

## Swimming in Literary Analysis

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McDuffie describes the process of learning the genre of literary analysis after returning to school from the workforce. She describes the discomfort of asking for help in learning how to research. She also articulates the difficulty of finding an original thesis statement. Ultimately, she finds that learning a new genre is always going to be somewhat uncomfortable.

My first semester in graduate school was intimidating. I was coming back to study English after being in the workforce for four years as a credit analyst. My undergraduate degree was in business and I decided to go to grad school in English because I had always loved to read. I was nervous about the many unknowns of graduate school, such as how much homework I would have and how I would live off a meager paycheck. I also had to navigate a new campus, including the library, parking, and lunch spots. Most of all, I was worried about writing papers. I had learned to write credit reports and prepare PowerPoint presentations, but it had been a long time since I had written an English paper, and I didn't know what to expect.

### Diving In: My First Assignment

One of the classes I took my first semester in my Master's program was an 18<sup>th</sup> Century British Literature course and the first big assignment was a five-page midterm essay. I felt like an imposter in that class; most of my peers had majored in English and were continuing their studies in grad school. They

had years of English classes with literary analysis papers. I had only taken *one* English class in college. Most of my preparation came from my high school English classes, but by the time I was sitting in Brit Lit, eight years had passed. I had some catching up to do. This assignment felt like a test for me to prove I could keep up with my peers and prove that I belonged in the program.

As soon as the professor handed out the assignment sheet, fear set in. Where was I supposed to start on this “literary analysis”? The assignment sheet said I needed an original thesis statement, so I figured that was as good a place as any to start. I have always hated admitting weakness, so I didn’t want to ask my peers for help. I didn’t want anyone to recognize me as a fish out of water, so I looked for answers on my own. I Googled “thesis statement” and found the Purdue Online Writing Lab’s website. But rather than offer me a single or straightforward definition, the site listed several options. The third option, an argumentative paper that makes a claim backed up by evidence, seemed most in line with the assignment sheet. From my high school English classes, I remembered that this evidence should be quotes from the literary text I am writing about, such as a poem, play, or short story. My investigation helped me understand that I needed a topic, an argument, and evidence... but I still had the problem of the *original* thesis statement. Despite my difficulty treading water, I still didn’t want to ask for help. I put aside the thesis statement and looked for how else I could move forward with the paper.

