

Finding, Evaluating, & Using: Assisting Students with the Stages of Research

preface: the challenge of information literacy

As researchers ourselves in the digital age, we've no doubt recognized that some things have changed in our own process of doing research—and then found many aspects of the root process remain the same. So, too, even the historically “analog” Warren Wilson student now arrives with increasing levels of digital literacy—although the daily efficacy of the Google search may itself impede the understanding of more complex research processes. More broadly, we also know that students arrive in college with widely variable research and writing abilities. To this context we should add the challenge of transferability: students can't easily transfer research and writing strategies from one discipline (or assignment) to another.

In all, asking students to do research—at any level—is a hefty challenge. Therefore, we do well to understand some of its component challenges and then offer instruction to help students move through those challenges.

We'll propose today that we look at research in three stages, each with its corollary challenge:

1. Finding Sources — “I can't find anything.”
2. Evaluating Sources — “Can I use this?”
3. Using Sources — “I've got all these sources...”

Finding

"I can't find anything" – Warren Wilson student #589

Problem: students are overly specific in their research focus. They hunt endlessly for sources that address their research question dead on. While there is certainly a chance of success with this method, many students come up empty handed and experience great frustration. Students need to practice contextual research, that is, to practice locating broader sources and/or sources that address only a portion of their research question.

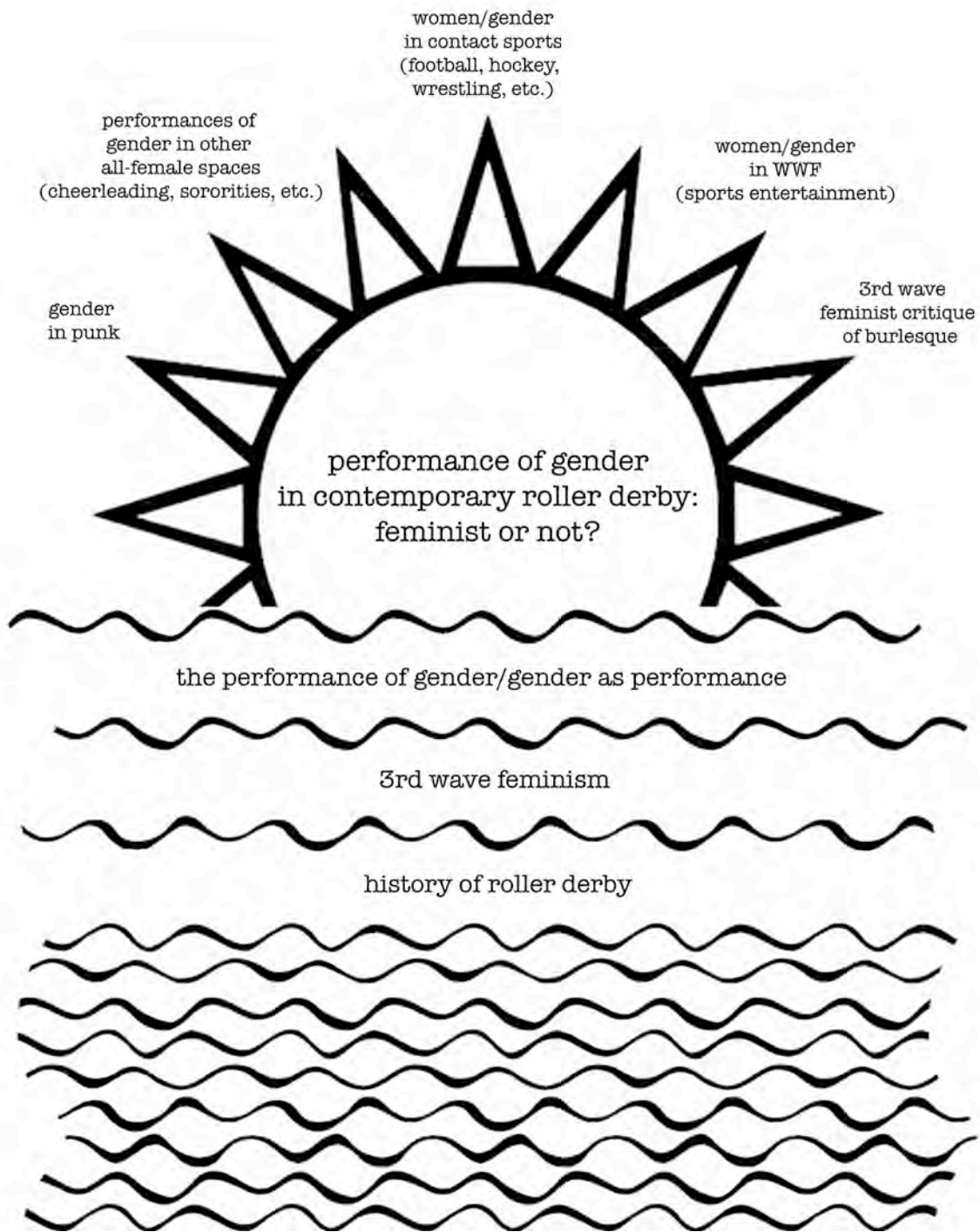
This exercise aims to get students to recognize the need for sources that are either 1) far broader than their stated topic or 2) related to a discrete piece of their topic, possibly from another disciplinary perspective. The exercise is ideally done in-class in about 10-15 minutes.

