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# Guiding the Library Search by the English Teacher

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## Introduction

There is currently little professional literature for high school English teachers teaching their own students how to use an online catalog. Based on my conversations with library staff, scholarly research into the subject, and my own experience, most "information literacy" articles are aimed at the trained librarian, the information *specialist*. For example, in the academic database Library Literature and Info Science Full Text, one finds that there are only 11 articles, using the key words "teaching" and "high school" and "English." Other subject/keyword combinations produce little else relevant to *English teacher search ability*, and one even finds that the English teacher may be considered a junior partner to the "Teacher Librarian," (O'Sullivan, p. 5) the actual school librarian conducting classes for students.

English teachers need their own *information literacy*, the ability to use online databases skillfully to gather data quickly, accurately, and relevantly. This skill is a supplement – not a replacement – to the certified librarian. Librarians offer full lectures, but on a tight schedule; English teachers can initiate brief in-class sessions to help students to be "better searchers." Teachers can build their own information literacy skill, pass them on as the class engages in literature searches and writing projects. Effective search strategy will help students get pertinent information quicker, allowing for more time to be spent on the writing of term papers. Search skills can be used in the student's home, at a personal computer, if the student logs into the school library. The result will be a student who absorbs sound search strategy, what it takes to make a faster, complete search, when preparing an argument for the paper.

Below is a sample search at the Guyer High School Library in Denton, Texas.

This multi-word strategy, which can be used at any catalog, requires "subject" and "keyword" searching. Teachers should emphasize that a search can be narrowed quickly once the student identifies the correct subject area and prime words that needs to be searched.

Many researchers, including, O'Sullivan, argue for this dual approach:

Using the keywords/search terms from their research question, the teacher librarian stresses the importance of developing a comprehensive, dynamic list of related keywords or synonyms, and in identifying the appropriate subject headings

for the key concepts in their research question. (p. 7)

Bastone and others have recognized the need for students to go beyond simple "keyword" searching, those with inconclusive or overwhelming results (numerically, that is). I prefer encouraging the subject heading strategy for students' "critical thinking skills" (Bastone, p. 10), speeding up and improving the search, but the search style is yours to make.

A high school English teacher should be able to teach the following 10 step, 10-minute mini-session, either as a prelude to a formal class with a librarian or as a reminder to class after a basic but formal introduction has been given. Notice that the emphasis is on isolating the subject heading by using an initial keyword search. In the instance below, students are taught to research literary theory, in particular, critics who have written about an author, including Hawthorne, from a documented perspective.

The *quick search* method can be demonstrated by an overhead connected to the Internet within the classroom, a technology that most high schools have today. Note that the teacher will go through a number of connected sets, repeating, reviewing and even reversing, allowing students to build research skills slowly. Materials should be located as circulating or reference, emphasizing the accessibility of material in either case.

1) The search begins at the Guyer Library Home Page, located at the following site, <http://www.dentonisd.org/512428294548/site/default.asp>, which can be accessed at the Guyer High School main web site, at <http://www.dentonisd.org/guyerhs/site/default.asp>.

2) The 2 primary databases are on the left, the Search For A Book (OPAC) and the Online Databases Home Access. The first database, the actual catalog, will be the focus of this review – those desiring greater school/home access should contact their school librarian for further instruction, to set up database accounts and demonstrate searching methods. The school catalog, however, should not require any special account to access.

3) I start with a double keyword search, "criticism" and "Hawthorne."

4) I find 4 titles and click on the first, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Comprehensive Research And Study guide* / edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom.

5) This allows me to find at least one relevant subject heading:

Hawthorne, Nathaniel, -- 1804-1864 -- Criticism and interpretation --  
Handbooks, manuals, etc.

6) Now I would show the class the full screen result for the "Criticism and interpretation" subject heading, which gives the following title, *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne* / edited by Larry J. Reynolds.

