Challenging Classical Legacy: How I researched for my Senior Capstone

Last semester was the culmination of my English major in its capstone course, and without the incredible resources and staff of Marquette’s library, I could not have produced the quality of assignment that I did. I am as proud of what I achieved as I am thankful for the help and opportunities Marquette’s library afforded me. Writing my capstone was a long, trying process over the course of last semester, but I really do believe that my research experience—both my struggles and successes—has made me a more confident and capable scholar.

My research journey began with a one-on-one consultation with Heather James and only the faintest notion of a topic. My capstone course dealt with Modernism in the 1920’s, and we were allowed to select any dimension of 1920’s Modernism to write about; I chose to combine my two majors (the second being Classics Studies). So I told Heather that I would like to write about the intersection of Classicism and Modernism. We searched several databases, including Literature Online and the MLA International Bibliography, all the while adding or subtracting or revising our search terms in order to take stock of what literature existed in this area. As it turned out, there was not much; however, we did eventually find one article that had a particularly useful bibliography. Although I didn’t end up using that article specifically in my final paper, I did scour its references in order to turn that one article into several others, and so on and so forth. I would find a reference that I thought might be useful and then see if Marquette had a subscription to the journal in which it was published. If we did, I would assess the article’s value to me in its online form, and then print the PDF out if I thought it would be useful either as another step in my bibliography search strategy or as a source I could actually use in my argument. I went through many journals and databases with this process.

It was in this way that I eventually arrived at a more fully-developed topic: I was going to write about Jane Harrison, a renowned Classicist and friend of several eminent modernist writers from the 1920’s. Having found this connection in several articles, I knew it was time to go to the stacks, so I conducted several keyword searches in the catalog and checked out everything I could find on Jane Harrison. I read biographies to understand the context of her work. I read key passages that the articles I had seen beforehand had quoted or referenced. But most importantly, I came across a book entitled *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf.* I was so thrilled to read this book (because it so directly engaged my topic!), and it did not disappoint. Yet, after having read it, I realized that its
argument was quite similar to the one I was considering crafting; it was at this point that I realized that my scope was still too large.

Thankfully for me, I didn’t panic. (Maybe I panicked a little.) Nevertheless, I went to go get a book—not some secondary scholarship nor even a primary source book, but a literary novel. I finally just picked an author and a modernist text so that I could apply it all that I’d learned from my research on Classicism and Modernism in general, as well as my newfound expertise on Jane Harrison. As Jane Harrison’s close personal friend, Virginia Woolf was the obvious choice, and the novel I chose was her *To the Lighthouse*. Finally, I had come to a reasonable scope for my paper: one author, one text, and several frames through which I could analyze that book and author. Even so, I knew that I needed to restart my research process; I needed more articles on this specific text. I therefore went back to those databases Heather had shown me how to navigate those weeks earlier. I also used the bibliographies of the books I now had, such as *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text*, as springboards in the same way that I had used the bibliography from the original article Heather and I found. I moved from bibliography to bibliography, annotating what might be useful, or what connected to something else, and eventually I realized that the conversation concerning Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* was one that analyzed its mythic allusions.

At last I had an established academic argument into which I could insert my voice, which allowed me to begin drafting my paper in earnest. I now had resources which discussed the particular book about which I was writing, as well as all of my preliminary research on the Classicism of 1920’s Modernism and Jane Harrison. Instead of scrapping that early research, I chose to use it as a frame for my paper. As promised, this capstone really did force me to bring everything together, and this process really taught me a lot about the labor behind producing knowledge. From finding just one article in the field I was interested in, I began a journey through T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce to get to Jane Harrison—and from Jane Harrison to Virginia Woolf. I read more scholarship than I ever had for a course before, and I am truly thankful for experience of trudging through academic articles because I now think that I can assess their applicability to my projects just by scanning the first few pages. Furthermore, I think that this assignment helped me become a better information assistant at Raynor’s Information Desk because I have actually loaned books through ILL, gone up to the Archives to make scans, and used the Writing Center as a resource (though this was not the first assignment I had brought there). I used as many library resources as I could over the course of this assignment, and after all of that searching, reading, synthesizing, revising, and writing, it’s almost hard to believe that my formal bibliography only has sixteen entries because those were the only ones that I specifically quoted, paraphrased or referenced in the crafting of my argument. For me, that is the most humbling thing I learned from this process: you need to read so much scholarship before you even know what you need to read to do your own project.