

Information Literacy and Comps: Common Challenges and Some Solutions

Librarians' roles in working with comps include one-on-one and group consultations, research guide authorship, participation in comps preparation seminars, and presentations to comps groups. Librarians also interact with students from early on in the comps process all the way up through final due dates. Through these experiences, we are aware of the information literacy challenges seniors face during the comps processes across the curriculum, and we are able to observe the broad range of pedagogical techniques and disciplinary contexts that play into successful comps completion. We offer these six examples of many ways that we in the library work with seniors (and rising seniors) to help them navigate the intellectual and logistical challenges of comps work.

1. Finding Data and Primary Sources

Most comps projects involve finding existing sources of data and primary sources, then accessing, gathering and organizing these for use in answering a research question or developing background information for creative projects or exams. Librarians help students navigate a wide range of challenges in this area. We may help them access other collections, learn strategies for searching for data or primary sources, gain awareness of major sources and collections, and help them track down and determine the availability of truly hard-to-find sources.

- **Primary sources.** Librarians sometimes teach students or classes to use relevant scholarship or course readings to find primary sources or to gain inspiration for the selection of primary sources. What types of primary sources had scholars used? What kinds of questions could the scholars explore effectively? What are the methodological limits of using these kinds of sources? What logistics might be involved in getting access to similar sources?
- **Data.** Librarians emphasize that identifying appropriate data is tied to both the literature review and the formation of a researchable question. Along with teaching specific strategies for searching for data (e.g., using compendia to identify producers of data), librarians also encourage the formation of habits such as always looking for and noting data sources when reading research articles in order to gain awareness of potential data sources.
- **Ethics.** Students who discover sources that are not available through Carleton's collection sometimes want to try to acquire them through personal networks. Librarians talk with students about the ethics of asking others to share licensed resources and the risks of sharing passwords.

2. Developing a Literature Review

Depending on the discipline, comps may be the first time students develop a literature review surveying an area of research, or it may be an opportunity to demonstrate and expand on skills they have practiced over the course of many classes and projects. Librarians see a wide range of experience in this area, with some students needing basic instruction in searching collections and databases while other students are eager to collaborate with librarians on use of advanced sources and strategies. Because crafting a literature review involves so much more than just canny searching, the following are a sampling of ways we help students with this undertaking.

- **Literature review as intellectual activity.** Students often conceive of literature reviews and bibliographies as simple lists of sources. Librarians emphasize that reviews of literature are selective and creative intellectual products that describe the salient features of the scholarly conversation on a given topic.

- **Mapping the connections.** Librarians help students use grids or concept maps or other organized lists to map out the theoretical and/or methodological approaches used in the literature on the students' topic.
- **Bibliographic management.** Organizing large numbers of references is a new task for most students, so librarians introduce them to bibliographic management tools (such as EndNote) and help them develop methods of using those tools that facilitate analysis and synthesis of the literature.

3. Exploring an Appropriate Range of Source Types

Comps is a time when students are using the more specialized disciplinary sources that they aren't necessarily exposed to in lower-level course work. Librarians teach comps students about these valuable resources in classes, appointments, and through online resource guides.

- **Range of available sources.** Using secondary sources and their own knowledge of available collections, librarians can help students determine whether books and articles will be sufficient or whether maps, images, data, statistics, media, interviews, or other kinds of sources might also be appropriate.
- **Advanced use of resources.** For most disciplines, there are databases or collections that are designed for upper-level research on a topic that librarians can teach students to use. Also, familiar resources may have advanced functions built into them that students have not had to use prior to comps.

4. Going beyond Sources That Are "On My Topic"

Even at the comps level, a common sticking point for students is a habit of searching for a body of literature only by using familiar, everyday terms that describe their topic itself. Librarians help students expand their understanding of the structure of scholarly conversation and give them strategies for hooking into existing networks of research literature.

- **Building a theoretical or methodological foundation.** Librarians and students often brainstorm bodies of scholarship that may exist and be applicable to the student's topic taking cues from the student's coursework, existing bibliographies and literature reviews, and from the librarian's experience. Students can then "borrow" the theoretical basis for one work and apply it to another.
- **Arguments from analogy.** In addition to building a foundation based on theoretical and methodological frameworks, students often benefit from being encouraged to explore the scholarship on analogous topics and applying it to their topic. So, for example, scholarship on one piece of literature may be applicable to a recently published work in the same genre or by the same author.

5. Selecting and Refining Research Questions

The bulk of the work of refining a research question is between students and their advisors. However, through the librarians' knowledge of the collection, search expertise, and the particular ways they work with students, librarians play the following roles as non-disciplinary specialists:

- **Librarians as experienced novices.** Students benefit from having to explain their topics, rationale, theoretical or methodological approaches, and gaps in understanding. Even though librarians are not disciplinary experts, we are experienced enough with the literature of the field Carleton assignments to be able to prod and question students and to recognize familiar hooks into the scholarship.
- **Helping students map scholarly conversations.** By showing students how to organize what they find into grids, concept maps or bibliographic management tools, librarians help students see the conversations that already exist and where the students' projects fit within those conversations. What will the student be contributing? What links to existing work can the student use to develop a

strong argument? What questions or approaches have traction within the field currently? Where faculty advisors help students map scholarly conversations through deep disciplinary knowledge, librarians help students answer these questions by teaching them to recognize patterns and evaluate contributions of authors using bibliographic analysis.

- **Helping students determine whether a topic is researchable.** There are logistical constraints on comps work that impact what students can accomplish. Librarians can help students determine whether key sources for their work exist, and if they do exist whether they are accessible given time, funding, and travel limitations.

6. Organizing the Process

Novice researchers have not yet formed personal habits of approaching the administrative challenges of a large research project. Quite reasonably, students will try to apply the skills they've honed from writing short papers and completing assignments to the comps process -- skills which often do not translate well to sustained, independent projects. Supplementing the disciplinary norms students learn from their professors, librarians use their familiarity with collections and organizational methods and tools to help students effectively manage their projects.

- **Time management.** Librarians help students develop realistic expectations about how long location and synthesis of sources may take. Students also benefit from reminders that locating and synthesizing information often has to happen alongside drafting and revision as well as on its own.
- **Note-taking.** Librarians introduce students to various tools and strategies for keeping research journals and organizing their reading notes and bibliographic references. Additionally, librarians highlight the kinds of information students should record about sources as they gather and read them.
- **Arranging and preparing to visit other libraries.** When key sources are only accessible through other libraries, librarians can contact those libraries to prepare the student's way or help students know what to expect when they visit. Are there protocols for guest researchers? Will there be research assistance there for them? Is there research they should do here so that they can make the most of their time at the other library?