

Award for Undergraduate Research 2023 – Essay

As an environmental science and policy (culture) student taking a professional writing course for the humanities, the trick was finding a way to write something relevant to my studies that still aligned with the humanities-oriented guidelines of our final journal article assignment. I am drawn to interdisciplinary topics and approaches, however, and this challenged me to think about what I knew in different and important ways. After searching Neanderthal depictions on Google Scholar for a separate class, I noticed a trend in how they were illustrated over time – I knew there must be some historical correlation. Sure enough, I found that there was a strong racial connection in how this species was portrayed, and, going further, a feedback loop between how they were portrayed popularly and scientifically. As my curiosity about this phenomenon grew, I sought to understand this trend and connect it across historical periods, and eventually, I found a common factor, even beyond race: imperialism. This topic, I feared, would be too niche, too elusive to build out. But in reality, it was the opposite – there was a wealth of information, more than I could ever need, and I could not have accessed it or connected it without the resources made available through the University of Maryland library system.

I was not very aware of the resources offered by the library until writing this paper, but once I discovered some of those resources, it felt like a whole world of opportunity emerged as I found source beyond source – popular or niche, from recent to centuries old. As I start much of my research, I first consulted Google Scholar, trying several variations on my search terms to find sources about Neanderthal depictions through time and their connections to the Enlightenment, imperialism, race, science, anthropology, and humanism, among other themes. The resource I likely made the most use of when discovering sources this way was the Reload @UMCP browser button, which allowed me access to almost every online journal I wanted. If I

couldn't access a source through this method, I could almost certainly find it on the UMD library catalog, where I could find alternative access options whether virtually or in print. I then looked through the references section of almost every work I consulted, looking for other potential sources, which I would search through the same methods.

The catalog was also extremely useful for finding physical books. I would often find a single book through the catalog, locate it in the stacks, and spend a long time sitting (literally sitting on the floor) in the same section, flipping through all of the nearby books I could find that might be of relevance. I likely spent *hours* total doing this throughout those few months, and in this way, I found several books that I would go on to check out and reference in my research, even though they hadn't been on my radar beforehand. At this time, I also discovered interlibrary loan, which afforded me access to almost every source I could need. Several of the sources I used, including works from the Enlightenment or from the 1800s or early 1900s, could be difficult to find, especially as many of them were originally written in other languages. I spent a lot of time searching for correct versions/editions, but for the first time I became aware of the breadth of the library system's content. For this assignment, I used a wide range of resource types, including scientific publications across the centuries, fiction and fiction analyses, museum educational content, news publications, and political and literary commentaries. In addition to simply finding the sources, I spent a lot of time corroborating material, searching the authors and their publication and education history to ensure they were well-educated on their subject, and cross-referencing their assertions with the references they used to ensure the utmost quality and reliability in the content I used. From there, I could be sure that the ideas I proposed were based on a solid foundation, and that my thesis could be appropriately situated in sound and thorough literature.

I regret that when I began my research, I was not fully aware of how useful librarians and subject specialists could be, and they did not play a part in my research. However, through one-on-one meetings with my professor, Mark Forrester, I was pushed to explore resources and avenues of research that I would not have otherwise considered, such as the role of perceptions of intelligence in historical racial studies. He also helped me significantly in orienting and voicing my thoughts, pushing me to refine my ideas of how history, popular media, and science reify each other, creating a cycle of discrimination that has been difficult to break across spatiotemporal contexts.

I learned a lot from this research experience that I have since applied to other research papers and will continue to use in the future. Perhaps the most important skill was how to use reference sections to verify information as well as find other possible sources that I otherwise would not have been aware of. Additionally, this experience has taught me a lot about finding and taking advantage of all of the resources available to me, making me realize that I can get access to more materials than I originally thought not only through the university, but online and through other libraries and public resources as well. Looking back, however, if I had the opportunity, I definitely would take advantage of the library's subject specialists for research assistance and help locating resources. Especially since my paper builds on several different research areas including history and anthropology, the different subject specialists would have been helpful in clarifying my thesis and direction. Even without this assistance, however, the University of Maryland library system provided me with a wealth of resources that I was grateful to have access to, and this made my research experience not only viable, but also exciting and truly fascinating.