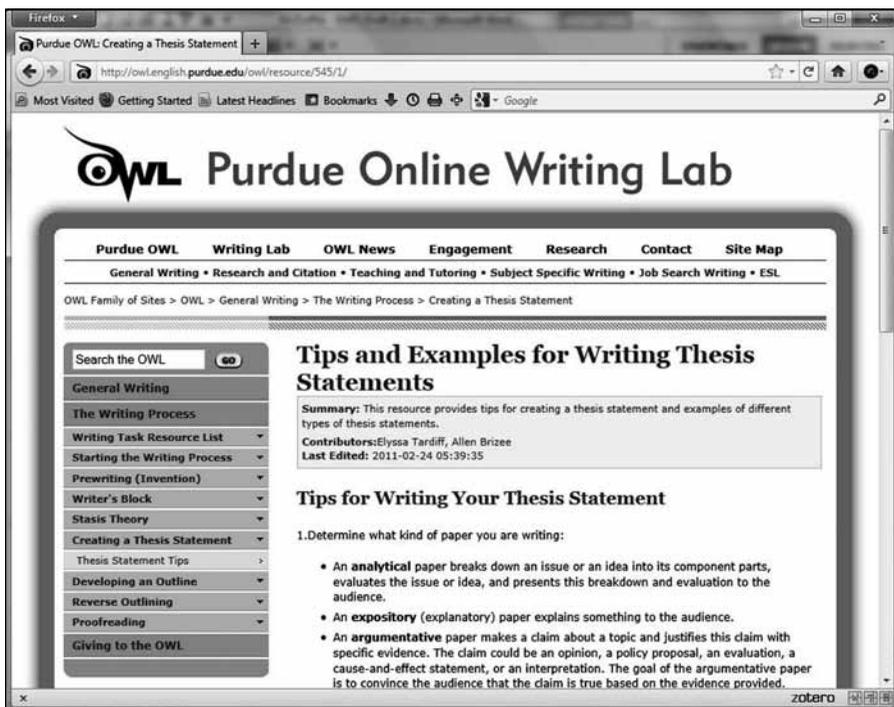


Figure 1: Purdue Online Writing Lab

## Beginning with the Butterfly: Researching Journal Articles

In addition to a thesis statement, the assignment sheet required that we use at least five scholarly journal articles in our paper. Earlier in the course we had read scholarly journal articles as assignments, so I knew that they were long-ish papers written by academics for other academics. The professor had provided these articles, though—how was I supposed to find more on my own? Since I'm the kind of person who will drive around for forty-five minutes rather than stop and ask for directions, it seemed unlikely that I was going to arrive at an answer before the due date. It was time to swallow my pride.

Embarrassed over my lack of knowledge, I asked one of the second-year students about how to find journal articles. He was a bit impatient with me, being someone who majored in English and had been doing research for years, but he agreed. He showed me our school library's website and how to get to the databases. He explained that MLA International Bibliography is one of the best search engines for English topics. He demonstrated some of the basics of searching, like how to put keywords in the search box and specify that I wanted to search for those words in the title of the article. He didn't teach me everything about searching, but he taught me enough to make me feel a little less overwhelmed.

With that tutorial under my belt, I figured it was time to choose a text. We had to write five pages about one of the works we had read, and I had liked *The Country Wife*, a play written in 1675 by William Wycherley. I liked the

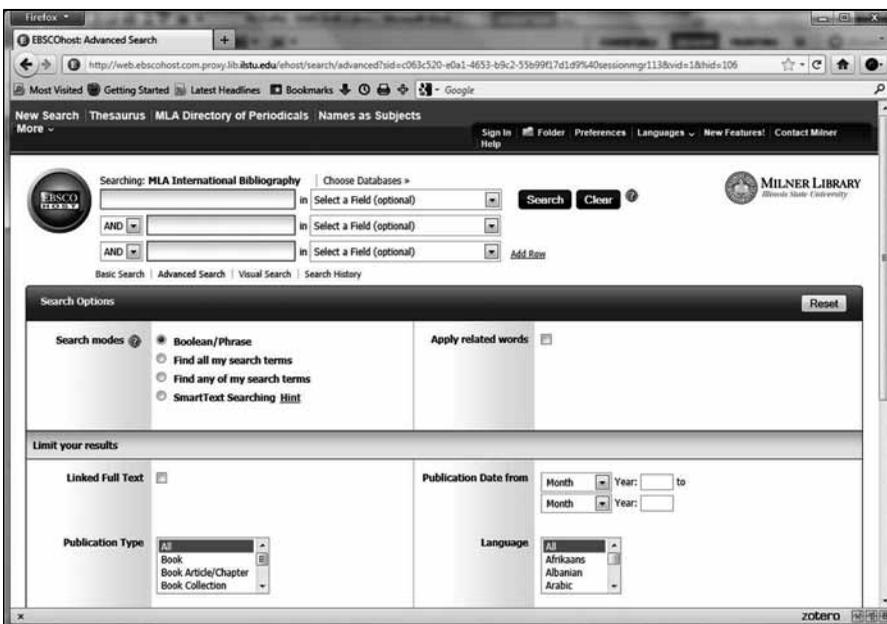


Figure 2: MLA International Bibliography

play because it was scandalous and funny. It was about a man who pretended to be a eunuch (a new word for me, which means a man who has been castrated) so he could have affairs with married women. That sounds like an oxymoron, but the point is that by pretending to be impotent, husbands were less protective of their wives around him. The play was also about a new young wife from the country who comes to London and is intrigued by the city and its men. The play itself and our class discussion about it had been mostly about the male characters, so I was interested in writing about the women. One, Lady Fidget, seemed sophisticated and adept at cheating on her husband, while the country wife read as a bumbling idiot who was naïve about sex. These two women offered different depictions of sexuality, and this train of thought led me to a topic of women's sexuality in the play. I still didn't know what kind of argument I could possibly make, but at least I had a topic!

