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Reflective Essay

Writing this piece for the Osler Essay Contest was quite a challenge. I think the hardest part was to find out where to start: I knew I wanted to write about deinstitutionalization in psychiatry, but the subject was too wide for me to get a clear sense of direction. Doing some preliminary research using PubMed and Google Scholar, I got lost in the large number of papers and articles on the Internet: I seemed to be swimming in a bottomless source of information. I jotted down a few interesting resources, but was quickly overwhelmed. My first meeting with my mentor was very fruitful: Dr. Wright directed me towards specific books on the history of psychiatry and recommended I read the chapters that interested me in order to get ideas. I was quite impressed by his ability to name

I started with a thesis that turned out too ambitious, and throughout my readings, I pinpointed a specific period that interested me. I was impressed by the large collection of books on the history of psychiatry I found at the Osler Library of the History of Medicine. I came in with a short list of four titles, which I located in the Osler library by using the McGill WorldCat search engine. By association of ideas, searching for other related keywords and just browsing the shelves, I found many more relevant books. I was also surprised by the large collection of books in foreign languages owned by the library. In the many titles I ended up taking home, I was able to find all the information I was looking for: the books were much more focused and in-depth than the papers or journals I had found on the Web, and they had a much larger scope. Moreover, the annotations and list of references were very helpful in probing further: I could go back to the primary sources and get another point of view. Most surveys of the history of psychiatry also had a helpful index or table of contents. I think this was the most useful research skill I learned: how to make the most of the index table at the end of a book in order to go straight to the

information needed. I also learned the importance of establishing a precise thesis early on in order to avoid scattering attention and energy.

All in all, this experience taught me a lot about the process of writing a research paper, how to find information and appraise it (books generally having more depth and scope than articles), and organizing my essay around a concise thesis.