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# The Use of Archival Sources in Scholarly Writing

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WRITING RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS  
Closing Report

**Researchers' Names and Department(s):** Kristin Mahoney, English Department / Kaitlyn Abrams, English Student

**Date study was completed:** June 12, 2013

**Title of Study:** The use of archival sources in scholarly writing

**Research Question(s):** How can archival research be effectively implemented in undergraduate scholarly writing? This project investigated effective strategies for teaching students how to implement archival sources, in this case nineteenth- and twentieth-century periodicals, in scholarly writing. We considered how archival research can enrich students' understanding of a historical period and its literature, and we worked to generate strategies that might help students understand the value and methodologies of archival research.

**Method(s):** An ENG 423 Major Authors (Oscar Wilde) course was designed to include a strong focus on archival sources. Several classes were spent visiting Special Collections so as to familiarize students with primary sources from the fin-de-siècle. Students were required to present an archival artifact to the class and explain its connection to Oscar Wilde as well as its broader historical significance. They were additionally encouraged to incorporate primary sources into their final papers.

During the first few weeks of the quarter, we met repeatedly in Special Collections to discuss the archival resources available to students at the WWU Library, which include a full print-run of the *Yellow Book*, a facsimile of the issues of *Woman's World* edited by Wilde, issues of *Punch* from the 1890s, and the *Craftsman*. We also discussed the digitization of nineteenth-century periodicals and methods for engaging with the vast amount of archival resources now available to students online, paying special attention to relevant sites such as The Yellow Nineties Online and the *New York Times* Article Archive, which we would be consulting in order to understand Wilde's reception in America in the 1890s and in the years immediately following his death. Students were informed that they might draw from either print or online resources in their research for the course, and they were encouraged to consider the benefits and drawbacks of each method. I assigned models of archivally informed critical writing, such as Curtis Marez's "The Other Addict: Reflections on Colonialism and Oscar Wilde's Opium Smoke Screen," which relies heavily on racialized images of Wilde published in the periodical press, so that students might see how the use of archival sources can situate a literary figure or text historically, indicating how an author or text speaks to and engages with a specific set of political and cultural circumstances. Throughout the quarter, we discussed the difficulties and pleasures associated with this kind of research, and we considered the question of how to implement archival research in scholarly writing. I stressed to students that the use of archival methodologies would allow us to comprehend Wilde's position within the Decadent Movement, his influence and influences, and his relationship to feminism, imperialism, and consumer culture. By spending time thinking through the unique value of archival research, it was my hope that students would come to this work with real curiosity and enthusiasm.

After each visit to Special Collections, students were asked to discuss their archival discoveries as well as the difficulties they might have encountered in the archive. I also distributed questionnaires following our visits asking students to consider what interacting with the archival material illuminated about Wilde or the 1890s for them and what questions the material raised. In addition, I asked them to think in more abstract terms about what kinds of information one seemed to be able to garner from consulting nineteenth-century periodicals and to provide me with feedback on the kinds of information or guidelines that might make it easier for them to navigate the material available to them in Special Collections and in digitized formats.

**Gains/Challenges in Collaborating:** Collaborating with a student was incredibly beneficial to this project. Kaitlyn and I were able to talk extensively about the difficulties of archival research from a student perspective. As I designed and assessed the assignments for the course, Kaitlyn was able to give me wonderful feedback about what kind of additional guidance students might need. We have decided to write an article together about this project, so the collaboration will have been truly productive,

**Key Findings:** Many students were fascinated and electrified by this introduction to primary sources. A large portion of the class voluntarily referenced archival documents in their final essays, understanding the added enrichment of context and support for thesis argument that archival sources provide. However, several students expressed that they felt almost overwhelmed by the sudden mass of information at their fingertips, and some felt that a greater degree of guidance when looking through the documents would be helpful. A few suggested that future students be given key words or themes to look for during each visit to Special Collections in order to slightly narrow the search. One student expressed a sense of loss at being introduced to the world of archival scholarship so late in her education and wondered why none of her other professors had recommended primary sources before. Overall, the students' reactions were a combination of excitement and feeling a bit out of their depth.

**Implications for Teaching and Learning:** The clear conclusion of this research project is that college students ought to be exposed more often and in greater depth to archival sources. As opposed to disinterestedness or boredom with the primary documents, the one common complaint in the students' feedback was that they had a wealth of invigorating new material but weren't quite sure what to do with it. The understandable tentativeness with which students (mostly English majors and many of them graduating seniors in college) underwent their first encounter with archival sources only makes it more evident that the introduction—though better late than never—ought to have occurred sooner in their educations. The frustration that students expressed had to do with their desire to competently maneuver the many sources before them, but the inability to do so arising from a lack of knowledge concerning archival research methodologies. As such, in the future, it may be advisable for professors in lower-level courses to introduce archival scholarship to their students, if only to ensure that the young students become familiarized with such a beneficial and oft-overlooked resource.

**Implications for Further Study:** As we work on our article concerning this project, we are interested in raising questions about the enthusiasm for digitization in Victorian studies. While much of the scholarship on Victorian periodicals pedagogy expresses excitement about the implications of wider digitization of Victorian periodicals, many of our students expressed a preference for working with hard copies of the periodicals in Special Collections. They seemed to find it more thrilling and fascinating to work with the original documents, and they loved the element of chance that was introduced to their research when they were leafing through the pages of an issue of a periodical as opposed to the more targeted or focused searching they conducted when consulting digital resources.