Researching Urban Legends, Hoaxes and Conspiracy Theories

Don't Believe Everything You Read: An Example and an Introduction

To read about urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories is to be perpetually amazed on a variety of levels. Some of the claims border on the outrageous (are we really expected to believe *all* of the alien autopsy videos out there?), and some claims are much more plausible than others. In fact, sometimes certain claims, either explicit or implicit, in urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories really seem. . .well, they seem reasonable.

Take for instance this seemingly simple claim: that the Baby Ruth candy bar is *not* named for the "Sultan of Swat," Babe Ruth. This claim *could* be true, and the Curtis Candy Company, which makes the Baby Ruth Bar, says it's true; they claim that the candy bar was named after the daughter of Grover Cleveland—Ruth "Baby" Cleveland. However, the author of "Baby Ruth" (2011) points out that the namesake of the popular candy bar died many years before the candy became a hit on the market. Oddly enough, in 1921 Babe Ruth was probably the most famous man in the United States.

All of these urban legend claims and counterclaims that a candy bar was NOT named after a famous person are hard to tease apart. In fact, the authors of the Snopes.com article (2011) on the topic say that the notion that the Baby Ruth bar is not named after Babe Ruth is patently "false." However, that's not really the point.

The point is that minimally researching the "Baby Ruth" urban legend turns up lots of facts (e.g., Babe Ruth was famous in 1921, the Curtis Candy Company claims their candy is named after Ruth "Baby" Cleveland, etc.), but all of the facts do not cohere to arrive at a given truth. In fact, the facts seem to countermand each other, making the whole notion of what happened in 1921, when someone decided to call a candy bar "Baby Ruth" for some reason, incredibly murky.

This murkiness is what you face when doing research into urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories. Truth is elusive when dealing with the topics covered in *Terra Incognita*, and it is often beside the point. However, what is pointedly necessary when doing some research into things like the "Baby Ruth" urban legend, is an open and critical mind.

To do research into hoaxes, urban legends, and conspiracy theories is to encounter a lot of writing that wants to convince you of a given perspective—regardless of the truth of

that perspective. Research on urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories demands that you think like a good detective. You need to forego easy answers, lay aside your assumptions about what "should" happen, and look to verify claims, rather than accepting them.

This critical stance, a skeptical stance that says, "show me why I should believe in what you claim," is a necessary habit of mind to foster when doing the research you are going to be asked to do here. Also, it's a habit of mind that will serve you well in our modern age of extravagant claims made by everyone from political and religious figures to your Uncle Mike, who continually sends you emails about "the truth" behind 9/11.

The type of research that you're about to engage in *Terra Incognita* will give you a real mental workout. Your cerebellum should be sweating by the time you are done writing and researching. Like all good workouts, this "research workout" should challenge you and make you feel more alive after doing it.

Thus, extending the metaphor just a little bit more, what follows is an exercise routine that will prevent injury and hopefully lead to productive exercise of your critical facilities. So, stretch a bit, shake out your arms, and get ready to research and write about urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories.

Get Small and Smart: Starting with Researchable Questions

Many years ago, the great comedian Steve Martin had a comedy routine called "Get Small."[1] His idea is that there is a recreational drug that you can take that will shrink you, like Alice in Wonderland, down to a diminutive size. It's a silly, even whimsical idea. However, the idea of "getting small" is exactly what we would advise you to do as a researcher of urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories.

This means that you do not want to try and find all the facts about the urban legend, hoax or conspiracy theory that you are interested in. No, you want to find some sort of small and interesting element of a hoax, urban legend or conspiracy theory to focus on. Also, rather than focusing on the "whatness" of your topic, you want to focus on the "whyness" of it all.

Thus, if you decide that you want to research the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legend, you don't want to go out and, like a top-end Shark vacuum, suck up every bit of knowledge about this urban legend. No, you want to start by thinking about this question: *Why am I interested in the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" and why might others be interested in it?*

[1] If you have never listened to Steve Martin, all I can say is do it. Try some time with him on YouTube. You'll thank the authors of *Terra Incognita* later.

To start with a why-oriented question is to invite yourself, from the very beginning of a research project, to dig into a topic in a fruitful way. You want to have something to say about your topic, and you want to think about what your reader might get out of your topic at the beginning of your research.

As you go along and do your research, you will probably narrow your topic—going from a wide question, like the one above, to something much more focused. By the time you start drafting your piece, you might even end up with something like this: *Why do male college students tell versions of the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" that always include an attractive woman and scary plot elements?*

The underlined text above refers to the sort of specific elements that you would likely include in your **research question** as you move through a **research process.** Obviously, the question above is a lot more specific and pointed than the one that preceded it. The question at the top of this section started by asking a *general why question about everyone*; it ended by asking a *specific why question about a group of people and an element of the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" urban legend.* This is the level of specificity that you want to aim for, and to get you there we have a **research question writing process** that we want to suggest.

A Research Question Writing Process

Follow the steps below to get at a *why* question about your topic:

1. After **brainstorming**[2] a list of topics, think a bit about a topic that you want to look into, keep it broad. *Write down that topic in a short (2–6 word) phrase.*
2. Take that topic for a spin at Google Scholar (http://www.scholar.google.com) or another broad online database (something like "Academic Search Complete" or "EBSCOhost"). Also, run the topic through your college library database for books as well. Get a couple of sources, then *read and annotate them*.[3]
3. After reading for a day or two through some of the sources you found, write down a research question that includes the word **"**why.**"** This will help you focus your research a bit.
4. Take this question that you've written and run it through your library's database for books and Amazon.com (http://www.amazon.com). If you find books dedicated to your question, realize that you need to narrow a bit more. *You don't want to write a book about this topic, do you?*

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[2] This could involve freewriting and looping, clustering or webbing, or even simply listing. You want to generate lots of ideas—feel a sort of intellectual aerobic burn.

[3] There are hundreds of ways to annotate texts for research. Some people like using index cards, others like to get PDFs and mark them up using Adobe Reader X. Some people fill up a notebook with notes. The important thing is to read carefully and write a good deal as you read. This informal writing will help you with your research writing. I swear it will!

5. Read and annotate (we'll talk about techniques for this later in this chapter), and be sure to do the following: *For every source you write about, write out a full citation.* Your teacher will tell you about the citation style that she or he wants (oftentimes it will be either MLA, APA or CMS), and you want to use a handbook, the Purdue OWL (http://owl.english.purdue.edu), or some good online citation software (like NoodleBib Express, which is located at http://www.noodletools.com) to do this work. *Creating a general citation for a source as you read and research saves you grief later.*
6. When you have enough research done,[4] start your first draft of your research writing by *rewriting your research question, based on the research you have done.*
7. Write a draft of your research piece. (We will have much more to say on this later in this chapter.)
8. When you get ready to write your final draft, *reread your piece* and *rewrite your research question.* Now you have a research question that does the following:
   - Honestly expresses the research that you have done;
   - Honestly shows the focused, narrow nature of your topic; and,
   - Guides the reader through your research.

I cannot emphasize enough that you want to do something to make sure that your research question is narrow and doable. This will involve, as with all writing, writing and rewriting. It will also involve talking to friends, classmates, tutors and your teacher about your research question. You want to work hard to make sure that you have a research question that doesn't either commit you to writing a 300-page book (to not do so would be to do violence to your topic) or to writing an arcane, three-page poem about your subject.

This may seem hard, but if you follow through a research process, it will not be as hard as you imagined.

[4] "How much research is enough research?" is an interesting question that I've often had from my students. I tend to give my students a number of sources to optimally have (10+ for a ten- or more page paper, fewer if the paper is shorter), but there is no absolute. I do know, as a researcher myself, that I tend to read and write about a lot more sources than I use. I tend to only use between one-half and two-thirds of the sources I find while doing research in my writing.