The basic idea is to present a topic and solicit research avenues that are both broader than the topic and adjacent to the topic. Encourage creative thinking - silliness is good! Any number of visual images would suit this exercise, but as an example sketch out the sun as it sets against the ocean. In this example the sun is the specific topic, the rays coming out from the sun are the adjacent/related avenues of research, and the ocean represents broader avenues of research. Write the topic in the middle of the sun and give a few examples of both broader and adjacent research avenues. Give everyone five minutes to come up with five more on their own. After five minutes solicit ideas from the class, marking these on the board in the appropriate location.

Further steps might include asking students to do this exercise with a topic of their choice, asking them to pursue actual research on one or more avenues generated by the exercise, and/or creating a simple writing assignment based on placing adjacent and broader sources in conversation with their topic.

See other side for what the finished exercise might look like.

Finding



Evaluating Sources

warren-wilson.edu/~writingcenter/



Evaluating Sources

When picking a restaurant, you may consider the following factors:

Food—Does it hit the spot?

Atmosphere—Is it a fun/romantic/relaxing/stimulating place to be?

Location—Is it convenient to where you live or in a part of town you want to go to?

Price—Is it affordable? Or if it's expensive, is it worth it?

Popularity—Is it well-reviewed on Chowhounds? Well-liked by friends?

Similarly, several factors influence the choice of sources in a research project:

[Food] Does it satisfy your curiosity about a topic?

Read the introduction and conclusion and skim the beginnings and ends of each section. Skim the table of contents and any back and front material. Read for key words. Consider scope: some sources will help give you background information, while others will help you narrow your focus.

[Atmosphere] Is it itself well-researched and well-written?

Read the introduction and first section and pay attention to the language and structure—does the style grab you? Look deeper. Does the author cite outside sources and back up arguments with convincing evidence?

[Location] Is it part of same the intellectual conversation you have been having in class?

Read the author's biography and back and front material (including journal description) to make sure this book falls into your field of study.

[Price] Can you realistically read it for the assignment? If it is especially long or complex, is it worth the extra time?

You can't expect to read the first few pages of an article or the first chapter of a book and get the author's whole argument; if you try this, you may inadvertently misrepresent the author's idea. It is possible, however, to effectively skim a book by selecting what parts to read purposefully. A long or complex source may be appropriate if it is especially interesting and relevant to you.

[Popularity] Is it reputable? Is it written by someone who is respected by others in the field?

If it is not a peer-reviewed article, how do you know the author is credible? Beware of ideological or commercial agendas, especially when reading materials on the web: who is the sponsor of the website, and what is the organization's mission?

A great way to find sources is to look in the bibliographies of books that you're read in class or books on related topics that have made an impact of you.

Using Sources: Configurations, Formations

Research is an activity. You don't enter research to confirm what you know, but rather must enter ready to determine what there is to know. You'll have to be prepared for a potentially difficult journey; you won't know what the landscape is until you are well into your trek. Still, you can expect to see some types of formations of ideas.

Configurations of Scholars / Formations of Ideas

- I. Piggy-Back / Sedimentation
- II. Sparring Partners / Tectonic Plates
- III. Family Portrait / Light Spectrum
- IV. A Parade / Tributaries

I. In considering _____, most every discussion begins with the important issue of _____ (which was originally raised in ____). Later research confirms _____ and, in addition, expands our understanding of _____ to include _____. Most recently, _____ has been further clarified, and _____ has become the central issue.

II. In current discussions of _____, a controversial issue has been whether _____. On the one hand, some argue that _____. From this perspective, _____. On the other hand, others argue that _____. In the words of one of this view's main proponents, "_____." According to this view, _____. In sum, then, the question is whether _____ or _____.

III In discussions of _____, current opinion spans the whole spectrum. At one end is _____, who suggests _____. At the other end is _____, who instead believes _____. Claiming [a] position[s] of more middle ground is/are _____ [and] _____. This/these views seek a compromise by asking us to consider _____ and _____.

IV. In current discussions of _____, _____ [several/many/#] important issues remain central. First, the topic can be approached from _____. Then _____. In addition, _____. And then _____. Also, _____.

Using Sources: Configurations, Formations

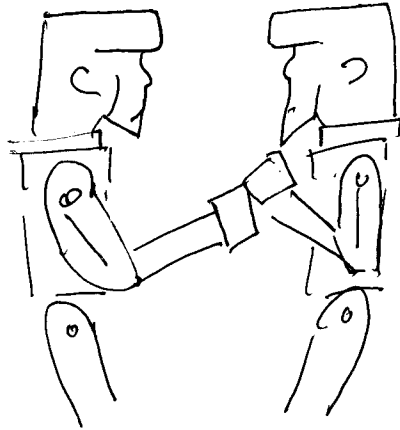
Piggy-Back / Sedimentation

Each scholar in a series builds on earlier ideas.



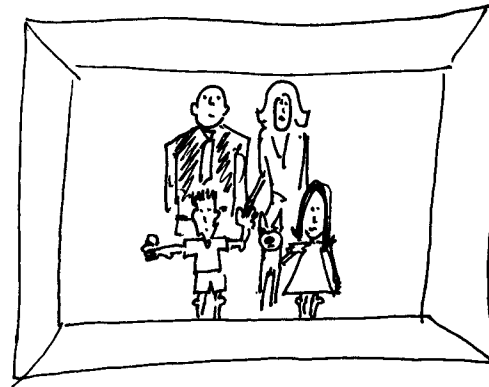
Sparring Partners / Tectonic Plates

Two scholars (or schools of thought) oppose each other



Family Portrait / Light Spectrum

An array of scholar and ideas across a spectrum of thought.



A Parade / Tributaries

A set of separate ideas, not in direct conversation, but all advancing toward a similar goal.

