Chapter 5. Using Sources

Best Practices in the Modern Library

In the modern library, whose shelves could be wooden, metal, or electronic, we need to school ourselves in the best practices to ensure that we efficiently access the best material from these shelves. We do this by overcoming the attitude that the library is a foreign country, by rapidly understanding distinctions among resources, and by using search engines effectively.

Getting to Know Your Library

My colleagues and I lament a growing problem with the modern university library, which now houses both books and computer terminals: Students use the library computer to track down a perfect resource, find all the bibliographic information they need about it online, then have no idea how to find it on a particular shelf, and give up without actually ever tracking it down. The problem here is not in the electronic cataloguing system, which must be comprehensive to be useful, but in the individual user’s initiative. Put simply, to become a good researcher, there is no substitute for being physically present in the library and learning its layout.

To work in the modern library, follow these basic practices:

- **Take a tour.** Whether self-guided, human-led, or virtual, a tour curbs the fundamental confusion about where you are within a library, which can make all the difference when you are chasing down a particular source in a hurry. A simple tour will also expose you to the different forms and locations of library resources, such as help desks, shelves for current periodicals, reference shelves, stacks for less recent resources, and microfilm.

- **Plan ahead.** Especially when working on a sizeable project, it is unrealistic to expect that all the resources you need will be immediately available. You must give yourself time to physically track down resources, recall material that is checked out, request archived material, or deal with the inevitable limitations of resources that you find.

- **Recognize how libraries work together.** Especially at a large university, you encounter multiple, specialized libraries within one system, and you have access to interlibrary loan (allowing you to borrow books from other libraries). No library is or even tries to be a “one-stop shop.”

- **View the library webpages as a time-saving device.** Beyond their obvious aid as a research tool, library webpages are typically set up to save you time. You can usually do such things as reserve books online, renew books online, and even suggest books for purchase or e-mail specific questions to a librarian.
• **When you find a hard copy of a resource, browse the nearby shelves.** Frequently, while standing among the library shelves, I have discovered some of the best resources simply by looking through the related books near the one I was originally seeking. Such serendipitous, productive discovery is a lot more likely to happen at the library shelves than online.

• **Do not fear the human.** When in doubt, ask a real person who is paid to help you.

### Discerning Distinctions Among Resources

When choosing the best resources for a particular task, you improve and narrow your search by assessing source quality and establishing a good fit between the level of source information required and the circumstances for which you are writing. A good starting point is determining whether a resource is scholarly or popular, whether its material is more anecdotal or research-based, and whether the author’s tone is subjective or factual. When discerning which sources best fit the task at hand, keep in mind these guidelines:

• You can rapidly determine the quality and usefulness of a source without fully reading it. Consider such issues as its level of language use, its context (whether published as a single work or as part of a collection), and the sources that it cites. Popular material is often short, not technically oriented, and topical. Scholarly work tends to be longer and more structured, more technical, and concerned with adding to a body of academic work rather than just standing alone.

• The best academic resources are usually journals that are “peer-reviewed” or “refereed” (the two terms are used almost interchangeably). This means that the journal editor has had other authorities critique and approve articles that the journal publishes. Practices vary about how this review takes place, but such review affords a level of quality that other resources might not possess. If the journal is online, you can try to determine if it is peer-reviewed by reading its root pages, but the surest way is to find a print version of the journal and look at its “Information for Authors” page, typically appearing in the back or front of the journal.

• When seeking print journal articles, narrow your search by using abstracts and indexes available on your library shelves. This helps you find resources across disciplines, and abstracts and indexes provide a form of quality control by listing established journals.

• If a source is online, see if it is also available in print, and favor the print version.

### Understanding Search Engines

Happily, the web is a good teacher of itself, so rather than provide lengthy material here on search engines, I offer just a few tips and some URLs for further
information. A few oft overlooked fundamentals of search engines are worth special highlighting here:

- For a comprehensive search, do not rely on a single search engine, and understand that different search engines work differently. Some, for instance, first yield sites that are attempting to sell books, while others first yield sites of academic journals online.
- Learn to do advanced searches by clicking on a link such as “Search Tips” near the search box within a particular engine. Such tips tend to be transferable among search engines.
- Most search engines employ “Boolean logic” (for an excellent primer on Boolean logic, see [http://www.internettutorials.net/boolean.html](http://www.internettutorials.net/boolean.html)), which means that you can use operators (such as “or,” “not,” “and,” and the “+” and “-” sign) to narrow your search. Further, you can usually use quotation marks around a key phrase to indicate that you wish to view pages that include those words in that order.

**Self-Study**

Here are two excellent online tutorials on using search engines from Purdue University and Grossmont College:

"Searching the World Wide Web" article from Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL)

"Using Search Engines" article from Grossmont Community College