Despite this big step, I couldn't move forward with a thesis statement because I was still stuck on the "originality" clause. In the English papers I had done in high school, I did not need to use journal articles, so my papers were always based only on the texts themselves. Originality did not seem to be as important then. But it was important now, and I began to think it had something to do with all of the articles we had read and had to use in our papers. Writing in this genre—and being original—seemed to relate to the research requirement: if I knew what other people had said about the play, then I could make sure I said something else.

With those thoughts in mind, I returned to the library's website to see what others had written about the play. I plugged in "The Country Wife" in the search box and specified that those words be found in the "title" of the articles and hit Search. The search returned sixty-one results. *Sixty-one* articles. There was no way I could read through that many titles. After staring forlornly at the screen for a few minutes, I noticed a checkbox on the left hand side that said "Scholarly (Peer-Reviewed) Journals." Since that was what I wanted, I clicked on the box and hit Search again. Thirty results this time. Much better.

In retrospect, the next thing I did was ridiculous. I printed almost every single article that I found about *The Country Wife*. That bears repeating. I printed about *twenty-five* scholarly journal articles about this play (for a paper that required *five* sources in *five* pages). I don't really know how to explain this irrational behavior, except to say that I thought that in order to make sure my argument was original, I had to see everything that anyone had ever published about the play. Looking back, I could have saved myself a lot of time and money by reading the abstracts (which I came to learn were short summaries of the articles that are easily

available through the search engine) *before* I printed out any articles. Or I could have read only the articles that were relevant to my particular topic of female sexuality; it was unlikely that arguments about other topics would have affected my own thesis statement. But I learned all of this later. At the time, I just sat down with stacks and stacks of paper and tried to get through the articles. I'll admit I didn't read these articles in their entirety—I would have needed weeks and weeks for that. Instead, I tried to read the first couple of pages and if the information seemed useful, I put it in one pile; if not, it went into a recycle bin. I also highlighted any parts of articles that seemed to be about women's sexuality. But even with these strategies, I was frustrated at how time-consuming research was turning out to be. I hadn't even started writing yet!

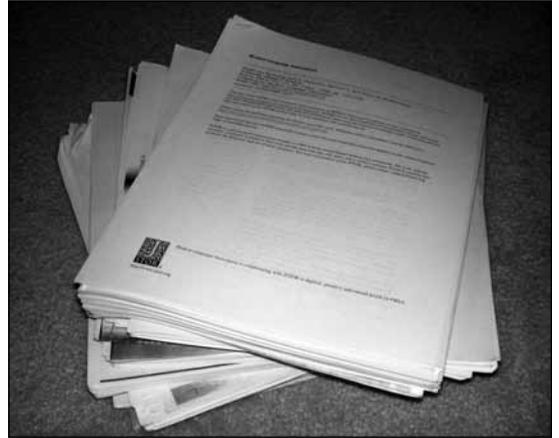


Figure 3: A Stack of Journal Articles

### **Back to the Backstroke: Discovering an Argument**

When I finished going through the twenty-five articles, I ended up with six articles that mentioned my topic of women's sexuality, so I tried to read those articles in more depth. One of the articles talked about women's rights during the 1700s. It turns out that in England during this time, women were considered property and lost all of their rights and assets (including any money, land, and inheritance) to their husbands upon marriage. My twentieth-century feminist sentimentalities were outraged at this information, but as my anger simmered, I realized I could use this history in my paper. What if this loss of rights was affecting the women's sexuality in the play?