Gathering Flowers in the Garden of the Weird: Finding Reliable, Verifiable Resources

The Research Process

In the chapter devoted to reading and writing about the texts in *Terra Incognita*, you might remember that we lavished a fair number of nouns, verb and adjectives[5] on the writing process. What we want to write a bit about here is the idea of **your research process**.

Like your writing process(es), the research process is a recursive (circular) process. And it is a process that varies a lot depending on your topic, the field you are writing in or for, and the genre that your work will finally partake of.

It is also a highly idiosyncratic process. Thus, at all times you want to use a research process that works for you. However, you might also have not done much—or even any—research in your life, much less research about urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories.

So, to help you think a bit about what your research process(es) look like, or might look like, let me share my general research process with you, and point out a couple of things that your research process might share with mine:

1. Get interested in a general topic.
2. Use Google Scholar to explore my provisional topic.
3. Read the work that I found via Google Scholar.
4. Start to construct a "why question" about the topic.
5. Start to mark up PDFs and write informally about my sources.
6. Start drafting, being sure to include in-text and end citations as I go.
7. Do field work.
8. Find more sources from the library and other online databases.
9. Remind myself of why I like my #@#$$%%%**!! topic!
10. Rewrite and rethink my draft.
11. Get trusted readers to help me out with my writing.
12. Do the final draft with proper grammar.

The process above appears linear, with lots of reading up front, followed by lots of writing. But that's an illusion.

Notice, first the similarity between **step one** and **step nine**. Both are about my interest in the topic. One of the things I have to do all along is to remind myself of why I like the

[5] But no stinking adverbs!

topic. This was, when I was a student myself, especially important when I was doing a required, teacher-assigned topic. I sometimes had to force my interest a bit in my research, but I was always, in terms of my own interest in a topic, able to "fake it until I made it." I'm sure you can do the same thing if need be.

I also want to point out that finding sources happens at least twice in my research process, at *step two* and *step eight*. Also, there is not a step here where writing is not involved, from writing interjections in the margins of a printed PDF at *step three,* to making sure that I nail down the in-text and final citations in my piece.

Not listed above is an important step that can emerge anywhere in the research process. It is a step that always occurs in my research process, regardless of the project: a moment of existential despair—a moment in which I experience what Douglas Adams called, "The long dark tea-time of the soul" (1995, p. 5).

I bring up the "long dark tea-time of the soul" not because I want you to think that research is a process that demands you feel lousy. No, I just want you to remember that there will come a moment when your research seems all wrong. Your research question will seem pointless, at best, and you will want to dump everything. You will be both bored and a little angry at yourself (for choosing the topic), at your teacher (for making you do research on a topic), and even at the sources you've chosen, which seem to not let you prove your point. You might even want to start over with a completely new topic.

My experience as a researcher and a teacher of researchers for the last fourteen or so years convinces me that this dread comes—then it passes. You need to have some faith in your topic, your writing and your own abilities as a researcher. If you have this faith, the research process for you will continue forward.

At the end, whatever research process you engage in will involve the following: *getting interested in a topic; figuring out a question to research; reading about your topic; writing about your topic; feeling a bit of despair about your topic; and, ultimately, creating some sort of fine piece of writing about your topic.* There are some things that will stay the same as you move from research project to research project over the course of your academic career and even your life; however, the only constant really is change in research. We would recommend embracing this change.

Now, let's look at the sort of information that you might find in your research.

Finding "Good Information" about Your Topic

At first glance it may seem difficult to imagine finding reliable information about something as factually shaky as an urban legend, a hoax or a conspiracy theory. But there is good information out there. But to get at this good, reliable information you

need to be critical reader of all of the sources on your topic that you encounter. You want to have a good "C.R.A.P." detector.

The acronym "C.R.A.P." comes from the work of a group of librarians headed by Bobi Newman, and the acronym stands for the "currency" of the source, the "reliability" of the source, the "authority" of the source and the "purpose/point of view" of the source" (2010). The librarians list, under each letter of the acronym, a set of questions to ask and answer about a given source. My condensed version of their work is below:

C (Currency)
- How recent is the information?

R (Reliability)
- Is the information balanced or biased?
- Are there citations or references to support the information?

A (Authority)
- Can you determine who the author/creator is?

P (Purpose/Point of View)
- What's the intent of the article?
- Are there ads or authors trying to persuade you or sell you something?

If you get good answers above (that would mean the source is current, is fair-minded, has citations, has an author, and has a clear intent that you can articulate), then you have a reliable source. If you find yourself, either in your head or on paper, wavering about a number of the questions, then you probably have a not-so-great source.

You want to listen to the voice in your head that says, even in a whisper, "*This seems fishy*." To ignore this voice, to ignore the questions associated with the C.R.A.P. test, is to invite yourself to repeat a lie—to allow yourself to be taken in by someone who might not have your, your family's, or your friends' best interests at heart.

The best possible example I can think of this revolves around the information that you could acquire about "Holocaust Denial" at the "Institute for Historical Review." The "Institute for Historical Review" is an innocuous sounding organization that says on their "About Us" webpage that it "works to promote peace, understanding and justice through greater public awareness of the past, and especially socially-politically relevant aspects of twentieth-century history" (2010).

The truth is that the "Institute for Historical Review" is an anti-Semitic organization that tries to say that the Holocaust did not happen, despite dump truck loads of evidence that it did, in fact, happen. The problem with this group is that, from the website and the copious footnotes on some of their online pieces, you might think that these "scholars" are trading in reliable information.

However, a quick rundown of the C.R.A.P. test questions gives you a good idea that folks on this website are NOT writing reliable sources. Much of the information in the writings here is *not current*, drawing on old discredited research by other members of the "Institute for Historical Review"; it is *not reliable* in that all the web-based pieces launch ad hominem attacks on the Jewish people and the nation of Israel; and *its purpose and point of view* runs against a huge, authoritative set of historical documents that articulate, (in fine and heart-breaking detail) Hitler's attempt to exterminate all of the Jewish people, as well as many other groups that Hitler and his cronies saw as literally "subhuman species."

If you were to write about holocaust denial, one of the most disturbing and pernicious of all conspiracy theories, you need to have your C.R.A.P. detector working perfectly. Otherwise, you find yourself repeating the words of people who are considered by all real historical researchers to be liars and anti-Semites.

Perhaps this seems too extreme an example to you. After all, what's the harm in smaller deceptions, like the idea that ancient aliens built Egypt's Great Pyramids?[6]

A partial answer to the above question is, "Yes, it does matter." If we say that those "poor, primitive" people of ancient Egypt, who didn't even have working levers, were incapable of creating massive, soaring monuments to their kings and gods, then we minimize the greatness of that civilization and country. We essentially insult the cultural history of the people of Egypt, as well as gratuitously insult the current residents of the country of Egypt who, quite understandably and reasonably, have great pride in what their ancestors built.

Also, there is a personal risk. When we buy into flim-flam and deceit and repeat it, we diminish ourselves as readers, writers, thinkers and people. When we accept false information simply because we haven't done due diligence and thought through the claims presented by hoaxers, coiners of urban legends and conspiracy theorists, we allow ourselves to be taken.

Most of all, we miss a chance to really think through something, which is its own fun reward.

In truth, researching urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories is really rewarding and fun because you get to think about things deeply and come to a "why question" that really matters: Why do people embrace or reject particular beliefs? It is this sort of question—a question of why we and others believe the ways we do—that animates all the readings in *Terra Incognita.* Also, it is this question that should animate your research into hoaxes, urban legends and conspiracy theories.

