

Research and writing are at the heart of learning and discovery. Following are interviews with the 2017 Arak Journal Finalists. In collaboration with the Arak Journal. The Arak Journal is an anthology of first-year student writing and creativity at the University of Delaware. Listen as these writers discuss their inspirations, challenges, and the research process for their essays.

I'm Natalie Walton. I'm a Political Science & Criminal Justice double major at the University of Delaware and I'm a 2017 Arak Journal finalist.

Hi, I'm Jasmine Edwards, a Women's Studies & English major at the University of Delaware and a 2017 Arak Award winner.

Hi, my name is Courtney Zozulia. I'm an Accounting and Finance double major with an International Business minor and a Spanish concentration, and I am a 2017 Arak Journal finalist.

Hello, I'm Patrick Reyes. I'm a Neuroscience BS major here at the University of Delaware, and I'm one of the 2017 Arak Journal finalists.

Describe your process of selecting a research topic.

I'm a Political Science major and it's, and it's funny, I was actually really motivated to *not* do something related to politics. I was kind of looking forward to, like, doing something different just because I knew I was going to be spending the next four years, like, talking about politics, researching it. I was like, I'm gonna do something different; I'm gonna do something fun. And then, kind of the election buzz started picking up and all the stuff was happening. And the social media thing kind of came about because I spent so much time, you know, following tweets and looking at different things that were being posted. And I was like, "I have to read about it." A couple weeks into the process I was like, "Yeah, I'm glad I ended up going this way," but at first it was definitely kind of like, "Oh, I don't know, like everyone's gonna be writing about this, everyone's gonna be doing this. I don't know if I want to also." But I think it worked out.

My interest in the topic is kind of...reaches back pretty far. I started it in high school when I participated in the YMCA's Youth In Government program. Senior year, I wrote my own bill as a mock legislator, and I really wanted to tackle a big issue in Delaware that happened to be the rape kit backlog. Once I started digging into, "Well, what are the the big problems I see in my state?" And then when I got to my E110 class and they said here is a book about fixing things - make an essay with this. I said, "Well, I know something we still need to fix that hadn't been fixed." The research was a lot, like I said, technical detail. It was finding out what's in a rape kit? What happens during one of the forensic exams? This also meant I had to research personal accounts. It couldn't just be any more the you know, X, Y, Z and things like that.

I guess the very first piece of information was my first job was a Shoprite cashier. So for me that sparked my interest. I just always remember wondering how people could spend so much money in just a single transaction. Like oftentimes it was more than my paycheck. So, for me, that was just wild. You know it was my first job and I just had that those observations. And I guess the second half of it is that I'm a business major. So I'm pretty interested in just like understanding how things work operationally. And you know like, what's the back end of the supermarket and like what that all looks like. So I guess together, the research...the research paper is just kind of a natural fit between that intellectual curiosity and then my own observations at my job.

So as for the interest to the topic, I guess that ties a bit into where I'm from. I was born in the Philippines. I grew up a little bit there. And then I moved to America. And growing up in the Philippines, you know, you see that first-hand experience of not everybody can always get to eat at night. Not everybody is well-off, well-to-do. And that's what you get when you live in when you're born in a third-world country. And imagine my surprise that when I come here to America, sure some place is a bit better off. But this was supposed to be the "land of milk and honey," and yet people are still hungry here, too.

My E110 class was with Dr. Frank Hilson. And his class was centered around the idea of taste. Of food and cuisine. How it how it affects cultures and how itself...it itself is affected by society and culture. And we explored many different topics, until finally towards the end of the semester he said, "As long as it has to do with food, research a topic that you're interested in." And I guess somehow that question that I've had about poverty and hunger, about food insecurity, was in the back of my mind and suddenly made itself forefront and said, "Hey! You've been thinking about this for a while, how about you think about it with a pen in your hand?"

How did you refine your topic throughout your research process?

I think for me it was really important to remember that you know this is a research paper it's not just a reflection of my experiences as a Shoprite cashier, you know. There has to be some sort of like factual basis behind it, you know? Don't let those, like, preconceived notions and those observations really dictate the direction of your paper. For me it was kind of having that serve as inspiration but not necessarily like the basis or the the guiding light per se.

Before I could crystallize what I wanted to ask, what I wanted to investigate, it was still a bit of a nebulous thought. And the fact that there was a lot of text out there a lot of people asking similar questions didn't really help until I started to realize that there in the body of literature, there are different clusters investigating different aspects to the problem. There was an economic side. There was a nutritional side. There was a geopolitical side, a socioeconomic side. I got back to the root of my question that said, "You know poor people are often hungry, poverty and food insecurity." And with that, with that common thread, I guess I slowly started to narrow down on the literature that pertained most to me.