With this last question in mind, I skimmed the play again and noted the lines where the two main female characters did or said something that related to their sexuality. I paid specific attention to the places in the text that the journal articles discussed. I also brainstormed how these actions and dialogue related to the historical background I had researched. Two things became clear by the time I had finished rereading the play and taking notes. First, Lady Fidget seemed more "advanced" sexually because she often cheated on her husband. The country wife, in contrast, wanted to cheat but had not yet done so. She was in training, so to speak. As the play progressed, the country wife became more like her seasoned role model.

The second idea that became clear to me was that these women's affairs were made more daring and rebellious because they had so few rights as married women. Since the women were considered their husbands' property, their actions reflected on their husbands. So when women had affairs, I thought, perhaps they were doing it to rebel against their husbands. Since nothing I had read interpreted the play in this same way, all of a sudden, I realized I had an original thesis statement. I could argue that Lady Fidget and the country wife were drawn to extramarital affairs as a way to rebel against their husbands given their devalued positions as property. Score!

Here is what my introduction and thesis statement ended up looking like after a couple of revisions, along with some comments about how I tried to use what I learned about the genre:

<p>The women in William Wycherley's <i>The Country Wife</i> sometimes get overlooked in light of the heavier themes of masculinity and honor. Yet the women's behavior and purpose in the play provide ample opportunity for enlightening discussion. As a playwright, Wycherley has misgivings about women with legal power (Bacon 439). He paints many of the women as promiscuous and sexually aggressive. However, it is important to consider the social setting of the play to fully understand the women of <i>The Country Wife</i>. Once their actions are analyzed within the historical context, it becomes clear that the women are actually asserting great independence by taking control of their sexuality. In a society where married women cannot own property, and are considered property themselves, they have lost their identities. Thus adultery in this scenario is a form of rebellion. It is one of the few ways that women can rebel against their devalued social position in their marriages and in society.</p>	<p>This was my first thought when I started thinking about the play. This introduction basically follows the thought process I had when I came up with the argument.</p>
	<p>This is an example of how I used one of the required scholarly journal articles.</p>
	<p>Here is where I bring up the historical context of women being property.</p>
	<p>I used big vocabulary words, like <i>masculinity</i>, <i>enlightening</i>, and <i>asserting</i>, to try to sound like the journal articles.</p>
	<p>These last two sentences contain my "original" thesis statement. I am trying to say that the women in the play are having affairs to rebel against their husbands.</p>

I felt good about writing this introduction and having a thesis statement, so I danced around my stacks of journal articles for a few minutes. Of course, my celebration was quickly dampened by the fact that I had to write the rest of the paper. I won't describe how I wrote the rest of the paper, especially because it would take another ten pages to describe the often

frustrating process. But in the end, I met the requirements of a five-page literary analysis that used a minimum of five scholarly journal articles. It was my first attempt at this genre in eight years and my first attempt that included scholarly journal articles so, needless to say, it was not my best work. But I still did it, and I felt a little bit better about swimming with the big English fishes.

When I wrote this paper, I thought the composing process was old hat for my fellow graduate students who probably only spent a few hours on this five-page paper, rather than the days that I spent on it (partly because of my newness to the genre and partly because of my unrefined research skills). Now that I have taken a few classes, however, and am no longer the newbie, I think my classmates probably feel out of their leagues too. Even within the genre of literary analysis, each paper presents new topics and different guidelines that will always make us somewhat uncomfortable. And though I have been able to refine some skills (like reading abstracts of journal articles to help me know if I need them before reading them), other skills (like writing a thesis statement) remain extremely difficult for me. I still stress about finding an original argument that will make me sound smarter than I feel. The good news is that I have become more comfortable asking for help, so I don't flounder around as much when I struggle. And I always offer to show new students how to use the library's search engine.



**Kristi McDuffie** is a second-year Ph.D. Student in English Studies at Illinois State. She is focusing on rhetoric and composition and doubts she will ever write another literary analysis paper ever again, although she will undoubtedly write lots of other kinds of analysis papers. When she is not writing papers, she is playing with her one-year-old son, whom she hopes to raise to ask for directions when he needs them.