

George Koors

# My life as a writing professor and research librarian

The ideas that bridge the gap

**W**hen I got into libraries, I looked forward to more one-on-one time with students. I had been a teacher at the college level for some time, and when I got a job as reference coordinator at American University, I saw an opportunity to have both large-group and one-on-one time with students.

I staff a public-facing research desk, am embedded in first-year writing courses as their librarian, and teach first-year writing as a professor in the literature department. It is a wonderful balance, but it has taken time to learn how these identities interact. Over time, they have merged. This essay looks at that, and at some of the language I have used to understand that bridge between these roles. I hope to lightly tie this language to aspects of the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.<sup>1</sup>

As a writing professor, at the beginning of the topic finding process, I ask my students for explicit language and deliberate logic. First, I want them to be as clear as possible so that we can generate a list of terms to be used in research. I have tried a lot of exercises around this kind of work, and one that works particularly well is a pitch discussion.

As a group, we briefly summarize what we would like to work on. This gives students time to work through their topic aloud, and it is a mock-research interview

where other students can ask questions. This builds community. If two students are working on similar projects, I then encourage them to swap resources: they are conducting similar searches and one could potentially locate items the other has yet to find.

Second, we work to be deliberate so that it is clear for our readers *why* we are writing this. It is not always evident what the purpose of a scholarly article is to first-year students, and as a new academic writer, your audience is broad: your professor, fellow classmates, friends, family back home. This looks like a popular audience. Yet, having such an audience does not mean that the logic or reasoning behind *why a piece is written* is self-evident. Students struggle with being this deliberate. I hear complaints about not wanting to sound too obvious, as the logic is already self-evident to the writer.

I want to know the “I am doing X because of Y” material because that informs me about the underlying importance of the topic. It shows me what scholarly discussions this could fit into. This all fits nicely into Scholarship as Conversation in the ACRL Framework. By deliberately telling the

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librarian audience member of what, why, and how, the librarian can then work to find where people are having these discussions.

Such work has been particularly helpful with graduate students at our research desk. It is not uncommon to find a researcher who is a little ahead of themselves, someone who has made the claim already, but does not have the underlying research. Instead of telling such a patron to start over, asking clarifying questions to get at the explicit basis of those ideas can lead to where relevant resources are.

Let's say a patron walks up to the desk and says, "I am writing that X, but I need to support X and don't have anything." Generally, this is a rough spot to be in, but getting into the basics with the patron, "Why X?" or "Where does X come from?" can inform the librarian of what kind of discourse X will be in, and indeed what sorts of resources X needs to stand on its own.

As the writing process continues, I often discuss the "rhetorical moves" that the students use in their work. When talking rhetoric with my students, I use the term *scaffolding* frequently. Let's say Student A wants to make an appeal to pathos, but they are not sure that it fits. They might choose to make some claims based upon scholarly evidence first to establish their authority with the reader and then use their remaining space for the emotional appeal. This all fits well with the Authority Is Constructed and Contextual frame.

Research librarians can think along similar lines. When teaching a class or conducting a research interview, refer to scaffolding so that our students understand that there is a reason behind the inclusion of some resources: it is not just that we are finding any three scholarly sources that reference the topic, but three that fit together.

I find that working with patrons on this aspect of the logic of their piece works well when we are clarifying their topic. When staffing a public-facing desk, one meets a range of researchers. The language around scaffolding (X builds on Y, Z de-

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pends on A, A, comes from B, and so on) allows patrons to explain their topic in an orderly manner.

Finally, I think of resource-linking. I often use this strategy at the research desk to find more sources for a patron: looking at a relevant work's bibliography. But in the writing classroom, this is also valuable. It allows students to see what terms and jargon writers are using by referring to the titles. It also points out who is participating in the conversation. This sort of "interconnecting of things" comes after students have worked through their topics. I save this sort of work for the revision process of a major paper. That allows students time to also revise the research they are including in the piece. I see students who have successfully made a claim, but they find something new that adds texture: the icing on the cake. This is a lightbulb moment for them, realizing that the nuance of research can really make a difference in a paper.

My life as a writing professor and research librarian is fun. I learn so much. Navigating both roles is complex, and ever-changing, but doing so has illuminated for me just how deeply interconnected our goals are.

## Note

1. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" (ACRL 2015), [www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework](http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework). *ZZ*