Originally I was kind of thinking about doing celebrities which is kind of interesting. I don't think I mentioned specifically celebrities at all in my paper... But I was kind of looking at it from the standpoint that there's just a lot of different stuff about, you know, how involved should celebrities be in politics, you know? Should they even have a say? Should they be advocates? Should they not? And I was kind of looking at that angle. But as I was trying to research it, it didn't really have anything. It was just a lot of opinion-based. I mean, I couldn't really find any sort of information that actually said "Yeah, celebrities have a huge impact on like how people vote and stuff like that." So I'm like, okay, maybe I need to kind of reframe this a little bit. So I ended up going more more specific but also a little bit more generalized. Like I kind of just nixed the celebrity thing and I'm like, okay let's just think about day-to-day people. And then how do day-to-day people get influenced? And it's usually through politicians, and then journalists.

How was this project different from research you did in high school?

There were absolutely differences in my process. I think in highschool, you're given a couple sources, you're told, "These are your options for sources," and then they really try to cut down how many you can use, and

they want you to use certain amounts from each. When I got into this, it was...well, I have all these technical things that I already looked up: let me look into these personal stories, let me see how those can coexist within my paper without me sounding cold or detached from what I'm writing about. In high school, I didn't write anything that I put my heart into like I put this into. I had already argued a lot with people about it when I presented it as a bill, so it had a lot of emotional value to me. In highschool, you do research on dead white men's books, you know? You tell people, "This is why I think this character did this. So this is symbolism everyone!" And...and here it was--I have to find a way to help people.

I think just resources in general. I knew it was going to need to be more than, like, the first thing that popped up when I searched on Google, you know what I mean? So I think it was just the realization that I probably should be using the resources that are provided to me as a student. Like, just taking the time to really look for resources as opposed to just reading a paper. And, I mean, the length also is something I kind of had to get used to. So it was nice, actually, to be able to use resources and research and just continue to kind of let my ideas evolve as I was writing.

I think this research paper in college...there's just so much more creative liberty in the actual process. I don't know if it's just to attribute it to my professor, but he was awesome. And he just gave us the topic--he's like, "Write about food." And then that was your only parameter. Like, that was my only guideline. I remember in high school, you've got a very specific question that they want answered, and you've got your five primary sources, and you're over here highlighting, trying to find the connections between that. But in college, and when you do research papers from this point on beyond, you know there's so much more depth in what you can use and those resources available, you know? You can synthesize peer-reviewed journals, and books, and newspaper articles, and create something that is truly unique. Not to be...not to say it again but, again, just a vast body of literature.

I guess in highschool when I did research papers, I was faced with the the problem of scarcity because our resources were a bit more limited, which meant it was easy for us to find that common thread, but it was hard for us to put, you know, the meat on the bones, so to speak--to start crafting the argument. On the other hand, I guess this time around, I was faced with the problem of abundance. That may be good, that may be bad. Especially if you're a bit more curious, in the sense that, you could take your argument a thousand-and-one different ways. While it's hard to narrow it down to one, once you do it, that was a very, very satisfying process from then onwards. So I guess in short, compared to high school, it can be a bit more overwhelming. There are a lot more resources to overwhelm you. But then again, there are a lot more resources to help you.

What assumptions did you have about your topic and how did they evolve throughout your research process?

I guess the primary assumption that I had going in was, I felt that, you know, the relationship between producer and consumer was very one-sided. Like it was, you know, the producer is employing all of these tactics and the consumer is kind of mindlessly spending all of this money. And I see people with hundreds of dollars of groceries every shift. And as I researched, I realized that, you know, there is some truth to that, but the relationship is a little more...it's a little more mutually beneficial in that sense, you know? There is this duality between producer and consumer. And if I hadn't really researched further and kind of moved away from my own observations, I don't think I would have ever really grasped that second part of it. The latter is so essential to my thesis.

