

Julia Glassman

# Research support for creative writers

## Bolstering undergraduate fiction and poetry through library instruction

It's well-documented, within both the LIS literature and wider academia, that more undergraduate students are studying creative writing than ever before. With a majority of English departments in North America offering majors, minors, concentrations, institutes, or individual classes,<sup>1</sup> creative writing has become a staple of most college course offerings. Furthermore, librarians are rising to the occasion, introducing student writers to Special Collections materials,<sup>2</sup> online resources for publication and professional development,<sup>3</sup> and more.

However, the extent to which creative writing students conduct research—both formal and informal—for their work is still vastly underestimated. Fiction writers and poets tend to be viewed as artists who, at their core, need only a notebook and pen to write; however, access to information resources is crucial to producing solid stories and poems.

I learned this firsthand when writing my first novel, *Other Life Forms*,<sup>4</sup> as an MFA student. The narrator was a thinly fictionalized version of myself, living in a setting almost identical to my hometown, and I never thought I'd have to perform research to write about such intimately familiar topics. Yet, as the story unfolded, I found myself searching for information over and over again. I decided to make the narrator a sculptor, but I knew nothing about sculpting. In one scene she encounters a coyote, and I had to make sure my own experiences with coyotes weren't outliers or

flukes. At one morbid point, I realized I had to research effective suicide methods. In every chapter, it seemed, there were aspects of the characters and the world about which I knew surprisingly little.

Nor am I alone in having significant research needs as a writer. Julie Orringer, when writing her historical novel *The Invisible Bridge*, “spent long hours at libraries and archives, going through old papers and letters and artifacts.”<sup>5</sup> During the summer of 2014, when the UCLA English Department invited me to teach an undergraduate fiction workshop, my students wrote stories about topics ranging from Mexican tent revivals to roller coaster operators to human cloning.

Most creative writing students, save those interested in historical or science fiction, probably don't think of themselves as researchers. I certainly never considered my myriad Google searches “research” as an MFA student. However, there are many ways that librarians can support the work of creative writing students. What follows are resources and exercises my students have found especially useful, both in my fiction workshop and in research workshops I've taught for undergraduate creative writing classes over the past two years.

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## Subject encyclopedias

Often, the research needs of creative writing students are similar to their academic counterparts. A student may need basic background information, foundational knowledge on a subject, or quick reference for a particular scene or character. Subject encyclopedias can help meet these needs. For example, I would have benefited from background information on sculpture or coyotes when working on my novel, and *The Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques in Art* or *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia* might have been especially helpful.

Furthermore, with their variety of esoteric subjects and wealth of full-color illustrations and photographs, subject encyclopedias can serve as inspiration for in-class writing prompts or for students struggling with writer's block.

During my research workshops, I often show students some of the more offbeat titles in our reference collection: *A Dictionary of Superstitions*; *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*; *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants, and Trees*; *Handbook of Norse Mythology*; and any others that catch my eye. Students are often surprised that an academic library would include "fun" titles such as these in its collection, and enjoy browsing the volumes I provide.

### Exercises

1. Have students write down one or two topics in their work that they feel they need to research. (This may sound vague, but creative writing students can often easily identify places in their stories or poems where they lack firm footing on the subject matter.) Using the library catalog or a database like "Reference Universe," have the students generate keywords that they can use to find an appropriate subject encyclopedia.

2. Bring a small collection of encyclopedias to the classroom. Have students browse through them and choose three unrelated topics from three encyclopedias. Then, have them combine those three topics into a single story, character sketch, or poem.

## Online databases

Before I began teaching research workshops for creative writers, I assumed that by the time English students enrolled in UCLA's creative writing concentration, they would have ample experience using library databases. After all, the UCLA Library puts significant effort into our FYE program, faculty outreach, and research support for students. Surely creative writing students hone their research skills in their academic courses?

Well, yes and no. In "Truth be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age," Alison J. Head and Michael Eisenberg state that students tend to view academic research as a set of "techniques for tackling one course-related research assignment to the next," rather than a general skill they can use for a variety of information needs.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the very research methods that a student uses effectively for a specific assignment may feel overwhelming when placed in another context. Furthermore, librarians may underestimate the number of students who grow rusty at research methods outside of their major, forget what they learned in their freshman one-shot session, enter as transfer students, or simply fall through the cracks.

Each time I teach a creative writing research workshop, I'm surprised at the number of students who claim not to know how to use our databases. Even if that perception is based more on library anxiety than reality, the workshop becomes a teachable moment for students who need help using research methods in multiple contexts.

This isn't to say that online databases don't offer specific benefits to fiction and poetry. Depending on the project they're working on, students may benefit from scholarly research (for example, the biology behind cloning), digitized primary sources, news or magazine articles, interviews with published poets and writers, digitized literary magazines, and countless other resources. Research support for creative writers should include, at the very least, a quick refresher on how to access and search databases.

### *Exercise*

Have students identify a major subject or theme in their work. Then, have them find two articles about that theme: one scholarly article and one newspaper article. Have them incorporate one insight from each article into their work. (If time is limited, they can read the abstract of the scholarly article in lieu of the article itself.)

### **Special collections**

David Pavelich describes numerous resources that Special Collections can offer creative writing students, including historical documents, drafts and revisions of published works, chapbooks and other alternative book forms, and more.<sup>7</sup> During one research workshop, I had my students look at our collection of Raymond Chandler's manuscripts. The students discovered that Chandler wrote much of his fiction on half-sheets of paper because he believed that any single idea or plot movement in fiction should be simple enough to fit into that space.

