the College of Business, Jayne Zanglein, is having her students post their findings to *Wikipedia*, a very popular web encyclopedia where anyone can add content. These projects seem to give students a little more motivation to find good information. With this kind of project, students will be judged by their professor, their peers, and sometimes the general public.

In our tips section, Reference Librarian Lorna Dorr suggests having students explain **why** they choose their sources. I have seen several examples of professors doing this on campus. Some assignments are in the format of annotated bibliographies. These assignments seem to work because they force students to *think* about the information they find. We also like assignments where students have to report their progress throughout the research process. Professors grade each step and provide constructive feedback about the sources students choose. This helps to prevent last

minute statements such as “I couldn’t find anything...” or “I have the paper written; I just need a few sources for my bibliography.”

Tips from Reference Librarians

I wanted to include some practical advice from librarians in this booklet. I have asked each Reference Librarian to provide a research tip. Some of these are for students, some for faculty, and most are useful for everyone.

Krista Schmidt, Reference Librarian and Science Liaison

Tip for faculty: Contact your Library Liaison for help. Liaisons offer a variety of services including designing specialized research guides for a particular subject or class. Your liaison often knows the most common kinds of information that the students are seeking and can design an online guide that will help students find the most appropriate and useful sources.

Lorna Dorr, Reference Librarian and Database Administrator

Tip for faculty: Have your students evaluate and defend the sources they use. Ask them to identify the authority of their sources and explain why they chose those resources. Is the source an article by a professor, a case study by a team of researchers, or a paper by a sixth grader?

Becky Kornegay, Head of Reference

Tip for faculty: Clue us in by sending a copy of your assignment to the reference librarians. Students sometimes explain your assignments to us so raggedly that even you wouldn’t recognize them. Let’s say you want the class to learn about the scholarly process, so you ask them to look at some of the sources listed in the bibliography of Caro’s *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*...Next day at the Reference Desk we hear, “I need some articles about Lyndon Johnson.” Quite frankly, that is an understandable interpretation, since this bibliography business, second nature to us academics, is quite new to students. In high school they cited works in order to avoid plagiarism, not to guide other researchers.

This leads me to a second research tip — spend time on the basics. Primary vs. secondary; scholarly vs. popular, peer-reviewed; citation or abstract; and even bibliography. Why do researchers love abstracts? Who cares if the journal is peer-reviewed? Why can’t I use a book review

from Amazon.com? It's all so obvious — to you, the professor. But what 18 year old has encountered such talk?

Dana Edge, Reference Librarian and Business Liaison

Tip for everyone: Remember the “15-Minute Rule:” If you don't find good information after searching for 15 minutes, it's time to get help! The Reference Desk is open 8 a.m.—10 p.m. on school nights and slightly shorter hours on weekends. Call us at 227-7465 or toll free at 1-866-928-5424. You can also send an email to askalibrn@email.wcu.edu.

Ruby Banerjee, Library Technical Assistant, Government Documents

Tip for everyone: Take advantage of the library's delivery services! If you give yourself enough time, you can access resources from other universities as well as WCU. You can have books delivered from Appalachian State University or UNC Asheville in just a few days via ABC Express. Interlibrary Loan is another free service that allows you to access books and articles that are not available at WCU, UNCA, or ASU. This process might take a little longer, so start early!

Ann Hallyburton, Reference Librarian and Health Sciences Liaison

Tip for everyone: For consumer health information, *WebMD* is not the best. Instead, try *MedlinePlus* <http://www.medlineplus.gov>. Search *Google Unclesam* <http://www.google.com/unclesam> for health information and statistics from state and federal government agencies.

Elizabeth Vihnanek, Head of the Curriculum Materials Center and Maps, Educational Resources/Remote Services Librarian

Tip for everyone: Keep a research journal. This will save time, keep you on track, and help you think about your research. Make a list of ideas for your topic and identify the kinds of information you will need (books, scholarly articles, webpages, etc.). Identify the important concepts in your topic or research question. Write down each database you search, the search terms you use, and the number of records you find. Use this research journal to keep track of your citations, the items you print out or photocopy, and the items you order through Interlibrary Loan or ABC Express. This

way all your materials will be together and you can remember what you have done! – summarized from Elizabeth’s Research Guide for Remote Users.

Nancy Kolenbrander, Assistant Head of Reference

Tip for everyone: 95% of all government information (federal and state) is now published exclusively online. The best ways to access this information:

- *Google/Unclesam* – <http://www.google.com/Unclesam> (searches for state and federal websites) on a topic.
- Go straight to a specific agency (i.e. <http://www.census.gov/>).
- Use the *Google* Advanced Search within a specific agency. For example, go to “Domain” and type in www.cdc.gov to search within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Go to the **Government Information** section of the Hunter Library website <http://library.wcu.edu>. Government websites are organized by subjects including statistics and Jackson County information.

Alessia Zanin-Yost, Reference Librarian and Visual & Performing Arts Liaison

Tip for students: If you don’t know where to start, use a research guide! Guides for nearly every program at WCU are available via the Hunter Library website <http://library.wcu.edu> – click on Research Guides by Subject.

Hiddy Morgan, Assistant Head of Cataloging and Acquisitions

Tip for students: When starting your research, be sure to look up some basic facts. Getting the background information (places, names, dates, etc.) will help you find what you need. For instance, if you are researching Addis Ababa, you will need to know where it is located and how to spell it!

Author’s Note: There are several reliable sources for finding background information online. The library has the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on our database list. The *Columbia Encyclopedia* is available via *Bartleby* <http://www.bartleby.com>. Hunter Library also has a plethora of subject encyclopedias for finding facts about nearly everything!

How the Library Can Help

One of the main ways the library helps everyone find information is by providing user-friendly access to quality, academic resources. But there are other ways we can work with faculty to help students become more information literate.

- **Librarians are available to meet with faculty during the course planning process.** When designing an assignment that involves library research, it is a good idea to contact a librarian to see what kinds of resources are available. In theory, it might seem like a good idea to put limits such as “no websites” or “peer-reviewed articles only,” but when a student chooses a topic about bird flu or Jennifer Lopez, it will be difficult or impossible to find information according to those limits. A librarian can discuss possible topics with the professor and run a few searches to see what kind of information is out there. Sometimes the appropriate information is available in a government agency website, a professional journal, or a newspaper.
- A librarian can give your class a **workshop** on finding and evaluating resources. These class sessions are tailored to the class subject area and assignment, and the professor is an active participant.
- Librarians can also assist faculty in **evaluating** their students’ bibliographies.
- The **library’s web page** contains many instructional tools including research guides by subject, how-to guides (finding primary sources, scholarly vs. popular), and other tutorials. <http://library.wcu.edu>.
- We provide additional assistance to students and faculty at the Reference Desk, by phone, email, and by individual or team appointments.

We look forward to working with you!



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About the Author



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She has a B.A. in English from King College, Bristol, Tennessee and a Master of Science in Library Science from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Contrary to stereotypes of librarians, she does not 'shhh' people or get to read novels at work! She *does* help people find information, and she orders interesting books for the library. She enjoys working with students, faculty, and her wonderful colleagues. The most exciting part of reference work with students is watching the “light bulb” come on – the “aha” moment!