First Year Students and the Research Process: hearing student voices
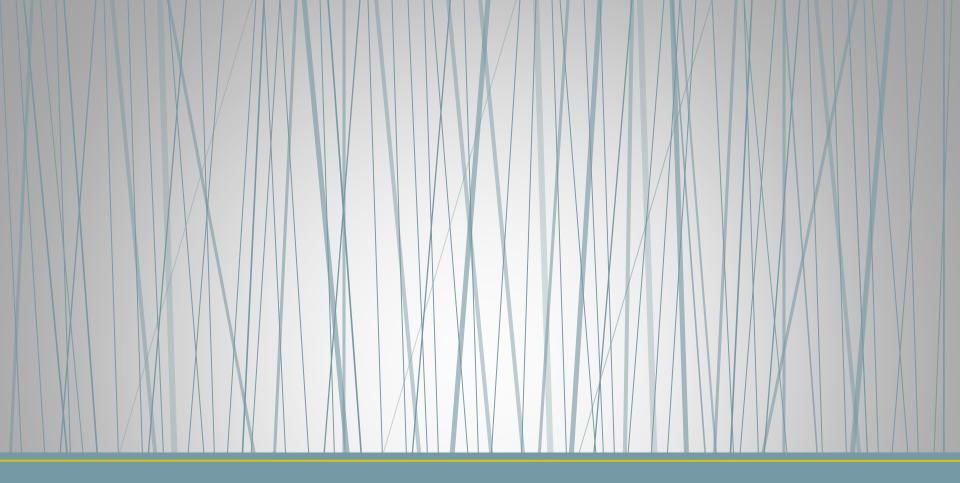
Diane VanderPol

Emily A. B. Swanson

Amy S. Kelly

Methods

- Recruited students from English 110 (Composition and Research)
- Interviewed 11 first year students students
- Interviewed students after they completed final research paper
- Asked pre-set questions but allowed interviewers to explore interesting ideas, thoughts, or topics

Findings

- Topic Selection

- Finding Materials

- Citation & Use
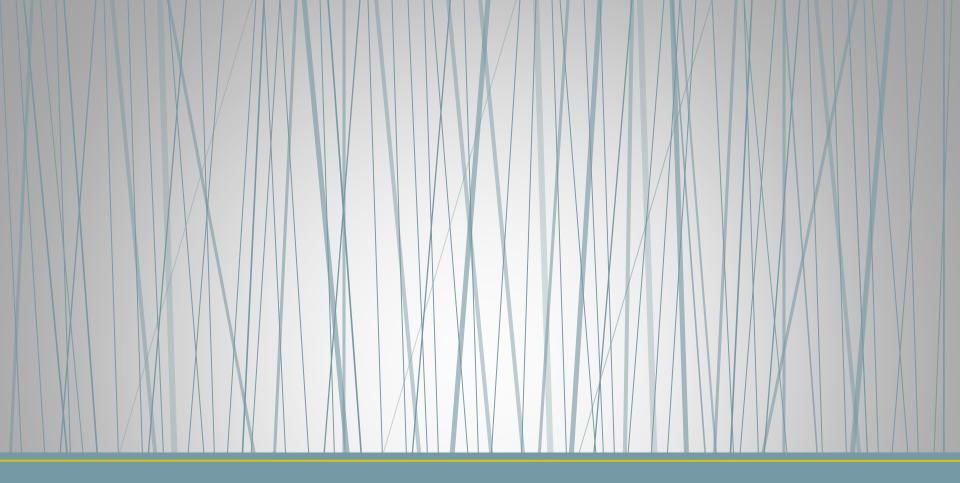
- Help

Findings: Topic Selection

Topic Selection: Emotional Connection

My mom got diagnosed with Celiac' s disease and so we [family] heard about this diet, it's called the Paleolithic Diet. And we started kind of doing it, and we started getting into it. And then I heard there was a controversy over it…So I was like, well, it's something that's in my life right now. Something that I can write about and be interested in.

Topic Selection: Prior Knowledge

I had already done some research on [the topic] in high school, and I thought it was really interesting… I thought it might be easier already having some ideas.

Topic Selection: Ease of finding information

"I decided on ones that I could find the most information on and that I felt knowledgeable about and that I thought would be interesting to readers."

