

Grade: 3.3

## Resource Consultation

On the thirteenth of November I was chatting online with a friend of mine who is still at my undergraduate college, Mount Holyoke, from which I graduated in May. I asked her if she had any unfulfilled information needs and would be willing to let me help her with them as part of a library-school assignment, and she was only too happy to help.

My friend's information need was part of a paper that she was planning to write for her Philosophy independent study on the subject of the philosophy of absurdism in literature. She was planning to have the paper done by Thanksgiving, but as the class was an independent study, she could take longer if she wanted to. She had not yet written anything; knowing her, she probably didn't even have more than a vague plan of what she was going to write about. She tends to write by putting all her ideas down on paper and then rearranging them so that they make sense; before then, it's hard for her to express them to others. I knew not to expect an incredibly coherent definition of topic. 😊

As I said above, my friend was interested in absurdism, and she wanted to argue that the [absurdity of human existence can only be addressed through the art of literature] rather than through logic. She had a fairly long list of authors and works that she wanted to use to argue her point, including Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Eugene Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros*. She had already read all these works in detail, but she needed to process them. ?unclear She also lacked philosophical background; she did not know what had already been said about absurdism, either in philosophy or in literature. She did mention a possible link with existentialism. She had so far done no searching for secondary literature on her topic.

I have presented her need as clearly as I can, but getting it from my friend was not quite that easy. Although because we are friends I did not have to probe very much? But your friend's need is highly undefined – this would argue fr more probing. I found that remembering to use neutral and/or open questions was harder than I had expected, good observation and that my impulse was to jump to closed questions on the assumption that I

already knew what she wanted. it's always a struggle After her initial statement of topic, I forced myself to ask, "So what is this for again?" Here she complained that she had no background in the field of philosophy, especially regarding absurdity, and found it hard to tell what had already been done. She felt she was missing some great, definitive work. I then asked, "If you could describe one source that would be the absolute most useful to you, what would it be?" Here she explained that she had primary but not secondary material. After those questions, I thought I had a good idea of what her topic and need was; of course, my task was made easier by the fact that I already know her very well, including her habits, interests, and patterns of thinking. true I proceeded with closed questions, confirming that she had no secondary material, then suggesting possible types of sources such as literary criticism that might have useful information. Although her topic spanned both literature and philosophy, she was only interested in literary criticism with a philosophical bent, and she also seemed more interested in books than in journal articles, though she did not rule anything out explicitly. I closed that conversation by saying that I would do some searching and get back to her. Furthermore, I charged her to speak up if what I found wasn't what she needed and not to settle for less just because I was her friend. good

In my searches I used a lot of subject headings, particularly since I was not sure what vocabulary would be used in individual records. In the online catalog of our college's library, I did a keyword search for philosophy and absurdity and swiftly found that "Absurd (Philosophy) in Literature" was a Library of Congress Subject Heading. There were approximately eight books listed under this heading, four of which I thought were possibly worth pursuing. I also used the subject headings for literary criticism of each author she had mentioned and came up with some more possibly absurdity- or philosophy-oriented works as well as some which compared two more absurdist authors.

I also tried to find philosophy- or literature-oriented databases and indexes to search but had limited success. I tried the MLA bibliography and found a couple of articles that looked somewhat relevant but nothing spectacular, perhaps because of the varying terminology in the discussion of absurdity and because there appeared to be no accurate descriptor like the one in the Library of Congress Subject Headings. I did, however, find one book which used the word "paradox" in the title and whose record

included an abstract describing exactly what my friend wanted. Were there any good keywords in the abstract?

Unfortunately, because of the geographical distance, I was unable to look on the shelves myself or to present her with the physical materials. I was also unable to inspect the books' content and had to rely mostly on titles and descriptors in selecting materials. I initially tried to search rather broadly and sent my friend a preliminary list of sources, asking her to tell me what she thought of them good – involve the user early in the search process, from titles only if she didn't yet have time to go to the library. These sources included monographs and journal articles as well as one professor. I organized the list by the search or subject heading which turned them up and included access information for each item. This is an excerpt from the email I sent, describing the resources I thought the most promising:

The first book on my list doesn't have "absurdity" in the title, but it has it in the description in the database I used. I have included the abstract for this book, because it's what made me think it could be relevant for you. It seems to be about absurdity itself.

