

INFORMATION LITERACY PROJECT -- Spring 2015

Composition-Writing 107

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INTRODUCTION

There once was a time when journalism schools taught students to be as unbiased as possible and the citizenry of the United States received most of their news from three main television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC), a handful of respected magazines (Time, Newsweek) and nationally distributed newspapers (The New York Times, The Washington Post), local newspapers and word of mouth. Our information was handed to us by a handful of professionals who, for the most part, had been trained in how to collect legitimate, credible information, were overseen by supervisors intent on preserving integrity, and were well-aware of libel and slander laws.

Those days are long gone. The Internet, as well as satellite and cable services, have created a vast universe from which to draw news and facts, as well as advertising, promotions and lies masquerading as fact. It's important to give students the tools necessary to critically analyze which sources of information are legitimate and which are questionable.

When students write papers for their college classes, we want to steer them toward sources that provide factual information with accountability, and sources that are as unbiased as possible in their reporting of information.

In Writing 107, we strive to develop students' critical thinking skills, so that they can form educated opinions not only during their college years, but also as they become contributing members of society and, potentially, leaders in their communities. These educated opinions that students are asked to form in Writing 107 are not only writing-focused, but cover the gamut of contemporary issues, historical events, scientific findings and best professional practices in their intended major or career path.

There is value in teaching students to critically examine the process by which facts, news, and other pieces of information are delivered to the masses. For example, what is the exact process by which articles in scholarly journals are chosen for publication? Who makes the decision and what possible biases or backgrounds do those decision makers have? Are there certain media outlets – Fox News, *The New York Times*, CNN, ABC, Huffington Post, *The Washington Post* – that have particular political biases? Why, for example, might we see a bunch of Disney movies hyped on “Good Morning America” on the ABC network? Are producers, editors, anchorpeople or writers affiliated with certain social groups or other companies which could impact their decisions? Who owns or created these media outlets? (For example, what does it matter that a man named Rupert Murdoch created Fox News?) How do their affiliated businesses influence the news they deliver? (For example, how does the relationship between CNN and HBO translate into their presentation of various products?)

METHODS

Early each semester, each of my WRITING 107 classes meet in the library with Betsey Moylan to go over research methods and how to best take advantage of library resources. This session is done after students have been asked to think about the topic for their argument research paper. Students may pick their own argument research topic, but are encouraged to relate it to their majors. The eight- to ten-page argument research paper is due mid-semester and requires at least eight sources. This instructor allows only one Internet source on the research paper and students must use Modern Language Association style in citations.

In collaboration with librarian Betsey Moylan, for this information research literacy project, one class of Writing 107 students was asked to track down details about three sources cited in their argument research papers (which, at that point, had been graded and returned to the students). These three sources could include any combination of the following sources: one television source, one academic journal, one approved magazine, one newspaper.

We also had a control group of Writing 107 students who were given the same assignment, but were not asked to specifically work with a librarian.

Students were asked to assess the effectiveness of their original research paper sources and reflect on lessons learned. (Please see assignment sheet at the end of this report.)

The goal of this project is for students to further develop critical thinking skills and encourage them to more thoroughly assess the source of their information. These skills are especially important in contemporary times, where we are bombarded with information from a variety of sources, many of which can be contradictory and much of which comes from questionable sources.

OBJECTIVES: Evaluate Information Resources

- a. Students are able to identify how to locate the various types of information resources to determine the origin of their sources.
- b. Student is able to evaluate the appropriateness and reliability of their sources
- c. Student is able to determine reliability, accuracy, validity, authority, timeliness, and point of view or bias of information found.
- d. Student is able to judge usefulness or appropriateness of information found.
- e. Student is able to summarize or compare and contrast main ideas found in

information resources.

- f. Student is able to examine and process information to determine if adequate for information need.

ASSESSMENT

Overall, students had a good handle on the point of the assignment and responded by following through on tracking down the true sources behind the sources and determining if they were legitimate or not. Interestingly, there was a discrepancy between the papers submitted by students who had sought direct librarian help and those who had conducted the research without librarian help. For example, one student used Wikipedia as a source for this assignment. As an example for why Wikipedia should not be an acceptable source, I'll include the following quote from *The Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, A Publication of the Harvard College Writing Program, available on the Harvard University website under the header "Evaluating Sources" --

"As its own disclaimer states, information on Wikipedia is contributed by anyone who wants to post material, and the expertise of the posters is not taken into consideration."

Also, a couple of students submitted papers in which they identified Ted Turner as the owner of CNN, and examined Turner's possible political and social biases. In fact, Ted Turner was the founder of CNN and the news network is now owned by Turner Broadcasting, which is owned by Time Warner. As a point of reference, this fact was subsequently reviewed in class as a demonstration of how important is to find reliable sources in order to get our facts straight. Curiously, Wikipedia does not make it clear that Ted Turner no longer owns CNN.

