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In my poetry class last semester, we had to compose a research paper as one of our last assignments. My teacher, Jacques Plante, gave us several categories to choose from. As I scrolled through the long list I found one about poetry in its oral form, but what really stood out to me about this topic was that she mentioned hip-hop as something we could possibly write about. As a hip-hop artist myself, I instantly knew that I wanted to write about it, especially analyze it and write a scholarly essay on it. I even knew, roughly, just from the moment I saw “hip-hop” on the page what I wanted to write about. I didn’t know how I was going to do so, but I knew I wanted to write about Amiri Baraka as a poet and his connection to the new (and old) age of hip hop. Primarily, I wanted to show the link between jazz accompanied poetry and hip hop, but thought it easiest to do so by comparing Kendrick Lamar and Amiri Baraka. The purpose of the essay however was to highlight hip-hop’s poetic and cultural significance and overall value and redefine its standing in the atmosphere that we call literature.

Firstly, Jacques told us to find two or three sources and annotate them. Knowing that my topic was not typically recognized in the sphere of scholarly research, I had to search low and high for interesting and valid sources. I had to widen my understanding of what was relevant to my research and reword plenty of search questions and keywords. I think that if I were to give advice to someone researching an obscure topic I would say to fall in love with the process of copia. Utilizing the online databases such as JSTOR and Gale that the university provides, I was able to find plenty compelling and relevant articles such as one written by Mary Ellison, “Jazz in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka and Roy Fisher.” I even went to a place some people may never consider to search for sources. YouTube.

YouTube actually offers a lot of seriously educational videos that many people would not expect. I was looking for a documentary about the origins of hip-hop and came across a documentary titled “The Hip Hop Years” directed by David Upshal. It actually ended up being the source of most of the information in my essay as it provided testimonials about the birth of hip-hop from the birthers themselves. Producers and DJs like, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, and DJ Kool Herc all made appearances in the documentary. Maybe I’m foolish, but I think that the best place to learn about the origin of hip-hop is from the originators, so be it I found them in a documentary (produced in 1999 I might add) on YouTube.

Jacques did not agree as much on the matter of YouTube providing sources as I did and instructed me that while a credible and quite frankly, very informational documentary found on YouTube cannot be counted as a scholarly source, did not mean that it could not be used as a source in the paper, but that I must find some more erudite sources to complement it, which is when using the databases came in handy.

Although, as I was working on the paper, especially as I began outlining it, I learned that I had not narrowed my focus down enough. I knew the general direction in which I wanted to head, but not how to actually head there. So I sat down with Jacques after class one day and had a very long discussion about what I should do. She offered me a book, which was a collection of essays called the “The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry” and in it was an essay titled “‘Internationally Known’: The Black Arts Movement and U.S. Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop.” Needless to say, this essay was pivotal in my research. It does not necessarily hold a large presence in my writing, but the knowledge gained from it was massive.

That is another thing I would advise another student to understand: not every source is quotable, but every source is notable.

I think the real moral in my meeting with Jacques is to look for help. If you are stuck, writhing around in your pajamas, cradling your last Red Bull will not help you write the paper. Asking for help won't either. But asking for help, then employing what help you were given, will. Had I not met with her on that fateful day, I may have submitted a terrible paper. Instead, I am submitting it now to possibly win \$1,000. My only regret is not meeting sooner. Then again, I didn't realize my confusion until it was almost too late, so in the end, things worked out just as they were supposed to, I suppose.

If there was one thing I could ask of the library to help with our research needs, it would be to compose a list of recommended sources. Perhaps, as students complete research papers, they could (optionally, of course) submit to the library their topic and any sources that they found imperative to their research. I think that would one, reduce the time that students spend searching for sources, and two give students a good foundation for where to begin, or spark inspiration.