I guess it ties back again into my experience being a Filipino. Poverty and food insecurity and in my experience of what I've seen firsthand and with my neighbors in the Philippines, there was that high correlation. And then I saw that here too in America. But that really wasn't a satisfying enough answer for me. You know, one can't just be hungry because they're poor, nor can one just be poor because they're hungry. I really was thinking there must be something special about the relationship between the two that makes it so pervasive and almost universal. I wasn't satisfied with just, "If then, then that." And I also really wasn't satisfied with the idea that some people assume that this is a problem that's cordoned off in some far-off corner of the globe, that it doesn't pertain to us because we are an advanced nation, or we are a more rich nation, or it doesn't apply to us because our history has been different.

Clearly, after looking at it a little bit, after researching it, I found that's not exactly the case. So really, the assumption was that there must be something concrete there. There must be something more to it. And I guess I was a bit desperate for that because once you find a concrete cause, you ground the problem in something. You put it in the same plane as us. And that way, if you can give a problem a cause, you can just then afterwards start giving it a solution. I was kind of assuming going in that there would at least be a little bit of like a positive mindset in relation to politics and social media. I mean, I was kind of hoping there'd be something.

I know being a student, I hear a lot...you know, all these negative things that social media is doing, how it's impacting us, all these different terrible things that come out of social media. And I'm like, well, maybe it does have some benefits. And I was kind of hoping going in, and I find some. And the whole, like, idea that I had, I almost had this kind of drive to find something that would say, "Look, it's not, you know, this terrible object, like it's actually kind of beneficial."

I was realizing that my assumption that a lot of people don't see it that way was like kind of solidified as I was doing research which was really interesting. I assumed it was a very bipartisan issue. I thought the Democrats would probably support it a lot more. And then I did my research and the first huge bit of legislation I found came from Texas. Texas and New York actually have the best rape kit reform laws in the United States. That was fascinating to me, and then also, when I interviewed Representative Paul Baumbach, who is a Democrat, he talked to me about how everyone in our legislature had worked together on a budget bill for this in Delaware--how it wasn't that divided of an issue. I had just hated that I assumed that about...that because of their political affiliation, they could not be as worried about this as I am. And as soon as I went in my research, that changed.

How did you address challenges you encountered in your research?

One of the earlier iterations that I had for poverty and food insecurity was that I was trying to tie it to political instability. I was drawn to the fact that there were commonalities between social upheavals and uprisings and hunger. There's a reason that we saw bread riots in both the French Revolution and in the Arab Spring. There was a high correlation with social upheaval and the rise in food costs. I didn't have that universality that I was looking for. I didn't have that...that...you know, that red flag. After going through some more literature, that helped me refine it and frame it. And sort of--I was afraid to do so--but widened the perspective, you know? What happens when a place is politically unstable if the institutions cannot function to help their citizens? Well then those who are most vulnerable--those who are most poor--are the ones who were more susceptible to increases in food insecurity.

I suppose my biggest challenge was making it not as technical. It was finding pieces that weren't giving me all the scientific and legal jargon. Because, like I said, it was difficult to find the survivor stories and to relate that in a way that didn't come off as appealing to pathos without having any real logic behind it. It's...it's always a very difficult area. Like when you have to mix the two, just finding ways to support your research and support your topic. And I think I found definitely that almost every source I used had statistics all over the place and nothing saying, "This is the real impact of this." And that's why I really reached out in the end to Paul, because I just wanted someone to sit down with and talk to about it instead of staring at a computer screen.

I think the 10-page thing was really difficult. I always over-research so I went in and I was like, "Okay, I'm gonna find any resource that I can possibly find on this and I'm just gonna compile it all and see where I end up." And even then I was realizing, just talking about like person to person, I was not finding enough. So I really had to kind of push myself to say, "Okay, what can I do to fill 10 pages? What can I do that's gonna be, like, related to the topic, and informational and important, but at the same time help me, like, reach the page limit that I needed to make?" So that's where I think the journalist angle came in. Which is something where I was...as I was writing, I'm like, I can't believe I hadn't thought of this before as like a, you know, student reporter, and someone who is involved in journalism. And I was like, "Oh, well obviously there's some sort of, like, influence here and something needs to be said about it."

What was the most interesting or unexpected thing you learned while you were doing research?

Something that I thought was super neat was two of the sources that I used my paper actually used each other for their own argument! So there's this one, it was a study conducted in like the 80s. He was really the pioneer of the field of...kind of the marketing analytics bit where they tracked the purchases by putting a little sensory device on the cart. And then there was another study that was done maybe five years ago, and they used that as the base mark and then kind of evolved it, and took the modern-day perspective on it. It's also very possible that I may have just, like, tracked a footnote further, but I remember I discovered it at the end of the process when I was rereading it and then it came to my attention--I cited the scientist like two pages earlier, so I thought that was super neat.

