

One of the hardest and sometimes dreaded tasks a student is presented with in their educational career is the research paper. From deciding which topic to focus on, or developing a thesis, to trekking through the maze of the billions of sources one can use for their paper, a lot of students face challenges throughout each step of the research process. A variety of library and research tools were available and it was never limited, as students are able to use printed and electronic popular sources for current event information. One of the resources used in first choosing our topic was Above the Fold, an environmental news aggregator which would send various environmental health news articles to our e-mails. Students had subscribed to this listserv per recommendation of our professor, and this allowed us to educate ourselves on the current events surrounding us as well as the vast amount of online resources and materials in the media that were available.

A personal goal when tackling this assignment was to find a topic that was not only interesting to myself but also applicable. After review of the news articles on Above the Fold, I finally stumbled upon a topic that was relatable and was also something that not many of us, or at least myself, considered too much of an environmental health issue: Air Conditioning. It is something that has become quite a necessity for the population and although there are many positive things attributed to this, there are also negative effects that can arise. I looked through various resources to compile them, and then sort through them to determine which resources I wanted to use in my final paper. I decided to take the position of arguing against air-conditioning, or at least controlling air conditioning in our respective environments and where we should draw the line to air conditioning use. Saying this, I wanted to include the positive health effects air-conditioning and heating appliances had, as well as various ways the population could become more responsible and safe consumers, which was a theme frequently discussed in our environmental health class.

I discovered many of my sources through the resources offered by the University of Maryland and a student's best friend: Google. Further research of our topic included the use of the campus online library databases to find scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles to compliment our research. In evaluating the resources, I determined which resources would be most applicable to my research, how recent the studies were, how reliable the actual resource was (especially if it was popular press), was the resource peer-reviewed and of great quality, were the resources cited by many other studies, and would the content from the resources best convey my message to my intended audience. As an off-campus student, I often encountered challenges in accessing resources from home. Saying this, with the vast amount of resources available, the librarian and our professor were key educators in helping us through the process of the research.

At the beginning of the semester, my instructor had provided library course modules on using the library resources, which was developed by the Physical Sciences & Public Health Librarian, Ms. Nedelina Tchangalova. The library online modules were very helpful because they were self-paced and gave students insight into the research process, various research techniques, types of literature, and citation processes that specially dealt with health information – which was a key component for this class. Ms. Tchangalova was also brought in as a guest speaker in other major courses I was taking that semester. She personally went through the search process with the students and explained how to use Boolean operators, which would further aide in how broad or how narrow students could explore research tools and I believe this definitely complemented the work that I had to do for my final project in my courses that semester and so forth. A list of resources and tools were provided for academic research, which included: contact information should we have any further questions, search strategies, and citation management tools. Lastly, throughout the whole research process and through the development of our final persuasive essay, our professor offered great advice, further suggestions and questions that would be helpful to address in our final paper to create a strong, persuasive essay as well as peer-review time. A combination of these things helped students to look at their persuasive essays from different perspectives, express and analyze the merits or gaps in knowledge of various research available, and also allowed for further improvement in their writing.

Reflecting back on my research experience, it has provided me with the confidence the further tackle future research papers. As I educated myself on the resources that the library could offer me as well as the support that students had from professors and school librarians, I definitely feel more comfortable in navigating through the library and resource system, even as an off-campus student. In addition, I believe I have found a research method and organization system that personally works for me. I think it would have been helpful to use a personal citation organization system chart in Google Drive as an excel sheet to keep better track of what sources I reviewed, what sources I would want to keep, as well as notes on my thoughts of the source and whether I would want to use it in my final paper. As the world becomes more technologically advanced, I think it would be helpful to develop more courses on the neat tools, tips, and tricks that are available at our disposal. For example, I recently learned what RSS feeds were as well as discovered a great site called feedly.com and I think that they are great tools for discovering many new sources as well as keeping up to date on topics you are interested in. As the advancement in technology surges, I am sure students will look forward to learning about how to stay “up-to-date” with the technology that continues to surge forward.