

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on February 26, 2024.

Revisiting Informed v. Uninformed

The Pittsburgh Regional Science and Engineering Fair's (PSREF) Science Review Committee (SRC), at the Carnegie Science Center, is charged with reviewing all student project proposals before experiments are done. Students apply for entry into the Fair each year, usually from about December of the preceding year to February of the Fair year, and they must have various proofs, first for adherence to safe practices. Establishing that is one important goal of the SRC. The SRC members are not judging the projects, generally; that comes later, by the actual judges, sometime around April 1.

A second important goal is that students are expected to show proficiency in preparing a proper bibliography as part of the Research Plan, the whole of which is at the core of their enterprise. Getting the bibliography right has proven to be a difficult task for most of them.

In the past, it was common to see bibliographic sources merely designated by google.com and as having come from wiki origins and the like, all without original attribution or expression in standard bibliographic format. In 2024, it is so satisfying to be able to say that we have "moved the needle" in respect to bibliography. Rare now is the use of just google.com or wiki-like citations, and the bibliographies more and more look as they should as part of an informed document and presentation. That is a qualitative assessment of this reviewer

So, how has this happy thing come about? One probable positive impetus is that the student-supervising teachers for Fair projects have been provided a written guide to share with the students. Its use is officially encouraged. The guide is a product of Emma Beaver, who, at the time of writing the guide, was Library Director at Murrysville Community Library.

The essentials of the guide were also given a link at the WLN web site under "Resources" (<https://www.wlnonline.org/prsef/>) where it remains today. That link drew 236 views or landings in 2023, up from 112 in 2022. The link went live in January 2020, late in the Fair process for 2020, but there is no tracking pre-2022. These numbers are significant in that the Fair drew only "more than 450" in 2023 (well below the pre-COVID participation that surpassed 1000 participants); the 236 represents about one half of the number of PRSEF participants for 2023.

It would be difficult for application reviewers to direct each and every participant to project-dependent, informed sources on an individual student basis. That is a teaching task that calls for immersion of the reviewer beyond capacity. To the rescue is Power Library, whose usefulness as an informed site and use are the point of Emma Beaver's guide and the on-line WLN link.

"POWER Library is Pennsylvania's collection of free online databases that give all Pennsylvanians access to peer-reviewed articles and research, magazines, newspapers, eBooks, and more. When you use POWER Library, you are accessing

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thousands of authoritative accurate, subscription-only resources that aren't available through free search engines." And at WLN's web link there is even a tool called "How do I cite my sources?" That is as close as we can get to an informed source center for these students without overstepping reviewer capacity and purpose. All that the user needs to access it is a Library card. For PRSEF applicants, and others of you, it is as simple as that!

Even if nothing else were lasting of the PRSEF experience, it is so satisfying to this reviewer to know that student users are learning the difference between "informed" and "uninformed" sources of information, and that the WLN is playing a vital part!

Charles B. Greenberg
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