The students were also able to examine subsequent drafts of the opening narration to the original *Star Trek* series, including extensive handwritten revisions. They were able to see firsthand that revising a work of fiction or poetry isn't a process of steady improvement, but rather of trial and error. A work-in-progress may get worse before it gets better.

### *Exercises*

1. Identify a collection of manuscripts that clearly demonstrate an author's writing or revision strategy. Have students employ that strategy in their own writing. (For example, I gave my students half-sheets of paper and asked them to fit one complete idea onto them.)

2. After viewing an author's drafts, have students do a one-minute freewrite. Then, have them hide that sheet of paper and rewrite the passage from memory. Repeat this process three more times, for a total of five freewrites in five minutes. Have them look over each version of the freewrite and identify intentional and unintentional changes they made.

### **Images**

The importance of image resources to creative writers cannot be overemphasized. Images can be used for visual reference and accuracy checks for countless settings, characters, and historical events. They can also be used for inspiration in much the same way as subject encyclopedias. Students interested in ekphrasis, or writing based on a work of art, can greatly benefit from easy access to image databases like ARTstor. If your library has a LibGuide devoted to images or art resources,<sup>8</sup> it can serve as a jumping-off point for exploration of your library's image resources.

### *Exercise*

Have each student select an image from an image resource. Then, have them "assign" that image to another student, who will use it for the basis of a freewrite.

### **Research guides**

Dedicating a LibGuide to creative writing can serve as either a supplement to in-person instruction or an alternative resource if instruction is not possible. Numerous academic libraries now provide creative writing research guides, which include the types of resources listed above, along with information on professional concerns like publishing, literary magazines, and MFA programs.

### **Conclusion**

There are numerous benefits to providing structured, ongoing research support to creative writers. It strengthens their creative work, bolsters their general research skills, and establishes the library and its staff as a resource they can turn to for help. It may even encourage them to take greater risks in their writing.

For example, a student with little research experience may feel intimidated at the thought of writing a novel or poem based on historical events, while a student with a more solid foundation may feel prepared to take on that challenge.

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his lab's current publications could be featured on the media wall. Another faculty member asked if her program could be included next time. The associate director for public services comments, "We've had visitors from around the world come to the Center who specifically comment on and ask questions about the digital exhibits. Not only are they impressed with the aesthetic, they acknowledge that it's a unique way to highlight research that is happening in the sciences and social sciences across campus."<sup>7</sup>

Librarians are collaborating more with faculty, staff, and researchers and are learning more about university activities. For the curators, there are greetings when we pass former collaborators on campus. To thank us, the Physics Department manager, presented the curators with Galileo bobble heads. Library administrators welcome the opportunity to further support Yale's academic and research activities.

## Notes

1. Melissa Dennis, "Outreach initiatives in academic libraries, 2009-2011," *Reference Services Review* 40(3):368-383.

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*("Research support for creative writers," cont. from page 604)*

Furthermore, providing increased support to creative writers can spur outreach to students in other fields that traditionally lie outside the realm of academic research. How can libraries expand the services they offer to student dancers? Painters? Experimental filmmakers? The possibilities are as intriguing as they are numerous. Who knows what artists can produce when they have the offerings of the library at their fingertips?

## Notes

1. AWP Directors Handbook 2012, as cited in Harriett Green, "Literature as a Network: Creative-Writing Scholarship in Literary Magazines," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14, no. 2 (2014).

2. David Pavelich, "Lighting Fires in Creative Minds: Teaching Creative Writing in Special Collections," *College & Research Libraries News* 71 no. 6 (2010): 295-297, 313.

2. Sarah J. Chicone and Richard A. Kissel, *Dinosaurs and Diorama: Creating Natural History Exhibitions* (Walnut Creek, California, Left Cost Press, Inc., 2014).

3. Mark Saba, email on June 16, 2014, to Lori Bronars.

4. Mark Saba, email on January 16, 2014, to Lori Bronars.

5. See <http://csssi.yale.edu>.

6. Sidney Cahn, email on July 10, 2014, to Lori Bronars.

7. Kelly Barrick, email to Lori Bronars and Gwyneth Crowley on July 30, 2014.

## Acknowledgements

Monique Atherton, graduate student and photographer, School of Art, Yale University; Kelly Barrick, associate director for public services at the Center for Science and Social Science Information, Yale University; Sarah Demers, associate professor, Physics, Yale University; Kelley Fryer, photographer; Jill Parchuck, director of the Center for Science and Social Science Information, Yale University; Amanda Patrick, director of Library Development and Communication, Yale University; Rona Ramos, technical support specialist and lecturer, Physics, Yale University *~*

3. Hugh Burkhardt, "Creative writing and the Web," *College & Research Libraries News* 73, no. 3 (2012): 156-159.

4. Julia Glassman, *Other life forms* (Dinah Press, 2012).

5. Julie Orringer, interviewed by Liz Sher, Politics and Prose Bookstore and Coffeehouse, [www.politics-prose.com/10-questions/julie-orringer](http://www.politics-prose.com/10-questions/julie-orringer) (accessed September 9, 2014).

6. Alison J. Head and Michael Eisenberg, "Truth be told: How college students evaluate and use information in the digital age," *Project Information Literacy*, 2010, [http://projectinfolit.org/images/pdfs/pil\\_fall2010\\_survey\\_fullreport1.pdf](http://projectinfolit.org/images/pdfs/pil_fall2010_survey_fullreport1.pdf).

7. Pavelich, "Lighting Fires in Creative Minds."

8. See, for example, Janine Henri's guide to images at [guides.library.ucla.edu/images](http://guides.library.ucla.edu/images). *~*