Some samples of students' insight about this assignment:

- Acknowledgement that personal opinions are formed by experiences and heavily influenced by the views of family and friends, and that this also is true of the people who provide information to the public either through the internet or even through legitimate news sources.
- Personal bias also can influence how a person chooses to obtain his or her information. For example, due to personal bias, a person might be more inclined to trust Fox News as a source rather than MSNBC.

- In all areas of our life – both personal and professional -- it is important to be skeptical and selective when it comes to where we get our information that we base our opinions on.

In an analysis of how to approach fact-gathering in the future, University of Scranton student Maggie Hemphill said it best:

“When searching for reliable information in the future, I have decided it is best to approach the topic the same way I was taught to drive a car: with good judgment, proceeding with caution, and double checking before making any moves.”

THE ASSIGNMENT SHEET – The Man Behind the Curtain

This paper (2 to 5 pages) is 20 percent of the final grade. For your research paper, you were asked to include specific sources, including an academic journal, a television news source, a magazine and a newspaper. Now, we are going to investigate the reliability of those sources. You must find out who the owners are of THREE of the exact sources you cited in your research paper. You must choose to investigate only three out of four possible sources to delve into – academic journal, television news source, approved magazine, newspaper. Further, you must delve deeply to discover the owners’ or writers’ personal affiliations – for example, other companies they are invested in, political figures they are attached to, ideologies they admit to, influential friendships or family members – and their decision-making process. Who do they trust to decide what goes into their publications? Subsequently, what possible biases do those decision-makers bring to the table? Is there a committee of people from various backgrounds who decides what news is distributed or a few people with the same ideology? Is the source published within the parameters of United States libel laws or is the source distributed in a country with different free speech laws than that of the United States?

Your paper should present the information you discovered about your sources, then analyze how reliable the sources are. **Compare your findings to other possible sources you could have used off of the Internet** – websites, for example, that present statistics with no methodology and no author; websites for organizations or government entities, such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control or the White House; YouTube; Wikipedia, Twitter, Facebook; websites that present information but do not reveal any, or little, information about who runs the website. **Why is it important to know where your information comes from??? Why should you care?**

Finally, your paper should discuss your personal revelations in doing this exercise. Here at the University of Scranton, we seek to guide our students to become critical thinkers – We provide a liberal arts education, which means we seek to develop students’ intellectual abilities in addition to giving them the specifics they need to succeed in their chosen careers. Why is this valuable? Has this exercise inspired you to become a more critical thinker? Why or why not? What have you learned and how will you apply it going forward in college, your personal life and your chosen professional life?

This paper should have a minimum of six sources, chosen solely by you with no guidelines or criteria regarding them. Choose wisely.

All students in the 1 p.m., section 12 Writing 107 class are REQUIRED to seek help through Betsey Moylan, the librarian who conducted our research information session on the third floor of the library. Please make sure you speak to her directly for help with your assignment.

A rough draft is due for a mandatory peer review session on Friday, April 17. Anyone absent for class, or who attends class without at least three full type-written pages for peer review, will automatically have their final paper grade dropped down to a starting point of 70 points out of 100. The final version of the paper is due by start of class Monday, April 20.

The student is expected to:

- 1) Demonstrate the ability to conduct research and utilize the University of Scranton library services.
- 2) Critically analyze information.
- 3) Detail how this lesson has applications to the student’s approach to future academic, personal and professional pursuits.
- 4) Show a mastery of grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation and capitalization.
- 5) Continue toward improved writing and critical thinking skills through the paper’s depth of content, expert organization, and inclusion of personal narrative.

CRITERIA:

Research – (35 points) – The student demonstrated that she/he is able to conduct thorough research, delving deep to find the source behind the source. The student also demonstrated the ability to make smart choices in terms of what sorts of sources are reliable and acceptable. Further, the student demonstrated the ability to determine, at this stage, which sources were reliable enough to include on the citation page. This point structure also includes proper citation, both in-text and on the citation page.

Analyzation – (35 points) – The student demonstrated she/he can thoroughly analyze information and reach intelligent conclusions. Analyzation does not involve the regurgitation of information, nor does it involve repetitive opinion. An example of effective analysis includes the following format: [Discovered information] demonstrates that [lesson learned].

Polished Work – (30 points) – At this point in the process, the student should understand what the instructor expects as far as format (including how the paper should be slugged and the type of information that should be inserted as the header and footer). Also, the student should have mastered any grammatical, clarity, spelling, syntax, capitalization or punctuation problems that have been pointed out in prior papers.