Information Literacy: Writing Based Research

by Robert Phillips

The theme "our readers as writers" has frequently re-occurred in this column, including the last column on "research based writing." This column twists the theme to consider "writing based research." Whereas reflections of "research based writing" consider what writers do with the results of their reading and study of information resources, reflections on "writing based research" consider how writers' research activities contribute to the larger writing process. More importantly for theological librarians, can librarians and writers learn from each other about the practice of research?[1]

Both librarians and writers understand the importance of preparing to write: deciding on a topic, considering questions related to the topic, and focusing on a question to be discussed. The type and extent of research done at this stage depends on what else the writer needs to know about a topic. Established scholars draw on what they have previously studied or heard as well as informal conversations with colleagues and students. Experienced students draw on what they have read in their textbooks, heard in lectures, seen on the Internet, or discussed informally with instructors and other students. Inexperienced students have still to learn the importance of research at this stage. Reference librarians relish the opportunity to collaborate with writers at the beginning of their research projects. The writer is motivated to find general information; the librarian is prepared to engage in a reference interview, to suggest readily available sources of introductory information, and to demonstrate aids for finding more information. Librarians understand well this type of research. Consequently, writers learn to appreciate the librarian's role at this stage of their writing.

In addition to knowing who and when to ask for help, writers have developed some individualized research skills. First, they have established a personal knowledge base or otherwise find their place within the information universe. Institutional libraries are no longer the only option. Writers purchase trusted sources for their ready use; examples include Bible study software, inexpensive reference books, personal subscriptions to a few academic journals and online databases, collected Internet bookmarks, contact information for respected colleagues, etc. Institutional libraries do have a place in this personal knowledge base, of course. Not only must writers develop confidence in the library as a resource, they must learn to make use of the resources and services libraries offer. Using multiple libraries means becoming familiar with each library's idiosyncrasies—whether it is finding a parking place or remembering the building's layout. Librarians have themselves found a place in the information universe, and, through advanced training, quickly become self-reliant. More often than not, they use these skills to help others rather than themselves.

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[1] There are a number of assumptions not discussed in this column. First, the column addresses only academic nonfiction found in peer-reviewed journals, theses, and other research papers. Creative writing such as novels, short stories, poetry, and travelogues requires research, but the goal of research-based writing is to move from opinion based on impressions to informed opinion based on evidence. Second, not all evidence is found in print-based resources —observing behaviors and recalling experiences are also valid forms of research successfully employed, for example, in pastoral studies. Third, most librarians are not themselves writers; hence they have a different perspective on research and writing than do those actively engaged in research based writing for publication or for scholarly assessment. Fourth, library research is itself is only one type of research writers use; for a discussion of other types, see Mary W. George, *The Elements of Library Research: What Every Student Needs to Know* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6-10.

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Writers and librarians also share a second set of skills, though again for a different purpose. Writers develop personalized information storage and retrieval systems, usually at their own expense. While this does include organizing a personal library, setting up a personal filing system, and establishing conventions for naming and storing computer files, writers face the challenge of developing a system for note keeping. Writers work from their notes, which are their record of the sources used, the ideas found, and the structure to be used. How adept a writer becomes at choosing and recording information found in sources must be matched by how adroit they become at retrieving information they have recorded. Happily, the principles for storing, retrieving, and organizing notes were developed using note cards without present day technology. However, the technology tries to capture the established principles. Computers offer several advantages. Large blocks of information can be stored and retrieved quickly. Programs now integrate storage and retrieval with writing or facilitate capturing text and images from the Internet.[2] However, organizing notes for effective retrieval depends on pattern recognition of words and phrases. Writers achieve this by using and adding self-selected tags and groups throughout the writing project for their later personal use. Librarians differ by using controlled vocabulary. They assign retrieval terms for the use of others based on their examination of the item. These two groups' efforts have begun to come together in library-based storage and retrieval systems that allow users to add their own tags to bibliographic information developed by librarians. Here, librarians may be able to learn from writers' practices.

In conclusion, librarians and writers can learn from each other. They already share common skills, though used for different purposes. Librarians already help writers use library resources. Indeed, through emphases on information literacy throughout the educational system, librarians have honed generations of writers' research skills. Now that other information sources are becoming widely available and used outside library buildings, librarians must understand readers as writers if they are to continue this important tradition. What better way for librarians to understand writers than to become numbered among them, to share their challenges and discover their solutions.

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[2] *Zotero* is an example of the former; *Evernote* is an example of the latter.