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[6] Just so you know, there is NOT a shred of REAL proof that anyone other than the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids and other spectacular monuments of ancient Egypt—despite what the History Channel says.

Writing and Thinking: Writing to Learn While Researching Counter-knowledge

When I first had to do real research as a junior in college, I remember thinking, "I just have to read this stuff and then I can write about it."

Needless to say, I was wrong, wrong, wrong.

About halfway through a paper on some element of peasant uprisings in imperial China, I began, slowly and surely, to lose my mind. I had read everything, even checked out books from the large library at the center of campus—a building I hadn't spent quality time in previously. Still, I could not simply write my paper.

Literally out of options, I actually went to the office of my teacher, Dr. Brokaw, who I deeply respected—and was a shade intimidated by. To my surprise Dr. Brokaw talked to me in a humane and smart way about my paper, and said, "So, what have you written?" Since I hadn't written anything yet, I didn't have anything to say.

From this small comment grew a move born of desperation: I wrote down notes and ideas about what to write on a sheet of paper.[7] From this modest, informal writing, grew the first paper I wrote that I was legitimately proud of.

I offer up this anecdote because it took me until my penultimate year as an undergraduate to discover something I hope you already know or will soon learn: informal writing (be it note-taking, jotting, freewriting, or even filling out index cards) is a necessary part of doing good, focused research in higher education.

So, let me share with you a few ways that you might profitably start writing about your research as you do it.

Become a Member of the Digeratti: Blog about your Topic

I'm going to start with the most techie idea first, because as a sort of computer-addict, that is where my mind first turns.

Becoming a blogger about a topic might seem a bit much. After all, bloggers have been characterized as either doofs writing about World of Warcraft in their mother's

[7] My meeting with Dr. Brokaw predated my purchase of a computer by about a year, and the computer I purchased (a Mac Classic) had about half of the computing power of your average mp3 player today. What can I say? It was the 1980s. It was an uncivilized time where everyone had awful haircuts and no access to the web.

basements, or high-flying, professional writers who write because a lot of people think that they're really smart. The truth is, that with about 126 million blogs out there as of 2009, a blogger is likely to be just about anyone (Pingdom, 2009).

As for research, a blog (which you can start for free at Blogger, located at http://www.blogger.com) is incredibly useful. A blog allows you to open up an online writing space and post text, images and even video. And, here's the great part, a program like Blogger allows you to store your information online at no cost, and the writing that you produce can be copied and rewritten into a piece of research writing easily.

I won't go into the mechanics of blogging (Blogger has a fine video tutorial that covers the basics at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rA4s3wN_vK8), but I do want to suggest a few things that you might write about as you do your blog on your research topic.

Write out the C.R.A.P. test

I mentioned the C.R.A.P. test earlier, and it would be really useful to do the following: Write a citation for the text and then answer the C.R.A.P. questions below.

C (Currency)
- How recent is the information?

R (Reliability)
- Is the information balanced or biased?
- Are there citations or references to support the information?

A (Authority)
- Can you determine who the author/creator is?

P (Purpose/Point of View)
- What's the intent of the article?
- Are the ads or author trying to persuade you or sell you something?

The C.R.A.P. test gets you thinking, from the very first, about a source's reliability and importance. Also, it gets you writing smartly about your sources from the word go.

Summarize, Quote, Respond (SQR)

This tried and true way of writing about a source (SQR) starts with the creation of a citation for your source, and then you (in a few sentences) **summarize the literal meaning of the source.** Next, you find a **key quote and write it down, word for word.** Finally, you simply write (**for a page or so**) **about your opinions and ideas on the piece**.

*This sort of writing allows you come up with a **paraphrase** of your source, which should be written in your own voice and style, using less than 20% of the original language of the text. However, it also allows you to think about what your text means.*

Annotate and Respond

After writing down a citation for the text, this method involves you and a PDF or printout of a piece. You simply write down notes about, or highlight, a text as you go. Then, at the end you respond to the text you've read. Some questions to consider when responding are as follows:

- What is the key point of this piece in my opinion?
- What did I find myself agreeing with in the piece?
- What did I find myself disagreeing or taking exception with?
- How does this piece align, or not align, with other sources I've read on my topic?
- ***How does this piece REALLY fit in with my proposed research question?***

The bolded text above represents, for me, the most important question a researcher can ask about a source. There are lots of possible answers, and none of the answers can be "yes," "no," or "maybe."

Annotating and responding helps you "get information" from your source while you think about your source. It gives you the "info" you'll need to write a good research piece.

Freewrite and Quote

After writing down a citation, you want to "mine" some quotes from the text, and then simply freewrite. This means that you want to write down a series of quotes (be sure to include the page numbers where you found said quotes—if there are page numbers), and then you want to simply write "about the text."

If you are stumped about where to start, then you could simply start by writing: "I'm stumped. I'm really stumped." The seeming magic of freewriting is that words seem to beget words, and the more you write, the more cogent and focused you become.

Freewriting can be messy, but it often helps you find what you want and need to say about a topic. As for quoting, quotes are key bones in the skeleton that is your research piece.

A Final Note on Blogging: The Why of It All

You will note that I led with blogging, rather than writing down all of this in a notebook or on note-cards, and either writing in a notebook or on note-cards are definitely a

viable option. All of what is described above can be done "old school" on paper with a pen or pencil.

However, a blog creates electronic text, which can be copied and pasted into another electronic document—say, your piece of research writing. Thus, once you write text into a blog, you have text that can immediately be used in your paper. It's a one-step process that doesn't involve you having to rewrite everything into a word processing program. Also, you can put links into a blog that connect directly back to the text you found via an online database (like EBSCOhost) or a websearch (like Google Scholar). A blog allows you to keep all of your research materials in electronic format, which might be really useful if you are going to create your research writing in an electronic format.

Writing about Research with Pen and Paper

While there are a multitude of things that you can do with a blog, or even a garden-variety word processor, there are some things that are more difficult to do when writing about research.

Thus, I want to talk about two techniques that often get used to write about research that do not actually involve the use of a CPU.

Clustering, Drawing, and Graphing your Research

Unless you have a killer tablet PC or iPad, you probably would have some problems thinking visually about your topic and research question. Thus, a blank sheet of paper and a pen might be useful as you do the following:

- ***Webbing and Clustering About your Topic.*** Here you simply web or cluster (using circles with words in them and lines to connect said words) to think through what you read. You might start by putting the topic of the piece you've read in the center, then writing down important ideas around the center, and finally connecting the important ideas that you see as being connected. *This helps you realize the connections among all the elements of your source.*
- ***Drawing out your Topic.*** When doing this, you literally draw out the ideas of a piece. This allows you to think visually and metaphorically about what a given piece might mean. *Thus, you use pictures to think through what a text means and how you might use it in your research.*
- ***Flowcharting your Research.*** Here you create a flow chart, with the key idea at the top of a chart, and the associated ideas below said topic. *Start by organizing and selecting information from the research at the very beginning. Essentially, you are organizing your research piece as you research.*

At the end of the day, the approaches above are best done with pen or pencil in hand while poised over a piece of paper. They are good reasons to approach writing about your research in an "old school" way.

Note Cards

I don't know about you, but I have never, ever found a way to make note cards work for me. From elementary school on, teachers suggested writing down summaries, quotes and notes from a text on a set of color-coded index cards, which I could then use to write a paper from.

Perhaps I'm not visually oriented enough, but the idea of color coding cards, spreading them out in the order I would use them, and writing a paper from them never worked. If I *had* to have note cards for a research paper that I wrote for school, I would create the note cards after the fact.

