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Reflective Essay

The paper that I am now submitting to you for consideration was my first research paper written in college and, as such, was a daunting yet interesting experience. Throughout my high school English classes, we had focused on “close reading” essays where we worked closely with the text, analyzing it to bits. However, we never incorporated another person’s opinion into our essays- only our own ideas and conclusions. In this research paper, I had to not only draw my own conclusions, argue for my own analysis, but also discuss how my analysis of was part of a more general conversation. Thus, the hardest part was writing the essay as part of a conversation and including references to other critical essays in the same field.

I wrote my essay on Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* and used my paper in order to discuss the questions of race and identity, which are a major theme throughout the novel. This novel was the favorite thing that we read in my English 301 class because it was very original to me. When I first picked up the book, I thought that it would have to do with death because I interpreted the title “*Passing*” as “passing away”. Hence, I was incredibly surprised when the book was not really about death but about passing for one race, instead of another. I interpreted the question of race to be one of a mixed or multiple identity and explored it as such. It was fascinating to read about two different women- Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry- struggling with the same issue, attempting to resolve it in different ways, and then coping with their decisions. Consequently, for the course’s final essay, a research paper, I decided to write about *Passing* and explore the question of race and identity in the novel.

Professor Walter, the instructor of my English 301 course, was extremely helpful during the research period of our paper writing. During one or two of our class periods we went to the McKeldin Library and one of the librarians held a presentation for us about the various help that the Library offered for research. We were shown how to use the online catalog, as well as, how to use other online sources. These sessions were incredibly helpful because they provided me with a basic knowledge of how to conduct research and what to look for- I now had an idea of what to do.

I decided to conduct my research online and found several articles through some portals that were provided to us, in addition to using the online library catalogue. A difficult part of the research was deciding which articles to read and which to ignore. One thing that really helped me decide was having my topic decided upon. I, then, perused the titles of the various articles that were brought up by my search and based on the titles, whether to read them or not. The University of Maryland libraries have such an enormous range of literature to read, it was amazing and stupefying at first, as I went through the various articles that I could use. Another extremely helpful tool that the libraries provided could be found on the Library website- it is the “Cite” tab that is included next to each work of literature in the catalog. Coming from high school, where MLA format was the only way to cite sources, it was flabbergasting to learn that there were also APA and Chicago style citing formats. I had no idea what to use and how to cite my sources. Thankfully, this “Cite” tab made my task much easier and less confusing.

As I already mentioned, I selected my sources based on their titles which (after reading my chosen articles) I realized provided me with a reliable idea of what the articles were about. After reading the articles, the difficult part was figuring out how to incorporate them into my essay. What I found to be the easiest strategy for me was to literally imagine that I was in a classroom discussion of “Passing”. I made a summary of the key points that each article made, as well as, a list of the key quotes. Then, while making my argument in my paper, I inserted the opinions of the various articles that I read and then, either agreed, disagreed or built on their arguments in relationship to mine. Thus, I believe that I managed to get a small conversation going.

Overall, this experience for writing my first research paper I found to be highly beneficial and instructive in two ways: firstly, I learned where and how to find sources and secondly, I learned how to write my argument as part of a bigger conversation in the scholarly sphere. The McKeldin library and my Professor were the biggest help that I received during this project. Especially, Professor Walter’s commentary on my Annotated Bibliography that I submitted a few weeks prior to the actual paper, helped me to direct my argument and write a constructive paper.