The most interesting thing from a personal standpoint I learned is that I really like researching with books. And I also realized that the topic itself is like, constantly evolving. And I mean, that's with anything in research, but I was realizing as I was researching...I mean, as I was writing this paper, this was something people were talking about. Like, this was something where you know and it's difficult to write about something like social media in politics. Especially at the time I was writing it, because everything's changing constantly. I mean the first draft of my paper mentioned people who, in like three years, we're probably not really gonna remember or talk about anymore. And that was something that I kind of had to work around, and it's something that was definitely interesting and challenging.

The research process in general was finding just how many sources I needed to argue my point. Where I'd say something and then I'd turn in my draft and my professor or my TA (Teaching Assistant) would say, like "What do you have to support this?" And I say, "Well! Myself?" So it was finding how many different things I needed and then finding a way to...to put them all in...in a way that worked. Well certainly in the research process, I found that academic literature was much more approachable than I...than what I first thought it would be. And also it's approachable in the sense that you can narrow down what you want. At first, I thought it was gonna be, "I need to find topics that just have food insecurity on them." But then afterwards, I was able--after I found

that there were these certain nuclei to the argument dealing with geopolitics, socio-economics, nutrition, I can narrow down my search even further, and the resources accommodated for that.

What advice do you have for future E110 students working on research projects?

Probably to not be scared about the idea of having a, you know, broad topic that they really have to focus on. I think in the beginning it can be kind of scary, but when you actually get down to it, it's...you know, there's ways to make it enjoyable. I mean, this is coming from someone who enjoys writing, so it's kind of a different process for me. But there are ways! Like if you pick a topic that's something that you find exciting, and something that you think other people would find exciting. Or even...I mean, if you're interested in it, most people will be interested in it.

And then I guess the other thing is don't be scared to use, like, library resources! They were so helpful for me: being able to sit down and like, I learned how to use the library because I, like, was writing this project and I needed to figure out how to find certain things. And just being able to walk through the shelves and find, you know, 16 books all next to each other that all talked about something that I could talk about in my paper was really nice. I would say Google is your friend, but not your best friend! [Laughter].

That you should always always check, I guess, sources that don't come to you right off the bat. That don't show up in the first three listings on the webpage. Something like a book that I had Spelman to back me up with the personal accounts was great. If your E110 teacher doesn't give you a book, maybe find something...some philosopher or activist who has written about this. Find something that doesn't in your source say "website," because we are moving into a digital age, but there's so much out there that isn't online that is so important to have!

"Go and talk to people" is also one of my biggest recommendations. The fact that I was able to talk to a real legislator was so helpful in everything I did. Even if your topic isn't something like that where you have necessarily someone who is *right away* someone to think about interviewing, maybe talk to friends, family, strangers. The words that come from them can be more valuable than any statistic you can find in five-seconds with a search engine.

I guess the first piece of advice--it's so trite and I'm sure you've heard it from your professors--but you have to pick something that you're genuinely interested in. If you don't, all the research you're going to be doing--it's gonna feel so laborious. You're not gonna want to read those peer-reviewed articles. You're not gonna go into DELCAT and sift through all that information if you don't genuinely care about it. So that would be the first piece of advice. I think the second piece of you like don't be afraid of change. You know, your original thought may not be your end result, but like, that's okay! And again, I alluded to it earlier, but that could be better than what you originally anticipated. I think there's definitely some beauty in that. I guess, also too, like read as much as you can.

I think something that for me was a little difficult initially was understanding you're not just gonna be able to type something into the search bar like, "sounds of the supermarket," and you're gonna have 50 great articles pop up. Sometimes the information that you seek is gonna be buried deep within something else. And it's up to you to find that and to be patient, and to kind of do your reading and do your due diligence.

It doesn't have to be daunting. One can first feel a bit overwhelmed by the degree of freedom that they have, but then, you know, that degree of freedom is indeed liberating. You aren't tied down to something per se. You are free to widen and narrow the scope of your search as much as you want. And I say, take the initiative and ask those questions that deserve to be asked. Those questions that you think haven't been asked yet or haven't been asked enough. Because, you know, that's what the university is. It's an engine for thought and discourse. If you think it's worth investigating, go for it! And that'll add to that collective knowledge that we have, and hopefully somewhere in there is a seed of the answer we're looking for.

Video credits listed. After credits roll, it is revealed that our live Spanish guitar player has been our student interviewee Patrick, all along!