Slaate, Howard-Alexander

The pertinence of the paradox: the dialectics of reason-in-existence  
Abstract: "THIS IS A STUDY OF THE DIALECTICAL TENSIONS AND  
CONTRADICTIONS IN HUMAN EXISTENCE AND MODERN CULTURE. IT IS BEST  
TREATED AS PARADOXICAL FROM THE STANDPOINT OF AN EXISTENCE-ORIENTED  
REASON. [...]"  
BC199.P2 S58 (UMass, "check shelf" as of 13.11)

[...]

LoC Subject heading: "Absurd (Philosophy) in literature"

Baker, Richard, E.

The dynamics of the absurd in the existentialist novel  
PN56.A24 B34 1993 (MH/Main and SC/Nielson, both available as of 13.11)

Demastes, William W.

Theatre of chaos: beyond absurdism, into orderly disorder  
PR625 .D46 1998 (MH/Main, AC/Main, and SC/Nielson, all available as of  
13.11)

She indicated several that looked good to her, including the one abstracted book, and within the next few days checked out four books, Baker, Demastes, and two others that she found herself. Unfortunately, the Demastes book turned out to be useless, and she complained, "One type of organization that libraries lack is separating value from idiotic drivel," ouch! to which I responded that such was indeed the goal of libraries good for

you, and that obviously there are improvements to be made. I note that although she indicated to my be email that she thought the Slaate book was very relevant, she did not check it out, in spite of the fact that she goes to the University of Massachusetts several times a week and that it is possible to order books sent to Mount Holyoke for pickup.

After our class session about Dialog, I decided to experiment by searching for information for my friend. I found several possibly relevant sources, but more importantly, an abstract for one book or article said that another work entitled *The Theatre of the Absurd*, by Martin Esslin, was seminal! Bingo! After Dialog, I looked on the UW library's Information Gateway to see if there was a list of resources for philosophy, which indeed there was, although it was a professor's page (<http://faculty.washington.edu/alvin/phibib.htm>) rather than one maintained by the library. One of the sources was a philosophical dictionary on the web which not only had a definition for "absurd" (<http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/a.htm#absurd>) but listed numerous further resources, including two books which I had already found! I took this as confirmation that I was not missing key resources and that what I had already found was quality. good The professor's bibliography also listed a database for philosophy, the Philosopher's Index, and there I found another article whose abstract indicated that it was arguing the same point as my friend. These successes made me very excited.

I am very pleased with the resources that I have found, and my friend seems satisfied as well. I have not been able to get definite end-of-transaction positive feedback, but apparently she's progressing on her assignment and has come to some new conclusions about absurdity. Evolving information need – it sounds like you helped her a lot at this stage in her research

I have three criticisms of this reference interaction. First of all, I would have liked to have more time to consult with my friend after the initial expression of need, though I understand that she is extremely busy and that papers only become a priority the night before they are due. Secondly, I wish I had taken more care to give her only the most relevant sources and to present them slightly better. In hindsight, I realize that her selections of the most relevant material were the same that I could have made for her, and that I could have given her only those, rather than overwhelming her with a huge list of books and articles. good I was probably too much influenced by my own style of research

good observation, which is to check out a huge pile of possibly-useful sources, let them sit on my floor for a few days, and sort through them later. I was also too excited about the really cool, relevant sources I had found to take the requisite time to filter and sort them properly. Finally, I neglected to ask one of the most basic questions, how long her paper was to be. After I had mounted a colossal search, I gathered that it was to be less than five pages. If I had found out that information beforehand, I would have understood that in her case, precision is more important than recall and tailored the reporting of my results accordingly. These are both mistakes which I will take care to avoid in the future.