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Books and Websites, E-Journals or Print: If the Source Fits, Use It.

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ABSTRACT
Despite the ever-growing range of media types, formats, and information-access options, students are often instructed to only use specific sources in their research. They are sometimes even given strict guidelines, prescribing how many of each they need to, or may, cite. It is important not to lead students to believe there is a formula for the ideal works cited for all research topics. In contrast, students should learn to think critically about the content and appropriateness of each potential source rather than choosing it only because it is a book, a journal article, a Website, etc. This article argues that requiring students to use, or not use, a source based solely on its format or media type encourages students to choose sources for wrong reasons, pushing critical thinking and source-content evaluation to the periphery of their research processes.

"Can you help me find some sources for a paper? You can? Great! Oh, and I need to have at least three books, two scholarly articles, and no more than one Website." Depending on the topic, hearing these words as an academic research and instruction librarian can often mean one of two things: "This is going to be a breeze," or "This could be impossible." I understand the reasoning behind the "number of sources" requirement that is often established by professors (of course, one or two just won't cut it); however, I am firmly convinced that a predetermined quota for the number of sources-*by-format* or *media type* is counterproductive and just plain detrimental to the teaching of good research skills. Finding sources becomes a checklist not a challenge, or at least not the type of challenge we want our students to face and conquer in their quest to becoming critically thinking information seekers. Sure, requiring "three books" will give students a basic primer on searching the library catalog and navigating the stacks, and "two articles" will get them using a database, both necessary skills; but just because students have jumped through all the right hoops does not mean they have done the best or most appropriate research for their topic.

Of course, I do believe that there is a time and place for introducing students to these and other essential research skills and library resources, such as in a preliminary stage of the research. However, my experience tells me that applying quotas to how many sources from each format or media type that students must include on their *final* works cited page steers their attention away from where it should be fastened—source *content*. In many cases, students are left with no choice but to incorporate a sentence or two from each required source type (sometimes out of context) and somehow finagle them into the flow

of their paper. True, there are times when a sentence or two really is all that is needed from a source, but using that sentence or two for the sole purpose of being able to cite that desperately needed "third book" becomes contrived, unnecessarily frustrating, and, quite honestly, pointless. This conveys a message to students that they should be able to research sufficiently any and all topics using this same or a similar magic equation of sources. What it does *not* do is ask students to seek out and identify the *best* possible sources available to them for their topic. Could there possibly be more than one good Website or Web-based document containing sufficient and reliable content on a given topic, and no books? Personally, I feel it is quite embarrassing and unbecoming on behalf of both the library and my profession whenever I find myself with a student, struggling to identify a remotely suitable print source, when the Website we just steered clear of (to satisfy source requirements of course) was spot-on at directly addressing the topic. It's not that I am embarassed of my library's collections, but rather the fact that I, a professed research expert, am facilitating the selection of what we both know is an inferior source. Some of the most popular topics students choose to research have not even been "topics" long enough to have been properly addressed in book form. Try finding a book about the 2011 News Corporation phone hacking scandal. You won't in my library. This past summer, Norwegians were terrorized by the attacks of a deranged right-wing extremist; does your library have any books on that? Not yet. Does this mean that students looking to research these events need to change their paper topic? I would certainly hope not, but prescribing to them the same works cited requirements as all others in the class would make researching them virtually impossible.

Often, I have found that professors are in fact quite flexible, and these source restrictions are not actually as rigid as they may appear. Students frequently misconstrue them to be hard and fast rules and therefore try to abide by them at all costs. A colleague from another institution shared with me what he has often encountered at the reference desk, confirming the prevalence of this scenario. He wrote, "We will often get a list of minimum source types, though students willfully misinterpret them to be exact prescriptions." He went on to say that he, too, upon checking with professors, often finds that these lists are intended to be used only as guidelines. I sometimes get the feeling that students truly think that the closer they are to matching the suggested source ratio, the better they have done their research, and, subsequently, the better the grade they will get.

Students will often stare back at me with the very familiar "I don't think I can use that" look in their eyes, even if what I'm showing them is a full-length chapter of a classic text in Google Books. Is this medium negating what's in the content? To me it's not, but then again, I'm not the one grading the paper. It may be that this source would in fact be professor-approved, but if "one Website" is what is written on their assignment sheet, students may automatically conclude that their professor will consider it substandard and excessive use of the Internet. It is the imposed limits on and implied downgrading of Internet sources with which another colleague expressed displeasure. "This frustrates me the most because we lose a great opportunity to show students how to search the Web for good content and how to do advanced Web searching. Also, I get resistance from using newer forms of media ... blogs, Webcasts, etc." In such cases, I've found that a simple

explanation and added emphasis on the fact that "these are only guidelines" can help alleviate some of this pressure to conform.

The Google Books example brings up another point: does it really matter if a source is retrieved physically or virtually? As we know, modern academic libraries often provide students with more than one option for accessing a given source. Many books, journal articles, encyclopedia entries, newspaper articles, etc., can be found both electronically and in print (or if you're extra lucky, on microfiche). Despite this variety, it is not uncommon to hear students say that they have been instructed to locate and use *print* sources only. This produces another situation where, as a librarian trying to turn students on to research, I find myself struggling to explain why this task is relevant.