I would discuss the bottom of the catalog screen, to find an availability for check-out:

Non-Fiction	813 HIS	Checked In
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7) Now I would use a *critical search strategy* to find more titles. Since, I assume, we have discussed various literary theories in class, we can now use key terms as subject heading searching. For example, using "Historicism" as a subject produces:

*Practicing New Historicism* / Catherine Gallagher & Stephen Greenblatt.

8) I can type in "criticism" as a subject, which should look like "subject:(criticism)"

in the box, and click on "series" at the middle right of the catalog screen, giving me many works to consult, including the multi-volume series, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which includes 58 titles, including *Modern American Critics, 1920-1955* / Ed. by Gregory S. Jay. I would point out to students that each step is producing results, though with some labor, and that they should write down important titles when found.

9) From the title *Modern American Critics*, I can restructure the search because I have found a new set of relevant subject headings:

Subjects:

Criticism -- History.

Criticism -- Bio-bibliography.

Critics -- Biography -- Dictionaries.

American literature -- History and criticism.

10) I click on the last Subject Heading,

American literature -- History and criticism.

I would point out to class that with 61 hits, we probably need to redo our search. It is always important to emphasize that good searching takes patience and practice, even for professionals. I would then return/click the following icon from our subjects in # 9:

Criticism -- History.

Now we have a more manageable list of 6 titles, including a slightly newer, perhaps more relevant work, in the reference area:

*Modern American Critics Since 1955* / Ed. by Gregory S. Jay.

Reference	REF 920 MOD	Checked In
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Always navigate with the most "relevant" pattern, usually some combination of key work, key word, primary author, and especially, the primary subject heading. By virtual search, walking through each step and explaining the strategy, the teacher builds confidence. Students can work alone, search online for classics, and the interpretations of those classics. The English teacher and Internet become partners in student writing.

I have found that many students lack basic "information literacy" skills that would help them to learn their subjects better, prepare for tests better, and write better English. Particularly important for English students is this capacity to quickly look up books about the authors and subjects for investigating. When preparing for a paper on literary theory, the information is not simply in the back of the text, or in a laboratory, as it might be for a paper on some branch of science. Whether investigating Historicism, Deconstruction, Gender Theory, Queer Theory, Feminist Theory, Reader Response Criticism, Marxist Theory, Formalism, or any prevalent literary schools, students must have the skill to go to the basic expository information and then find fuller, detailed works without getting frustrated from a circular search. I often hear that – students cannot find the information looked for, when in fact it is the tool, the facility to search, that they need to develop.

It is refreshing to see that so many ideas in current literary theories are expressed by students in class discussion and in class papers, although in a more rudimentary form. For example, a class may be reading a work on a great American author, and a student may ask, "Why did the person write this way? I bet that the editor said, 'Make it like so, or else we won't publish you!'" Different

critical branches can help the student to decide how to answer the question of "why is this written as it is?" and "what does it mean?" Historicism can be used to point out that certain commercial books were more "popular," best sellers at a certain era, and the author may have been reacting to that. Gender theory can help the student see that women were portrayed in certain ways by the author's contemporaries, and that portrayal can be the subject of a term paper. No literary theory can answer all questions, which is better, because students will find quickly that searching leads to more searching, and interesting discourse.

I have created a "bare bones" introduction to teaching English teachers the fundamentals of an effective literary theory search. All school librarians can create a similar guide sheet, saved online for their teachers and/or students. Remember that the audience is often not comfortable with anything but keyword searching. To speed up *efficiency*, always encourage a minimal system of subject search, even if the author/title is known. A 10-step procedure should get each student started with a basic method for finding English texts and criticism in a catalog. Of course, advanced placement classes may require additional supervision by a trained librarian, along with the English teacher.

The library can be a helpmate in the student's growth. The student can learn that online, the text lives beyond what was just read or discussed in class. Interpretation of the literary canon can, at times, be just as rewarding as reading the classic, if the right sources are accessed.

## Works Cited

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