"And there were a lot of documents, and like, primary documents really that related to the topic that'd be easy to find."

Findings: Finding Materials

Finding Materials: Information Environment

"I spent a lot of time trying to find something relevant to what I was writing about, and it wasn't so much a fault of the system. It was more of a "I'm looking for things that are very specific," always going to limit my results."

"Yeah, the problem I have is, it's a newer debate. There's no, like, reliable resources or stuff. It's all peoples' opinion."
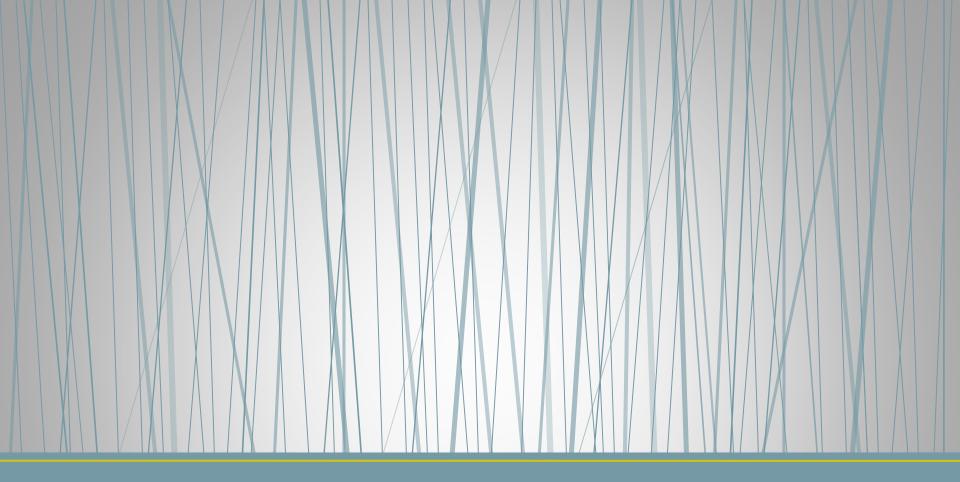
Finding Materials: Too much Information

Well I started looking at things. Like, the historical part was the easiest, because there are tons of history books, tons of websites [on Holocaust history], and so Google was my first choice…. I just like Google, because it's my go-to thing, I just use it. The only drawbacks I would say is that it pulls up stuff that's not really related. It's not really specific. And so you get just a ton of information. So that's why it took me a while, to kind of weed it out.

Finding Materials: Flexibility without Mastery

"I went back on, like EBSCO. Like the databases on there. And then also popular sources, just on Google."

"I did EBSCOhost and… ProQuest. I only search Google for small stuff."

Finding Materials: Difficulties with searching

I put in 'airport security' and then in parentheses AND body scanners or AND pat downs… And then when I was looking for drug sniffing dogs, I did the double search. With Google and the quotes, to single it out.
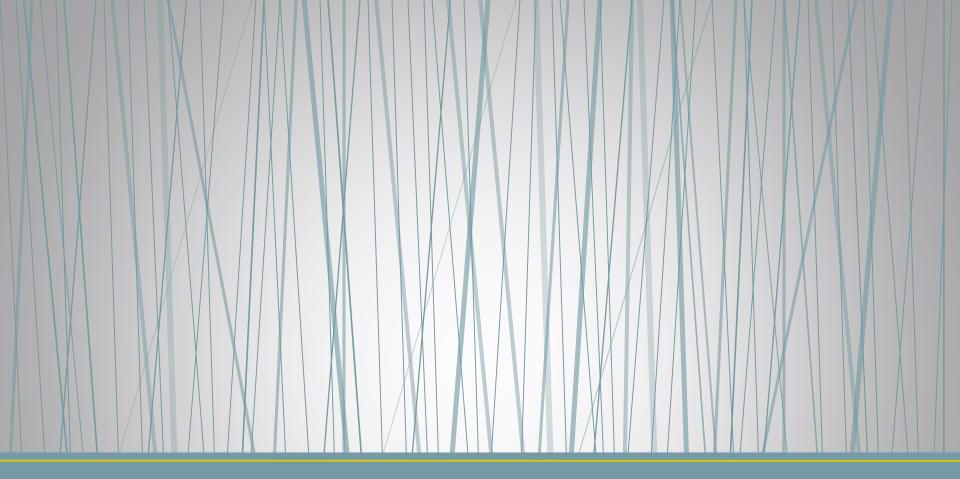
Findings: Citation & Use

Citation & Use: Organizational Mechanics

[The professor] said she wanted to see at least three citations in each paragraph. Because of that's the way a paper should be. So… she had us go through and make a chart. So we had all of our ideas at the top and then our resources. And whenever you had a resource that went with an idea, I would summarize what they said in that idea. So I went through and organized my sources that way and then I would go through them and condense them in paragraphs.

