Reflective Essay: Library Award for Undergraduate Research

I began my research for *Reading Still Matters* by first contemplating issues in this world about which I truly care. I wanted to write about a topic for which I could express a definitive stance, one that has played an integral role in my life already. Because I harnessed a true affinity for reading at an early age and continued to value this practice throughout my childhood, I consider literacy as an extremely important life tool that should be learned and utilized by all Americans.

In order to find my first sources I could use for background knowledge of my topic, I first googled "literacy in America" just to see what would surface. This generated a list of popular sources that I could cite in order to gauge an informal scope of my topic. I was able to see recent documents about my topic written by qualified authors as well as novice bloggers. In some cases, these searches generated scholarly sources such as Scholastic and the National Center for Education Statistics. From these sources, I was able to derive official and professional statistics, opinions and information regarding literacy in America. Because I was able to acquire a multitude of scholarly information from these sources, I figured that academic sources in general would probably best suit my research's purpose. This led me to using the University of Maryland online library resources. Just like I had done by simply google searching, I used media such as *CQ Researcher* and *Opposing Viewpoints* in order to generate more general information about American literacy. I used these articles to find portions I could use to extend my research to various specialized parameters. For example, many articles from CQ Researcher explained that the decline in American literacy within children results from a parental decision not to prioritize reading in the household. Because of this small excerpt,

I focused a segment of my research on how reading to children before they go to sleep affects their future literacy. From generalized foundations, I found keywords and ideas that led to more concentrated sources, such as the *Australian Journal of Language* and *Literacy and the Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*. I also guided my research by asking my peers their opinions on why America is experiencing such a significant dearth of literacy. By observation and inquiry, I determined that one of the main factors that deters Americans from picking up a book and developing literacy skills is the prevalence of technology in today's world. The understanding that technology influences Americans' will to read piloted my research significantly.

My English professor, Maggie Ray, aided my research significantly. At the beginning of my research process, when I was first brainstorming controversial topics, I was thinking about researching why classical literature is still read in modern high school English classes. I wanted to argue that modern literature is much more useful material, since the language is understandable and the topics are more relatable to high school students. I personally feel that children and teens have lost interest in reading is because of the forceful nature of reading strictly classic literature in English classes. In my position paper for this semester, I wanted to argue that assigning modern literature in English classes would increase student interest as well as increase teen literacy. Because this topic is so specific and there is not a solid foundation of research to support this thesis, my instructor advised that I talked about literacy in general in America. She recommended that in order to make a stronger statement, I must have a more vague approach to my opinion, which is how I came to the decision to argue that Americans should continue to value literacy even in the digital age.

During the research process, I learned that not all research is credible. I found that although it is important to incorporate both popular and scholarly sources, it is essential to prioritize scholarly research over popular articles that can easily be accessed via the internet. I also learned that although authors of certain documents or studies may have extensive education in their fields and may even be nationally or even internationally known for their contributions to their areas of expertise, it is acceptable to disagree with them. I believe that research is a gateway toward forming an independent frame of mind, rather than toward memorizing statistics.

While reflecting back on my research experience, there is one aspect that I would definitely want to change: I did not do any research in the library itself. I used all online databases in order to facilitate my research. I find this hypocritical in a sense: my essay presents the idea that technology takes away the need to learn how to research and that Americans should focus more on reading because the ability to research efficiently is an important skill to possess. The fact that I took advantage of all of the online library resources without checking out any print books from the library to better my essay truly does not make any sense. For my next research paper, I hope to use more library resources such as print books, encyclopedias and periodicals in order to broaden the horizon of my research. Although I do want to use more printed research in the future, I also believe that the UMD Libraries should promote their online research databases more. The databases are not as easily accessible on the website as they should be, and for that reason, many people do not even know that they exist. In essence, the libraries here at the University of Maryland offer extensive research media, and I feel that my access to such resources enriches my studying and writing greatly.