5.2: The Research Process

To succeed in college, students need to develop solid research skills that will benefit them throughout and beyond their academic career. They must focus, in and out of class, on doing the following:

- Identifying an area of focus
- Identifying the audience
- Using campus library resources to find information
- Determining if information is scholarly and credible
- Citing sources accurately, avoiding plagiarism, and creating a final written composition using the appropriate style guide

Identifying an Area of Focus

Any student writer’s initial task is to make sure he or she understands what the instructor is asking for. Precious time can be wasted if students begin their research without a clear picture of what their end product should look like and how it should read. Once an essay is assigned, and some initial contemplation and research on the student’s part, it is a great time to make an appointment with an instructor.

Conscientious college writers begin thinking about and researching essay topics immediately after being given the assignment. As we all know, brainstorming can be a solid way to record important initial ideas. At the end of a brainstorming session, writers can begin to see patterns of interest, which will become perfect places to begin research. Avenues within writer’s researching often need to remain fluid initially so student writers can determine what kind of resources are available regarding the respective the topic. This flexibility allows students to narrow or broaden topics into a thesis that might not be obvious at first.
Identifying the Audience

All writing is created for a specific audience. Writers must identify the specific reader they want to reach. If they are writing for a general audience, what is the best way to capture a wide range of readers’ interests? Should they provide background information that general readers would not necessarily know? Are they writing for an audience already well versed in this topic, and, if so, does this mean writers can use more scholarly language and include less background information?

Using Campus Library Resources and the Internet to Find Information

Research-based writing is only as credible as the sources the writer uses. Therefore, students should start with the college library catalogs and databases. There, a writer can find reference materials (e.g., encyclopedias and dictionaries), books, multimedia resources, as well as the most valuable resource of all, the college librarian. Librarians are trained with the most up-to-date strategies to access scholarly and popular resources that are available to students and usable for college projects. These days, many of these resources can be accessed online from home, which makes learning to use the tools of the library even more important and valuable.

The internet is increasingly used to find sources for academic essays. However, much of what is found on the web is not appropriate for college work. Note, too, that a simple internet search may not allow students to access full articles of ideal credible and scholarly sources whereas going through one’s college or university library main page will allow full and free access.

Some of the skills that good writers use as part of information competency include the following:

- Accessing the library search engines
- Determining the best search terms
- Narrowing or expanding search results
- Finding the best books, articles, and other sources through the library catalog

Determining if Information is Credible

Evaluating the quality of resources is an essential skill, especially in today’s world. People are inundated with media of various kinds, much of which tries to get us to buy something or to think in a certain way, so perhaps one of the most essential skills to learn is information literacy. The biggest challenge student researchers have is based in the fact that there is such a vast quantity of information available that could potentially be used for a research-based paper. However, there exists a significant range between highly credible, relevant information and that which is not. Materials found online are usually less reliable than those curated and made available through library resources purchased through the college.

Because “facts” can be accessed in just a few moments, it can be tempting to assume that they are just that—factual. More recently and more often, free online information is not fact, not verifiable through citations, and not credible. In
addition, new kinds of sources are available, such as live news feeds or any one of the array of social media options, thus necessitating a variety of ways of assessing information. As such, understanding how to research is key, especially in this new era when content can be skewed in a number of ways.

Evaluating sources is detective work. The researcher needs to make decisions about what to search for, how to search, and what type of information is credible and academically appropriate. For example, a student who is writing about the Great Pacific Garbage Vortex will find many sources available through library-based searches, as well as through online resources that could be more current. However, information that comes from the website of a company that produces petrochemicals and plastics will not be as valuable as a source that comes from scholarly research found through the UH Library System.

The following are some questions students need to ask of every source they are considering for an academic paper:

- Is this source relevant to the topic? Does it give background, explain concepts, and offer support for or an alternative viewpoint on the topic?
- Is it considered a credible source? What is the expertise of the person who wrote it? How current is it? Where was it published? What was the source of funding for this publication? Would that funding source add bias to the material? Are there references that indicate where the information has come from? Is it scholarly or written for a general audience? What does the language used in the source suggest about the purpose of the piece or the scholarliness of the writers?

Depending on the answers to these questions, writers can feel secure with sources that are relevant and credible. Papers that use high-quality sources get better results and better grades with the sharing of important information with professors and other readers.

Activities

1. Write assignments about a topic that is not only interesting to you, but that also encourages you to write about that topic with a strong sense of responsibility to the larger audience or the greater good. (Readings and assignments are most ideal when they can be individualized, relevant to your major area of academic focus. Suggestions of such essay topics can be found at the end of this chapter.)

2. Researched Persuasive Essay: In two minutes, brainstorm or list the biggest problems you wish could be solved in the world. In another two minutes, list the biggest problems you have noticed in the nation. In one minute, list the biggest problems in your state. In another minute, list the biggest problems in your community, town, area, ahupua’a. Take three minutes to list your personal values, beliefs, and priorities, and number them in order of importance. Then take five minutes to review your prioritized personal lists and select one of the “big problems,” from any of the lists, that match up with your values, beliefs, and priorities. This will help you to select topics you care deeply about and can engage with.

3. Once you have selected a topic for a persuasive argument involving research to back up your key idea, spend five minutes freewriting, brainstorming, listing your main claim (i.e., persuasive argument) about a debatable issue. After listing your main claim, list all possible key ideas that back up the main claim, as well as all the solutions and opposing perspectives (i.e., counterclaims) you can think of. Then spend 10 minutes with a partner or a team of three to four peers, discussing your ideas and gathering feedback and additional ideas, and noting down what your partner or team said. Then spend 10 minutes creating an outline or informal list organizing your thesis statement and the key points that become the topic sentences of your paragraphs.