However, I know a good number of people who have used note cards effectively to organize their research writing prior to drafting a research piece. If you are one of the people for whom this works, do what works. If you want to explore how to do this, I can recommend this URL for a good rundown of how to use note cards: http://www.crlsresearchguide.org/12_Making_Note_Cards.asp.

If you do not want, or need, to use note cards, then try some of the techniques listed above. You want (and I would argue *need*) to write about your research as you acquire it. However, the form and format of that writing is really up to you.

Do you Really Believe That? Fieldwork in the Weird

There is a great deal of research that you can do online, in a library, and while sitting in a comfy chair reading a book you found in a local bookstore. However, some urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories almost demand that you get out into the wider world to interview or survey people about their beliefs.

There is a long and deep tradition in folklore studies, and in other fields as well, of **interviewing** people about the folk stories that they know—including things like urban legends. Also, social scientists and pollsters have been **surveying** people around the world for years, trying to get at people's beliefs about hoaxes and even conspiracy thinking.[8]

[8] One of the most interesting and smartly done surveys on conspiracy thinking was done in 2007 by Carl Stempel, Thomas Hargrove, and Guido H. Stempel III. After creating a random sample of 1010 people, they found that more than 12% of respondents thought that conspiracies about 9/11 were "very likely" or "likely" true. The most interesting result was that 36.1% of the sample thought it was "likely" or "very likely" that "People in the federal government either assisted in the 9/11 attacks or took no action to

When you do your research it might be useful to find out what people think about the urban legend, hoax, or conspiracy that is central to your research question. To do that, you want to go and interview a set of folks who would either believe or not believe in your topic, or you might even go wider and survey a large group of people. To do that, you need to construct a set of **interview questions** or create a **survey.** An interview is where you, as the interviewer, get to ask questions of people—trying to get at attitudes and beliefs about your research topic via **open-ended questions** (questions that cannot be answered "yes" or "no".[9] A survey is a set of carefully constructed questions that you would ask to a group of people about your topic, with most of the answers to said questions being **closed questions** (questions with a limited set of answers, generally speaking).

Also, before you start any research that involves interviewing or surveying people, you need to obtain **human subjects permissions** for your project. This means, at my institution, that students have to complete an online "human subjects training module" and do research that does not imperil people (e.g., have them reveal illegal activities) and (in the case of surveys) keeps their responses anonymous and secure. This might mean something else at your school, and you want to check with your teacher about human subjects permissions before you ask a single question as an interviewer or surveyor.

Finally, there is one more bit of thinking through your survey or research project that you want and need to do: think about who you are going to survey or interview, and why you NEED to survey or interview a particular group of people.

Getting Your Population, Then Your Sample

First, you need to consider whether or not interviewing or surveying people will give you good, reliable data to use. Will surveying or interviewing anyone actually add something smart and useful to your research writing? Also, you want to think very carefully about the **population** you might survey or interview. Population, in terms of the sort of academic research we are talking about here, means a particular group with particular characteristics that you want to find information about. Thus, you want to be really clear and up front about the sort of people you want and need to answer your survey or agree to be interviewed. Will you ask everyone you can to take your survey or answer your interview questions? This is likely impossible—think about writing down all the answers that all the people you know would have about questions you would ask about, say, 9/11. This could take years.

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prevent the attacks because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East" (Stemple, Hargove & Stemple, 2007, p. 358).

[9] You get to be a sort of Jimmy Kimmel figure, but you're going to ask questions about your research to folks you know—not questions about vodka use to Lady Gaga.

In all likelihood, you'll need to come up with a **sample** of a population, a specific number of a larger group that you can ask questions of. This sample could be, if you had a good amount of money and time to do your research, a **random, stratified sample.** This means that if you wanted to know—as Carl Stemple, Thomas Hargrove and Guido Stemple III (2007) did—which 9/11 conspiracy theories people favored, you would create a random sample that reflects the whole of the United States in terms of racial and ethnic affiliations, gender, and class.

In all likelihood, unless you and your teacher get a big National Science Foundation Grant to do your research (which is, sadly, not likely), you're going to have to create what is called a **convenience sample.** This is a sample that is considered, overall, less reliable and valid (meaning not as true and authoritative) as a **random sample.** However, such a sample can give you some good information, nonetheless. You just want to be pretty modest in making big claims based on your sample. So, if everyone in your sample survey were to say that they believed that 9/11 was "an inside job," and you had 50 of your friends answering your survey, you could not claim that "everyone believes that 9/11 was an inside job."

Once you have thought about a population, nailed down a sample you want to collect, and thought about whether to survey or interview folks, you get to start writing down survey and/or interview questions.

Writing Your Questions

Once you have nailed down the sample that you want and need to work with, you need to figure out what to ask said sample.

This would seem to be an easy thing to do. If you are going to conduct an interview (which would give you good, non-numeric information), then you simply write down direct questions that will give you the exact information you want. And, if you are doing a survey (where you ask closed-ended questions to get numbers), then you will do the same.

It actually ain't that easy.

For an interview to work, you have to ask the *right questions* that get and keep people talking. As for a survey, you have to think about good questions that can be *definitively answered*. This is a lot harder than it appears.

<u>Interview Questions</u>

If you have written an interview question, the first question that you have to ask yourself is this: can it be answered "yes" or "no"? If the answer is yes, then you need to rewrite the question. (I would suggest rewriting your question to start with "why" or "how" and go from there.)

The reason that you cannot write **yes/no questions** for an interview is simple. An answer of "yes" or "no" to a given question gives you no juicy quotes to work with. Also, even if people try to answer your yes/no question in a meaningful way, they will often stumble around because you're asking them to do all of the work for you.

Essentially, with interviews you need to get people talking about themselves, then move into talking about your research topic or research question. Thus, you might have, for a short 15–20 minute interview about the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" urban legend, a list of questions like this:

1. Would you spell your name for me?
2. Urban legends are tales told by "a friend of a friend" that seem to be "real events," but are not verifiable as such. What are some urban legends have you heard of?
3. How did you come by the urban legends you have heard of?
4. There is an urban legend called the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" that goes like this. . .If you have heard a version of the legend, can you tell it to me as you know it?
5. Why do you think people might want to tell and retell the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" to people?
6. Is there anything else you want to say about the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" or urban legends in general?

I want to point out that all of the questions above avoid a yes/no format. Also, the set of questions starts with a simple question that anyone could answer (spelling the interviewee's name); then introduce the topic (notice that question two defines the term "urban legend"); and ends with questions about the "Vanishing Hitchhiker." This sort of progression is crucial.

You want, with any interview, to spend some time setting your interview subject at ease (even if this person is a good friend or family member). You need to ask if you can turn on the voice recorder, and, most significantly, you need to make sure that you ask questions that move from easy and not terrifically personal, to more involved and casually personal.

This is, of course, no guarantee that you will have a great interview, but it does go a long way to helping you conduct a productive interview that might get you some great stories about your topic.

<u>Survey Questions</u>

At some point in their lives, most people have had a dinner interrupted (generally during election season) by a person who wants to ask you a few questions about your opinion regarding a) the electability of a politician; b) your position on gun control; or, c) your opinion of the current resident of the White House. If you are like me, the few minutes turns into 20 to 30, and you despair of ever finishing your now-tepid plate of spaghetti.

Thus, my first bit of advice to you about surveys is to be brief, clear, and considerate of your survey taker's time.

In terms of the questions themselves, you want to come up with questions, or even statements, that people can clearly answer without feeling like they are being false to you.