Citation & Use: Emphasis

"Because I knew already, about the Paleolithic Diet, I just needed more information so that I could be more accurate in my statistics, or more accurate in proving a point."

"Well, so I'd use them [the sources] to, like, emphasize my ideas."
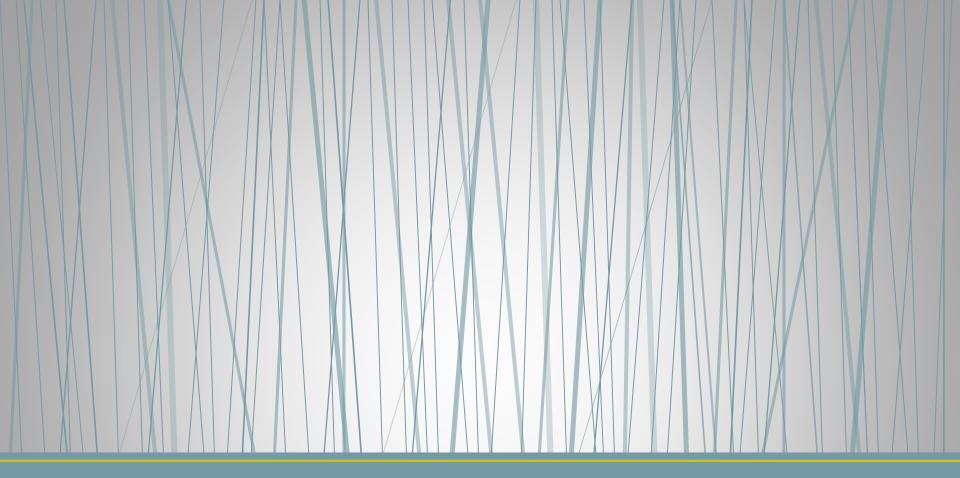
Findings: Help

Help: Family & Friends

"As soon as I put it in my own words, I needed some help with sentence flow and paragraph transitions. I went to the Writing Center… [the student consultant] read over it and helped me with some transitions. And then I had a friend who's really good at grammar and reading over stuff, and she helped me with the whole thing."

"But oftentimes my brother… I'd ask his opinion on certain things… I think it was a couple times when I'd ask, if it was a paragraph, does this sound right to you? Does this seem clear?"

Help: Librarians

I really didn't feel like I needed too much help finding sources. All year during class we'd been shown a bunch of different databases and search engines and stuff like that.

Conclusions

Prior knowledge

- Incredibly important

- Use prior knowledge for "good"

- Stumbling block: moving from topic to keyword searching

Search Confusion

- New tasks such as doing research, writing scholarly papers, and reading scholarly materials increase a student's cognitive load

- Overwhelmed with catalog &database selection, search strategy, selecting sources

- Students could benefit from discipline-based and discrete task-based Information Literacy instruction

- Librarians &faculty must have clear expectations and repeatedly model each element of the complex processes involved in research and academic writing.

- Trial & error learning may not be the most effective

Synthesis

- No more checklists i.e. use 3 scholarly articles
- Students should be encouraged to use the most relevant and appropriate sources for the hypothesis
- Librarians & faculty must help students to develop the skills to read critically, compare and synthesize information for use in their own thought and knowledge development

Scaffolding

- Problems in early stages of the research process snowball as students progress through the paper

- Librarians & faculty need to scaffold assignments & create low stakes research tasks

- Importance of early intervention

Moving Forward

- Librarians & Faculty should collaborate to design research assignments

- Isolate discrete tasks of the research process for consideration and focus, and emphasize that critical reading and synthesis skills are scaffolded and developmental in nature

- Help students identify the gaps in their understanding or abilities

- Celebrate and capitalize on students' desire to become proficient undergraduate researchers and scholars

Questions?