Okay, so students these days have it easy, I get it. They can just click a few buttons and have an article saved or sent to their e-mail. A few more clicks and it's cited in APA format. Oh, sorry—*click*—MLA. Instead of carrying backpacks loaded down with books, they have laptops, even cell phones, from which most or all of their sources can be accessed. I suppose that to some, accessing sources electronically is simply not "researchy" enough. Is it really necessary for students to undergo the "experience" of hauling a bound periodical over to the copier to print off an article when the same ends could be met, completely paperless, during an interaction at the reference desk or in their dorm room at 2 a.m.? Personally, I'm very thankful that my father did not make me walk uphill to and from school everyday in three feet of snow just for the experience.

Most students I work with would attest that tracking down good, relevant sources on their topic, even online, is not as effortless as clicking a few buttons.

When the emphasis is on *content,* students still have the very real challenge of searching for and identifying *good* sources. In today's information environment, good (and not so good) information sources are ubiquitous and definitely not confined to what is available within the walls of any given library. This truth is addressed several times in the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, with the emphasis on students' ability to evaluate, understand, and access content. I do not contest that students should learn about the various source types available, what they are, and when and how they can best be used, but when sources are dealing with the same content, access and media format options are, in my opinion, beside the point. On the whole, students today simply have many different options when doing research, and I would argue that not only do we need to embrace these options, we must continue to enthusiastically promote them.

Perhaps it could be argued that the particulars of source requirements are really no big deal when only applied to introductory writing courses, especially since much of this fastidiousness begins to disappear as coursework gets more advanced. Still, I find it dispiriting to see students so early in their academic careers being inadvertently conditioned to see the research process as hoops to jump through in pursuit of that perfectly uniform works cited page. I recently exchanged some thoughts via e-mail with a professor whose first-year expository writing students I have worked with many times as they've launched into their major research-based essay for the semester. His take on this topic has always been very consistent with my own; "I understand the motive for requiring types

of sources, for the experience, but I personally think it makes the process less authentic in terms of what writers do. It puts English-teacher procedure ahead of true inquiry and communication of a topic, which, btw [sic], I also believe should be of the writer's choice." His liberal approach to source usage allows each student the freedom to explore and decide for themselves what sources they need and how many of each. This does not in any way mean that his students can get away with using any old sources. Quality, appropriate sources are still very much expected. Like any good research and writing assignment, this professor's includes numerous draft and revision stages allowing for multiple opportunities to recognize and challenge inappropriate or marginal sources in the process. Needless to say, I have had some of my best library instruction experiences with his classes. He usually schedules two or three library sessions, and, by the end, it is not uncommon for me to have helped every student to some extent, addressing their source questions individually rather than *en masse* in a "one size fits all" research demo.

I trust that most of us can agree that guidelines make sense; however, restrictions or quotas, no matter how well intended, typically result in research conducted to fit a mold. Ultimately, the charge to students should simply be for them to "find the best and most appropriate sources for their topic." In other words, use sources that "fit." By this I mean, are they accurate, reliable, appropriately current, and relevant, and do they adequately address a topic? These questions aren't just for Websites either. Each source of information needs to be treated individually, regardless of format or media type. Often, grading rubrics include a spot for this, implying that "best and most appropriate" can

mean different things for different topics, thus acknowledging that there may be any number of possibilities. Can a college-level paper be considered well researched without the use of a single book, print or electronic? Absolutely! Just scroll up to the topic examples I mention earlier in this article (or flip back a few pages if you are reading this in print—I assure you, the content is identical). Unless writing a thesis or mini-dissertation, both topics could be researched quite thoroughly using only journals, online news, magazines, polls, political commentary, etc. It all comes back to critical thinking and information literacy. If students are stressing out, thinking that they might disappoint their professor by using too many Websites or too few books, critical thinking has officially taken the back seat in their research process.

Writing this piece for an audience of academic librarians, I admit, is somewhat akin to preaching to the choir. In doing so, my goal is to foster dialogue with professors who may be unintentionally placing the emphasis too heavily on source format or media type and how many of each. We librarians need to explain (and prove) to professors that a book is not a good source just because it's a book, nor is a document inherently less appropriate because it was found online. Perhaps, as I discussed earlier, an online source *is* a book. Certainly they will acknowledge the truth in this, but perhaps they have not thought about it from the student (or librarian) perspective.

We should also encourage professors to look for and identify first-draft bibliographies that appear more guideline-pleasing than truly disquisitive and topic-probing and then recommend that they send their students to meet with a librarian. As we all know, a Website may, in fact, end up being a student's most

valuable source, and maybe there *is* only one book in the library that properly addresses their topic. The landscape of information has changed dramatically. Many assignments and their corresponding source requirements have not. Librarians are often the ones right there in the trenches alongside students as they research, fully poised to recognize source requirements that are haplessly incompatible with paper topics or assignments.

I don't mean to come off as some sort of fanatical, trend-chasing, technophile. I am a Gen X librarian trying to best do right by the Gen Y population of students and their research needs. As librarians, we all possess the desire to connect students with quality information. In doing so, we must become advocates on our campuses, promoting what I believe should be the bottom line: content *quality* trumps source *format* or *media type* every time. If the source fits …