Thus, if you are surveying people about their attitudes towards, say, the conspiratorial notion that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, then you might ask a question like this at the heart of your survey:

Select an answer to the question that ***best represents*** your opinion of the statements below:

1. Lee Harvey Oswald was ***the only*** **person** involved in ***the planning of*** the assignation of President John F. Kennedy.
    a. Strongly Agree
    b. Agree
    c. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
    d. Disagree
    e. Strongly Disagree

You will notice that my "question" above, really isn't a question; it's a statement. Also, you want to note the bolded and italicized language. This question is really specific, asking for *just* the person's opinion on the planning of assassination, and referencing only the idea that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Finally, you will probably recognize the scale of responses below—from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree."

All of the above elements are crucial in writing a good, non-leading survey question. The question, or in this case **stem** (which is a sentence or phrase that a survey taker needs to read and consider before selecting an answer) is specific and the **Likert scale** allows for a specific answer to a question about a belief that someone holds.

Survey questions need to be written in a way that allows survey takers to give you data that is reliable. To do that, you want to do the following as you write down your **question** or stem and your **responses**:

- **Ask unbiased questions.** You would not want, in a survey about the John F. Kennedy assignation, to ask, "Do you feel that JFK conspiracists are crazy?" Words like "crazy" shouldn't be in your questions. Also, more subtle words like "right" or even "conspiracy" probably would not be appropriate to put into a survey question. *You need to ask unbiased survey questions because they will give you results that are not biased and misleading.*

- **Ask only one question at a time.** Sometimes we are guilty of asking two questions at once, particularly if we are parents or teachers. For instance, your teacher might ask you, "What do you think is the most important point in 'The Vanishing Hitchhiker' and why is it important?" This sort of mooshing together of two questions could work in a classroom, but it has a bad tendency to really confuse survey takers. Thus, if you wanted to ask the question above, you would need to ask two questions: "What do you think is the most important point in the 'Vanishing Hitchhiker'?" and "Why do you think that the point you selected above is actually the most important point?" *You ask one question at a time to avoid confusing people. You do not want to moosh together two questions and get "double-barreled" questions*.
- **Check your assumptions.** We all have assumptions that we bring to any task, including survey design. You want to make sure that you keep your assumptions in check when you write your questions. If you think that people who believe in conspiracies around the assassination of President John F. Kennedy are "nuts," then you need to do your best to make sure that you don't ask questions that would *lead your respondents to agree with you because of the wording of your questions*. Again, you do this so that you don't put your survey takers in an awkward position—as well as giving yourself unreliable data.
- **Be clear, concise and jargon-free.** This means that you want to have simple questions that you will have revised *one to three times* before you ask them. Simplicity is your friend when designing survey questions. Thus, you want to avoid words that people might not know, awkwardly phrased questions, or anything else that would interfere with people giving you good, reliable answers to your questions. *You do this, again, to give yourself good, usable data.*

As for responses, there are a variety of types of responses. I mentioned using a Likert scale (a response range from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree"), and you can also use a **rating scale** (generally asking people to rate an answer 1–7) to get answers. Finally, you can even have a **series of choices**, with those choices even being **ranked**.[10]

Each of the options above has benefits and drawbacks. In the final analysis, you want to write survey questions and responses that can be answered comfortably by the people taking your survey.

Also, you want to keep in mind this bit of advice that is encapsulated in the Hippocratic Oath: "Do no harm." What this means in surveys, and also with interviews, is that you need to make sure that all of your respondents know that their responses will remain *totally anonymous,* and that none of your questions will cause

[10] To read a free, and excellent, rundown of response types, as well as how to really design a good survey, check out what SurveyMonkey has to say on the subject at http://s3.amazonaws.com/SurveyMonkeyFiles/SmartSurvey.pdf.

them *psychological distress.* If you are interviewing, this principle might mean that you have to create made-up names (called "pseudonyms") for your interview subjects.

You want to get good information for your research from your fieldwork, but you do not want to make people miserable in the process. It's not good for your soul, or for your research.

Conducting Interviews and Surveys: From Design to Analysis

Designing and Conducting Interviews

Once you have figured out who to interview and what questions you are going to ask your interviewees, then you get ready to conduct your interviews. Notice that I said "interview**s**" plural. To do a decent job with research, you will need to do more than interview one person.

When you conduct an interview, you need to arrange a time and place for an interview, bring something to take notes with, and, if you can, have some sort of recording device at hand.[11] When you start the interview, and after thanking your interview subject for his or her time, you will want to ask these two simple questions to start: "Would you spell your name for me?" and "May I use this recording device so I can make sure I get all that you have to say?" From there, you will go into your carefully sequenced set of questions, asking them and jotting down important things that your interviewee says. I would also recommend looking up regularly and making eye contact with your interviewee, so that he or she will know that you are actually listening and interested in what he or she is saying.

At the end, after thanking the person for his or her time, you will have an interview that you will then have to **transcribe.**

Transcribing an Interview

When you get done with an interview, you have a lot of information, and you have to get it from your recording device and notes into some sort of written version of the interview. This means (and there are no good "techie" fixes for this) listening to every word of the interview *at least once*, then going back through and doing a **transcription index,** a **partial transcription,** or a **full transcription.**

A transcription index is an academic document where you list the time you asked a question, and the question asked, then list the time that your interview subject started his or her response and the *beginning of that response.* This is a very brief

[11] Two often-overlooked recording devices that you have immediate access to are your cell phone and your laptop computer. Most laptops built recently have a built-in microphone that works really well with excellent, free voice recording software—Audacity. (Audacity is available at http://audacity.sourceforge.net/.) Alternatively, check out the manual for your cell phone and see what sort of voice recording it will let you do.

interview write-up (or transcription), and it will require you to go back to your index (a listing of questions, answers and times on the time) that you create and re-listen to what was written. A partial transcription is where you write out most of what the interview subject said, *word-for-word*, and you make sure that you are clear about the questions that you asked. A **full transcription** is where you write down every word your interview subject said, sometimes even including "uhs" and "ums." You write this like a script to a play, and account for every word.

At the end of whatever you do, you will have a record of what was said, that you will then have to think deeply and well about. But more on that after we look into what designing and conducting a survey involves.

Designing and Conducting Surveys

A decent survey starts with good survey questions and reasonable answers that your survey takers can wrap their heads around. From there, you want to move to the *ordering of your questions* and into *distributing your survey.* The questions on your survey should make sense together, and you want to move from demographic information (generally you want to account for *age, gender, racial and ethnic affiliations,* and other factors that might be important in your research),[12] to more complex questions at the end. Also, it's a good idea to include directions for how to answer questions that people encounter (e.g., "You will select ONE of the answers that best reflects your opinion from the next *five questions*").

As for *distributing your surveys*, you need to make sure that you think about whether you want to conduct your survey through (most likely) one of three media: via phone, via the internet, or face-to-face. **Face-to-face surveying,** is a nice choice that allows you to either write down answers or have the survey takers fill out a *short survey* for themselves. Finally, you can construct an **online survey**. An online survey, which you could set up via a website like SurveyMonkey.com, allows you to finally make use of the 500+ friends that you have on Facebook.

Any of the methods of getting your survey out to your sample population presents problems and benefits. Face-to-face surveying requires you to be in one, or several, locations over a few days while handing out a survey. And when you conduct an online survey, you can never be sure that you're actually interviewing the sample that you hoped to.

However, for each approach there are benefits as well. Face-to-face surveys allow you to see folks directly, making sure your sample aligns with what you want it to, and an

[12] Note that I said racial and ethnic "affiliationS." Many people identify with a number of groups, so you want to make any questions about racial and ethnic affiliations open enough that people can select more than one or "refuse to state." If the US Census Bureau (a faceless bureaucracy) does this, you should do the same, right?

online survey allows you to give people anonymity that might lead to even more honest answers.

You have to make a reasoned choice and opt for the type of survey that will work for you.

