

Library Research Award

My research began by compiling information for a literature review assigned in my English 199 biolink class. Specifically, I wanted to look at the “curse of the mummy” through a biological lens. Although I was confident this curse did not have a supernatural basis, it seemed plausible that bacteria, molds, and fungi allowed to fester in a dark and damp tomb might have the ability to make someone sick. I first found some resources that discussed the origin of the mummy’s curse, a subject on which there is widespread disagreement. In doing so, I also discovered a statistical study that disproved the curse. Thereafter, I utilized the University of Washington library website to learn more about the types of microorganisms that were found on ancient Egyptian tomb wall paintings, several of which are known to cause respiratory illnesses in humans. I optimistically thought I had it all figured out. However, just a few searches later I realized that the conditions inside of the tombs at the time they were opened were actually more sanitary than the conditions of general upper Egypt. This threw a wrench into the plan for my literature review as there simply wouldn’t be research supporting my misconception. I then considered that if these microorganisms aren’t causing people to become ill, what exactly are they doing? It turns out that they were damaging the tomb wall art dramatically, and there was a plethora of research surrounding the cause, mechanisms of, and solutions to the damage caused by a variety of bacterium, molds, and fungi. In researching the preservation of tomb wall art, I also discovered that microorganisms are not the only thing damaging the tomb wall art; human interaction was also causing significant problems. As the preservation of these murals is important specifically due to the religious and cultural heritage, I next looked into the importance of the murals and what they symbolized. Throughout this project I learned that research is a fluid, winding, and never-ending process. The more I learned, the more questions I had that remained unanswered. It also became clear to me that the more I know about a topic, the easier it is to find exactly what you need as a source as you know what to look for.

As for my search strategy, I started by just looking through the University of Washington library using the search feature and filtering my results. Although I experienced some success

using this strategy, it did not give me exactly what I was looking for. From there, I transitioned to looking on specific databases that I found within the biology research guide. I received more tailored responses as well as suggestions based on the articles I was reading, which proved to be extremely helpful. As for roadblocks, they were easily overcome by use of library resources. I was granted access to an article through an interlibrary loan, which was both quick and easy. I also started a New York Times account through the University of Washington library to access an archived article of Herbert Winlock, the Metropolitan Museum Director, denying the existence of the mummy's curse when there was widespread buzz surrounding the mysterious deaths in 1934. I encountered some difficulties in locating information regarding the importance of the ancient Egyptian tomb wall murals. To combat this, I scheduled a meeting with a librarian. The librarian was very kind and generous with her time. She provided a variety of articles and books relating to my specific topic as well as suggestions as to how I could expand my research, all of which were conveniently sent straight to my email. She also put me in touch with Leith Calcote and Claire Kenny who have experience working with mold-damaged materials within the University of Washington library's conservation center. I scheduled a meeting with them and they showed me real-life examples of what mold can do to paper products and art. They also gave me a guided tour around the conservation center and discussed a variety of conservation techniques. It was an amazingly educational experience. I also checked out a number of books and lugged them to and from the library for use in my research. Lastly, I employed the citation generator on the library website which was unbelievably helpful and saved me so much time.

I am so grateful to the library for putting me into contact with so many passionate and interesting people, and allowing me to do a deep dive into this niche topic. Through my research, I discovered that conservation work may be something I am interested in pursuing. At the very least, I want to conduct research at the intersection of microbiology and history. I so enjoyed the process of compiling information from so many different sources that I was inspired to apply for an internship in which I would be writing a literature review over the summer.

Overall, I am so thankful for the University of Washington library for access to all of the valuable resources and look forward to using them again!