

Process:

I employed a variety of strategies while conducting research for a project in the course English 199: Interdisciplinary Writing/ Natural Science where I was required to choose an environmental issue and analyze it through the lens of environmental justice. Before I started my research, I first had to research historical environmental issues and choose a topic that appealed to me. At this point in my process, I didn't use any library or database searches, but instead did a simple Google search, which led me to the Environmental Protection Agency's website. Here I found a timeline of historical environmental events that significantly impacted environmental justice. Upon reading briefly about Warren County, my interest was piqued and I chose to dive into the environmental inequality that occurred and the activism that it inspired, which I believed should be brought to the public's attention.

After selecting my subject matter, I highlighted the key components I was going to include in my essay and created an outline of the ideas I wished to address. This included substantial background on my topic, addressing health impacts, historical racism, and making connections to modern day racial injustices. Once I created a basic structure of the main points, I started my search, focusing on each concept individually. I used a variety of search engines including the UW Library online resources, Google Scholar, and several databases to find significant facts and statistics to support my argument.

This was my first major research project, so I was learning to do academic research as I went. Prior to taking this writing course, I was unaware that the online library databases existed. I also learned that research is not clear cut or direct. I was forced to rethink the search terms I used until I was able to find sources successfully. I realized that there is a science between being overly specific and too vague, so keeping that in mind, I included only the most important terms.

Search Strategy:

Starting my search, there were many obstacles that I encountered, mainly the repetition of information between sources, and the inability to find specific key details that would solidify my argument and make my research come full circle. The solution that I found most frequently helpful was rewording my search. For example, instead of being hyper-specific and eliminating potentially useful sources by searching “Warren County Environmental Activism History” or “PCB Contamination Warren County North Carolina”, I would broaden my results by searching something slightly more general such as “Warren County Environment” or “PCB Health Impacts”.

One strategy that was very helpful in finding specific details that might have been indirectly related to my search was looking at the references of interesting articles to find additional relevant sources. This way I found examples of case studies and health impacts of similar environmental tragedies. However, in certain cases such as looking for specific statistics regarding the events leading up to the catastrophe, searching specifically for the origins of environmental justice related to Warren County yielded the best results. Another strategy I utilized on the UW Library site was the “advanced search” feature, which allowed me to sort sources based on the field of study, source type, and date. This helped me to narrow the search by immediately excluding sources that were no longer relevant or potentially outdated.

Resource Use:

Throughout my research process I utilized various library resources and services including online database searches, librarian instruction and tutorials, and guidance from my instructor. Environmental and Forest Sciences Librarian Kari Anderson introduced me to the UW’s online library when she gave a presentation in ENGL 199 with detailed instructions about

how to complete a search and recognize peer-reviewed articles. In addition to using this instruction, I searched for sources on databases such as Project Muse and Web of Science, as well as utilized Ulrichsweb to ensure that my sources were peer-reviewed.

As I was researching, I discovered that I had unintentionally created my own set of standards for the sources I chose to use in my project. First of all, I determined if a source contributed something to my essay, whether it be facts, statistics, or commentary that was significant to the message I was trying to portray. Many sources I reviewed were overly generalized and didn't add any specific insight, whereas others were extremely specific and used scientific jargon that would not effectively convey the issue to a broader audience. Another area where I was critical of my sources was the credibility of the authors and the organization of which I got my information from. I included many academic research papers which were peer reviewed and verified, as well as credible organizations as the Environmental Protection Agency.

One research strategy that I found very helpful to fill in the missing elements of my paper was researching background information about Warren County itself. For example, in order to support the claim that the majority of the county's population was African American, I found an archived document with data reporting the demographics of Warren County. This gave the reader context as to why it is significant that a minority community was targeted. Adding to this further, I researched recent income levels of Warren County residents to support the claim that the community was targeted for its lack of privilege.

Conclusion:

Reflecting on my research process, I've gained and refined many skills for effective research. The UW library tools were a critical source for much of my research. Learning how to

successfully navigate the features of the site allowed me to create a strong claim and support it with peer-reviewed sources. I have utilized these acquired research skills multiple times since completing this research project, for several courses across an array of disciplines. Overall, I've obtained deeper insight into the research process, and have a newfound understanding of how targeted research strategies can help develop my argument and improve the quality of my work.