Analyzing Survey and Interview Data

Analyzing Interviews

When you end up with some sort of write up of your interviews, you need to begin to think about what you have—other than a lot of words that represent sweat, blood tears, and a thumb ligament that you blew hitting the play and pause buttons on your tape recorder. To do that, you need to lay out your interviews and think a bit about what they mean in terms of your *particular research question.*

It helps to do some freewriting about the **themes and ideas** (big, general notions that came up in *more than one interview*) that seem to come up in your interview. Also, you can think about these themes and ideas in terms of the library or **online research** that you did earlier. To do this, ask yourself this question: How does what my interviewees said mesh, or not mesh, with the research I did before I even started interviewing folks? Finally, it sometimes helps to pull out colored pens and start marking up whatever **transcript** or **transcription index** you have. You assign a theme or idea to a given color, and mark up your transcriptions or transcription indexes according to theme.

One thing to keep in mind, whether you are working with interviews or surveys, is that you do not want to *over-generalize* your results. In other words, you don't want to do a set of three interviews and say that your interviews "prove" that most people do not believe in conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It's a long shot that any set of interviews will allow you to prove anything and, as we've said before, proving a "truth" isn't really the point of doing research into urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories. You can come to some assumptions and reasoned conclusions, but I would avoid using words like "proof" and "truth."

Analyzing Surveys

If you use a good online survey tool like SurveyMonkey then you are given tools to work with, but you can construct those self-same tools as well.

One of the tools that helps you visualize the data (remember that most of you survey questions will produce a number, or a word like "agree"), is anything that helps you make a **chart** or **graph** of a given question. Obviously, a program like Excel or Calc in Open Office will let you create a graph and chart. However, a piece of paper, a pen, and an ability to figure out percentages will allow you to do the same. *A chart or*

graph can help you look at the results to an individual question and see what most people answered. It can show you patterns in your data.

Another possibility is to simply create a table of your data. This means, even using a word processing program or a spreadsheet program, you simply put your numbers in boxes, with each box referring to the answers you get on a given question. *Again, this laying out of your data can help you see your results.*

You can also *compare* your answers using a **table**, chart, or graph. What you might do is to begin to *lump* together data and see what they look like. *This helps you see the relationship among your various questions and the data that they created.*

Triangulation of Interviews and Surveys

A necessary final step, before writing about your survey or data, is to think a bit about **triangulating your data** with other research. This can mean that you compare the results of your survey about beliefs in "conspiracy theories involving the claim that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone" with other surveys that have been done in the past. Or it can mean that you will compare your interview responses against what some experts have said in the past about conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. *The point is that you need to think about how your data from an interview or survey does, or does not, align with research done before.* Once you do this, you probably want and need to start writing your researched piece.

From Great Ideas to Written Words: Drafting Your Research

You might have noticed, or perhaps you didn't, that in this chapter the phrase "researched piece" is used, rather than the more common term "research paper." This turn of phrase is intentional.

A research paper, in my long experience as a teacher and student, tends to mean that a writer (and I include myself in this number) sucks in every piece of information, and then, like an old Hoover vacuum, flips some internal switch and spews the information back out in some sort of "order."[13] The end result of all of this is a mess of facts that rarely, if ever, say anything original, useful or interesting—even to the writer him or herself. It's a lousy way to write about research, and it's a particularly savage type of research writing to have to wade through.

[13] I'm using the word "order" here in the same way that someone might use "shy" when describing Katy Perry.

Thus, here we want you to write a "piece" that has "research" in it. This piece can take a variety of forms (more on this in a second), and the research should help you answer a question about your subject that you really have. You need, for the research and writing that we are advocating in *Terra Incognita,* to make sure that your paper has a point.

To get to this "point," we want to recommend that you consider thinking about writing your piece in a few **genres**, and it is important to remember that by "genre" we're talking not just about the format of the piece, but the way that the structure of the piece operates to create knowledge and meaning. Below are four research genres that we can recommend. The list is clearly not exhaustive, but it is a place to start.

Research Genres

The Seminar Paper with Subheadings

One genre that you might consider using is a pretty traditional one: the seminar paper. A seminar paper's name is tied to the idea of a "research seminar," a college class in which a small group of students meet with a teacher and write focused papers, driven by a **research question,** a **research problem**, or even a **thesis.** We have already described what a "**research question"** is, and you probably have some sense of what a thesis is (a statement that says "what your paper is about").[14] A research problem, which can act as the center of a seminar paper, is often a *gap in research* that you can identify, or a new approach to research that allows you an opportunity to say something.

Regardless of how you relate the purpose and point of your seminar paper, it might be useful to think about dividing up said piece into *subheadings that say something specific about your paper's focus.* Thus, if you are writing about why people are drawn to the idea that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the assassination of President Kennedy, you might have some of the following **descriptive subheadings:**

1. What The Conspiracists Say
2. What The Experts Say about the Conspiracists
3. Why Conspiracists Continue to Believe
4. Why We Need a Conspiracy Theory about JFK

You can see that each section of the seminar paper sets out to describe an element of the theory around why Oswald did not act alone—spending less time on the whatness of the topic. *The focus is on the why* of the topic.

[14] There is, of course, a big difference between being able to define and write a thesis, but that's not our point at the moment.

Ultimately, a seminar paper is a familiar academic form that demands that you think about your topic and research question in a particular way. It's the sort of piece that you might even write after the class you're in now.

The IMRAD Research Paper

At first glance this type of paper seems both familiar, a little boring, and terribly restrictive. The Acronym **IMRAD** stands for **introduction, methods, results and discussion.** Thus, if you write in this genre, you would have a paper that would include an introduction (an overview of your piece that includes a look at the library research you did, ending with your research problem or research question); a statement of your methods (how you did your research, particularly your fieldwork); an objective rendering of your results (this would be your field research data); and ending with a more open discussion of what the implications of your research are.

This paper, widely used in the social sciences (i.e., psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.) and the sciences (i.e., biology, chemistry, etc.), has a long history and a variety of reasons for its seemingly "boring" division into three sections. Perhaps the key reason for the division is a common-sense one: the IMRAD format follows the way a scientist typically approaches a question in scientific research. A scientist wants to come up with a question and review previous research, think about the methods she or he will use to explore the question, relate the methods used for the purposes of replication, and then discuss the findings. The IMRAD format exists because it nicely aligns with the **Scientific Method** of research.

This alignment between scientific research and writing that is reflected in the IMRAD format might be a good thing to work into your research, particularly if you are doing **fieldwork** as part of your research. *Also, this format allows you to think about, and present, your research in a way that emphasizes the scientific method, making your writing more credible to a wide audience of readers.*

A Magazine Article

At some point in our lives, we have all read a piece in an online or paper magazine that made us think, "Whoa. . .that's cool!" Perhaps it was the writing that impressed us, maybe even the research behind the writing.

The point is that most magazine articles that you read (whether in an online version of an article in the *Rolling Stone* or even something from a paper copy of *Time*), involve research of two types. You have to, at the very least, interview people and you have to do some sort of online or library research.

To write a magazine-type article, you must figure out your purpose and point, perhaps do some planning of the structure of the piece, research the piece, and then start

writing—wherever it makes sense to start. *The nice thing about doing this sort of writing is that it allows you to think about how to write for a broader, less-academic audience.*

The Multi-genre Research Paper

The last piece that is worth mentioning is a type of writing that Tom Romano (2000) calls "multi-genre" papers, papers which arise from "research, experience and imagination" (p. ix). This is a paper that draws on a variety of different academic and non-academic genres (everything from lab reports to emails) to tell the story of a subject. Despite the fact that the piece is composed of different forms of writing, the whole of it should still make a cohesive whole.

You want to use this genre of writing if you are interested in experimenting with research and writing. It allows you to work with a variety of types of writing, but it demands that you commit fully to your research, writing and thinking.

