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Library Research Award

Personal Essay

For this research project, we had to write a final essay for our French class based on one of the primary source texts we had read throughout the quarter. The course was on 18th to 21st century French history and literature. I chose a text from early in the quarter when we studied the French Revolution: Olympe de Gouges's 1791 feminist pamphlet *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* ("Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen"). The text was a direct parody of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, and it pointed out the innate inequality between these rights granted to men but not women or slaves. I was particularly intrigued in this topic due to my interest in Women and Gender Studies and I was eager to see what contemporaries and scholars thought of de Gouges's work.

Since we were required to use secondary sources, I started with the UW Libraries database, a tool that has been invaluable in my writing processes for UW courses. The database has been the most comprehensive and customizable search options I have encountered with previous high school and college databases. It was incredibly helpful to be able to select for documents in French or secondary sources. My first steps would be to type in my initial topic and go through the first few pages of responses, pinning notable books or articles to come back to. Then, once I got a sense of what I wanted to narrow my topic to, I searched more directly for responses to Olympe de Gouges's "feminine rhetoric" and filtered by secondary sources (non-reviews) and in the French language.

Once I got a sense of overall arguments and which points I agreed and disagreed with, I drafted an outline. I tend to use the format of background, arguments I agree with, arguments I disagree with, and then further supplementation of my thesis into a conclusion that takes the paper in a new direction. For this particular paper, I was able to find ample amounts of articles and information through the database online, but typically I would find and check out any in-paper books that resulted from my search.

After reading through pertinent articles and books from the database, I nail down any quotes or facts I find important. I have previously used Zotero to make flashcards, which I was advised to do in high school. Zotero has helped me keep track of my citations and ensure that my bibliography is in the correct format. For a shorter paper like this one, I was able to directly copy these “nuggets” of information directly to my outline. This was also due to the narrow breadth of my topic and fewer resources than I expected on the topic.

For the bibliography and overall paper format, I double-checked the appropriate citation format and then the correct method of citing sources. As I have since high school, I consulted Purdue’s OWL website to double-check the expected bibliography format.

For this essay, it was difficult to pin down what made Olympe de Gouges controversial or important. It took some more digging through the database and rethinking of my initial thesis to learn more about arguments about her use of “feminine rhetoric” or supposedly uncultured writing, and why exactly there was a gap in appreciation for her work versus her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft (who in fact did not call for equality in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in the same explicit terms as de Gouges). At this early point in the essay process, I typically make an appointment or attend office hours of my professor to really flesh out the

topic. For this essay, looking more at the database and reading through articles and books for common threads truly helped.

In an essay in a foreign language such as this, editing is still the most important step. Even though I have been taking French for nine years, I still make conjugation, accordance, and grammar mistakes in my writing. Oftentimes, certain English phrases don't quite translate to French and vice-versa. In this instance, tools like WordReference.com and Linguee.com are of great help to find the right words and phrases for the context. It is crucial to edit, take a break, and edit again, even past the point I usually would in an English essay.

I am pleased with my overall work, and even more intrigued on the subject than I began. I could see myself writing further on the topic for a longer paper. In that case, I would go back to the UW Libraries database and start reading some of the suggested books. By using resources to find articles that I likely would not have been able to stumble on by myself, I was able to explore this truly fascinating feminist work and the importance of its contents and the sexist backlash it ignited.