Finding and Exploring Genres

One thing that you can do to help start writing, in addition to all the note-taking and blogging you might be doing about your sources—as well as working with your fieldwork—is to find some of the genres above and look at them in depth.

To do this, you might go online and do a basic Google search, and see what is out there on the web. A word of caution about this: the quality of papers on the web is notoriously variable. Also, as you are certainly aware, using direct language from someone else's research piece could be construed as plagiarism. [15] So, you want to read through the texts *without writing down quotes and notes*.

A final and excellent source are papers that your teacher has gathered as exemplars of outstanding student work. These papers are tailor-made for what you want to do to get the most out of a sample piece of research writing.

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15 Definitions of plagiarism are pretty variable, but one that does the trick is from the Council of Writing Program Administrators: "In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source. **This definition applies to texts published in print or on-line, to manuscripts, and to the work of other student writers,,** (2003). The bolded text is important because it refers to *all* text, including the texts that friends and classmates produce.

Questions for Exploring an Exemplar Text

After reading the exemplar text, take a moment to think about and briefly answer the questions below:

- What does the text look like on the page? (Are there sections, chapters, different forms, pictures?)
- Who wrote the piece, when was it written, and why might the author and date be important to "getting" the piece?
- How would you describe the tone and voice of the paper?
- Who is, besides the teacher, the audience?
- What kinds of sources are in play here, and how exactly does the author use the sources?
- *What do you like or dislike about the piece as a reader?*
- *What do you like or dislike about the piece as a writer?*

The last two, bolded questions should help you think about what sort of genre(s) you want to employ in your writing, and the preceding questions should help you think about what makes the piece you read "tick."

Starting to Write

If you go back and look at our previous chapter, "Reading and Writing about the Pieces in *Terra Incognita*," you will find some good information about how to start a piece.

If you decide to write an **IMRAD research paper** or a **seminar paper,** then I would make a modest suggestion to you: Think about opening up a word-processing document and writing in the sections that you intend to use.

With an IMRAD research paper this will be done very quickly; however, you can add to the standard subtitles of "Introduction," "Methods," "Results," and "Discussion." What you can add are the sorts of descriptive headings that your seminar paper will likely have.

Once you have these headings down, you can start anywhere that you feel comfortable starting. The point is to start writing as soon as you can so there is sufficient time to do what writing should *really* be called: rewriting. Also, dividing up a larger research piece can help a great deal in terms of making the writing task seem a bit less daunting. If you have five sections in a ten-page paper, then it often feels (as a writer) like you are writing five two-page papers, rather than a huge, ten-page paper.

Rewriting and Plugging Holes in your Research

Again, you might be well served here to go back to the previous chapter in *Terra Incognita* called "Reading and Writing about the Pieces in *Terra Incognita*." This has some good specific strategies for revision and editing that I won't repeat here.

However, there is something that you will have to do with a widely researched piece that you don't necessarily have to do when you are writing only about the readings found in *Terra Incognita*. As you write your researched piece, you are likely to find that you need to come up with some sort of fact, idea, or statistic that you do not already have.

The truth is that even the most talented researcher discovers the need to add information that rounds out a point or an idea when writing. To do that, there are lots of tools; below are a few that have served this researcher well.

- **Google Scholar.** Located at http://scholar.google.com, this site allows for a broad source of scholarly articles—most often peer reviewed.[16] I use this to see what is available on the web from scholars, and I often find that I have to use the online sources that are available from a good college or university library to find sources.
- **Snopes.com.** This is a really fine website dedicated to researching urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories in a thorough way. It's a debunking site, but it tends to do good research and *cite its actual sources*.
- **My University's Library.** There is still no place as good to fill in research gaps as that large building on your campus that houses an ancient school technology called "books." I recommend using it and talking to the smart and capable librarians who work there. My guess is that they would be keen to steer you towards good, reliable sources that help you write with candor and intelligence about everything from 9/11 conspiracy theories to the interesting history of the "Fijian Mermaid."

I do feel honor bound to say one more thing about filling holes and gaps in your research: sometimes a gap or hole cannot be filled, period. This does not mean that you are not a good enough researcher; this just means that adequate and convincing evidence probably doesn't exist for the point you wanted/needed to make.

So, if you cannot find some statistic, quote, or bit of evidence that would help you perfectly make your point, let it go. It wasn't meant to be. Sometimes the best thing

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[16] A peer-reviewed article is the sort of research you hope to find. It means that people in the field, say psychology, read an article written in the field and say whether it should be published or not. This tends to produce more reliable and nuanced sources than, say, the stuff you might randomly find on the web. This is why a source about UFO abductions from the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* is considered more reliable than pieces you might find on the web at the *International Center for Abduction Research* (ICAR)—an interesting sample of ICAR's "research" can be seen at http://www.ufoabduction.com/straighttalk.htm.

that you can do as a research writer is to not force things and, maybe, even to simply remove text about a point you hoped to make.

This all comes down, really, to being honest and forthright with yourself, your teacher, and anyone else who reads your piece. There is a reward to honest research and writing, and that reward is satisfaction for work well done and real, authentic learning.

Credibility with Credulous Subject Matter: Dotting Your "Ibids" and Cross-checking Your Facts

You might have noticed that we, the authors and editors of *Terra Incognita*, are pretty big fans of footnotes and even in-text citation. And, as any dedicated fan of anything—be it *Angry Birds* or the San Francisco Giants—we want to share our love with you.

Citations and footnotes are lovely, beautiful things. They allow you to inform, entertain, and clue people into the rich world of fact, fiction, fantasy, and even reality, that swirls around every written word.

As for footnotes, they are incredibly fun. They help a writer convey information that might not fit into a straight-forward, linear narrative. They can be informative, playful, and even graceful and glorious.[17] As for in-text citations, and their brethren that you find in a bibliography, they are a necessary and considerate gesture that you, the writer, make to your readers.

When you cite the work of someone else, you are saying "this person, this fine writer and researcher, has something important to say that pertains to the point I'm trying to make." You are also saying, "without this text from someone else, I wouldn't be able to say this gracefully and well." In essence, each time you cite a source in text, and tell your reader where she or her can procure that text for further examination (that's the real purpose of a bibliography), you're doing a polite and kind thing. You're giving credit where credit is due.

If you don't do this kind, thoughtful sort of citation, you are essentially slorping up credit for work that you didn't do—just like the pointy-haired boss of *Dilbert* fame. No one, even the pointy-haired boss of Dilbert fame, wants to be the sort of person who refuses to give people credit for the work they do. *So, don't be a slorpper of other people's research, writing and thinking—cite them.*

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[17] To hear some of the best thinking about footnotes and endnotes ever, check out this interview by Charlie Rose with David Foster Wallace: http://www.charlierose.com/view/clip/9540. It can be argued that David Foster Wallace is the best writer and user of footnotes and endnotes in the last 50 or so years.

Ultimately, you want to dot your ibids and cross-check your facts as a researcher, via citing and thorough library and online research, because you want to do good, honest work. Our experience as teachers is that almost all students want to do good, honest work that they can be proud of. Thus, we have some advice and counsel for you on what resembles a mechanical process, but isn't: citation.

Basic Citation: A Logical Approach

The most damaging and soul-crushing way to approach citation is to be consumed with "just being correct." This means that you nail down the format of every in-text citation and each bibliographic entry, but you don't get *why* these formats exist and are important.

To give you some idea of why you need to think about placement of authors, dates, and page numbers with in-text citations and bibliographies, we want to deal for a moment with the *why* rather than the *what and how* of citation. And to do that, we want to focus on two **citation systems** (ways of handling outside sources and formatting research pieces): the Modern Language Association **(MLA)** citation system and the American Psychological Association **(APA)** citation system.

MLA

Odds are that if you have ever been required to do **in-text citation** (where you put an author and page number after paraphrased or quoted material from another writer in parentheses), you likely used the MLA formatting system. This is known as an **author, page number** system, because each in-text citation has to have an author and page number (if available) for it. As for the **bibliographic entries, or works cited entries** (the listing of sources that you paraphrase or cite that comes at the end of your piece), these sources also rely on the author(s) last name(s) heavily. And there is a reason for this that is tied to the sorts of professionals who write using this citation system.

According the MLA webpage, "MLA style for documentation is widely used in the humanities, especially in writing on language and literature" (2010). What this means is that people who write about language and literature are likely to use MLA, and the citation system is going to reflect the values of these folks.

Think for a minute about all of the good English teachers you had from 7th to 12th grade. When they talked about the writers they clearly admired did they get a far away look in their eyes? Did they, when leading the class through *Hamlet*, simply use the last name, "Shakespeare," when talking about the immortal bard of Avon? And when they did talk about this beloved author, could you feel the respect being invoked in the way he or she said the name?

The answer is probably yes.

The reason that the last name of an author is so important in MLA (so important that it is always the first thing you see in an in-text citation or in a works cited entry) is that authors are important, and they are habitually known by their last names—not their first names. Thus, "Shakespeare," "Dickinson," "Cisneros," or even "Brunvand" take on certain importance because MLA folks really value the writers of information, and using the last name of a writer is a mark of respect. Also, it's unlikely with long-dead authors, like Shakespeare, that we actually knew them on a first-name basis. Thus, MLA researchers do not talk about quoting "their bud Willie."

At the end of the day, the name of an author, the title of a text, and where to find a given, juicy quote is really valued by MLA citation style because those things are valued by the people who use that style—folks who teach and write about things like *Literature, Linguistics, and Romantic Languages*. Other things, like the date when things were published, are important, but less so. After all, the best, most accurate texts for some authors, like William Shakespeare again, were published long ago, so the date of publication has less importance in MLA than in, say, APA.[18]

The point of this is that it helps a bit to think about citation systems as ways that people in a field (such as literature or folklore studies) say, "This is what I cited," and "This is why I cited it the way I did." Citation systems are not arbitrary; they are pretty logical, actually.

APA

The citation style that we use for *Terra Incognita* is called APA, and we use it for a couple of reasons.

According to the *APA Style* website (2011): "*APA Style*® originated in 1929, when a group of psychologists, anthropologists, and business managers convened and sought to establish a simple set of procedures, or *style rules*, that would codify the many components of **scientific writing** to increase the **ease of reading comprehension**." Notice the *bolded words in the quote*. These words hint at why APA is high on always including, in their in-text citations and bibliography (*called "References"*) an *author and date.* The reason for this is that science, and writing about science, demands that information used for research and writing be current. Thus, simply by looking at something like this in-text citation (*APA Style Website, 2011*) you can get an instant sense that this is the most current citation that you are likely to find about APA style.

Thus, even in the "References" section, the first thing that is always present in APA is the author followed by the date. This makes sense if you imagine a bunch of people interested in current research, like psychologists and sociologists, sitting around and

[18] Shakespeare is so famous and important that he even has his own set of conspiracy theories that swirl around his "authorship" of all his sonnets and plays. A good rundown of these conspiracy theories can be read at http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/3686/1/Shakespeare.pdf.

wondering if a source is current. They would want to know the date up front. After all, knowledge in the **social sciences** (which can be broadly defined as the study of human society—and includes fields like psychology, sociology, and even anthropology), is ever changing and shifting.

The point here is that the forms of citations in APA are pretty consistent (every in-text and reference entry will start with an author(s)' name(s) and a date of publication), and they are consistent for a reason. Also, the other point is this: if you keep in mind the reason behind the way a citation system works, it is easier to make sense of that system when you use it.

If you get the why of a citation system, then the what and how of it are a lot easier to understand. To use a citation system, after you understand it, there are lots of tools out there. My personal "favorite five" are listed below in order:

1. **The Purdue OWL.** The Purdue OWL has a great rundown of MLA and APA styles, including how to cite everything in text and in the works cited or references sections. It is available at http://owl.english.purdue.edu. *The Purdue OWL is authoritative, smart, and free.*
2. **NoodleBib Express.** This is an online bibliography website that helps you construct good, pretty reliable bibliography entries in APA and MLA style. It's available at http://www.noodletools.com, *and it is generally correct about MLA and APA form and it's free*.
3. **EasyBib.** This is another free citation tool, and is located at http://www.easybib.com/. My experience tells me that this is a little less reliable and up-to-date than **NoodleBib Express**. *However, it is free and often reliable.*
4. **APA and MLA Citation Game Home Page**. This has one of the best one-page handouts of the basic bibliographic entries for MLA and APA (see the MLA and APA *review sheet* links at http://depts.washington.edu/trio/quest/citation/apa_mla_citation_game/index.htm *This site provides a good, quick rundown of APA and MLA style, and IT'S A GAME!*
5. **Any handbook that your teacher assigns.** I have used a variety of handbooks over the course of my life, and I'm pretty well convinced that all are fairly good to have around for reference. *It might be the one book you should never sell back to the bookstore.*

A Final Point about Citation and Fact Checking

It's important to remember that good citation practices (where you cite, in text, anything that you didn't know before beginning your research, and have a bibliographic entry for every source you have paraphrased or quoted) make you into a credible researcher. And credibility, real and perceived, is a key issue to consider when you are writing and researching things that often seem incredible.

Thus, make sure that you spend time citing materials in smart, thoughtful ways, thereby giving credit where credit is due. Also, be sure that you do not allow yourself to be swept off your feet by a particular author, article, or idea.

You want to keep in mind that the facts you include in your researched piece need to be **triangulated** if they can. That means, that for *key facts* you want to make sure that they are agreed upon by 2–3 of your sources. To do that, you need to research enough that you can be confident of the truth, with a small "t," of your sources.

In the haze and fog that can engulf research into urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories, you need to keep your fact-checking lamp lit. You want to do this so that you and your readers don't get "taken." Also, you want to do it because you are a smart, capable researcher, and your citation- and fact-checking strategies will show that to be true.

How to Avoid Boring Yourself and Others: Genre and Research about Urban Legends, Hoaxes and Conspiracy Theories

This final bit is a short, and hopefully fun, exhortation to remind you that you can easily avoid being bored when you research urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories. Because if you are bored with your research, it will show and you will invariable bore your readers.[19]

To prevent this, keep in mind that research into hoaxes, urban legends and conspiracy theories should be fun. You will get to read pretty unbelievable things (like the notion that a child star can buy the farm because of poorly chosen junk food combinations), and you will be putting forth *your ideas* about why such off-the-wall stories matter.

As a researcher into urban legends, hoaxes and conspiracy theories, you get to sometimes be *the first* person to really deeply consider and think through a phenomenon that scholars have not yet seriously addressed.

Also, you can be both endlessly entertained and engaged as you read, interview, survey and write your way towards a deeper understanding of human nature—as well as the nature of why people might want to believe that "we never landed on the moon."

[19] I've always loved this lyric from the band Harvey Danger: "if you're bored then you're boring." This pretty much sums up bored people to me.

To do the research that your teacher and *Terra Incognita* asks of you is to have an opportunity to discover how you and others think, in general. It is also an invitation to tell your research story in an engaging and thoughtful way that you can be proud of.

At the end of your research process, you should have a product of your intelligence and imagination that you can be proud of. It is this sort of intellectual pride that *Terra Incognita* wants to foster.

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