The research paper assignment for American Literature II consisted of choosing a twentieth century American poet and formulating a thesis based on a connection between three of that author’s poems. Because students were encouraged to find a poet not discussed in our regular classroom assignments, the first part of the research process involved finding a poet whose works lent to a connection with which I could work. As a double major in the disciplines of both History and English, I consistently find myself looking for the societal and historical connections within literature, and this assignment was no different. I felt compelled to find a poet whose works displayed a connection with historical events as well as social injustices.

In order to find that poet, I began by logging onto the internet at poets.org to research American poets of the twentieth century that I had already studied from previous classes or from personal experience. Works written by these poets, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and Langston Hughes, were part of the regular classroom curriculum, and I, therefore, needed to find a different poet with which I could research further. Poets.org was useful because it suggested similar poets and/or similar poems to those I already knew. Through this process, I read several unknown pieces and I came across Sterling Brown’s “Slim Greer Goes to Hell.” The humor of the story within this poem certainly caught my attention, especially when Slim compared Hell to the American South. Furthermore, the dialect as well as the humor had striking similarities
to Mark Twain in capturing the color and flavor of the American South, which further piqued my interest.

Because I found a possible poet, but knew nothing of his works, I began at my local library, the West Long Branch location of the Monmouth County Library System, with a catalog search for Sterling Brown’s poetry. I located a book, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* compiled by Michael S. Harper which was filled with possible selections. Narrowing to three poems was a bit difficult; however, I was able to link three specific poems first by the use of the strong “southern” dialect, then by drawing from my historical knowledge of slave folk stories and songs. As a matter of fact, I remembered reading a section on the slave folk songs and stories in a history textbook from the American History course taken at Brookdale and ultimately used this as a source to provide information regarding slave work songs, folktales, and spirituals which the African American slaves used to help in their physical and emotional survival.

The thesis has been constructed: Sterling Brown’s poetry was linked through his use of slave songs to provide the African American community of the twentieth century an association to their cultural past while also providing literature that could be understood and appreciated by the present common black person. Thus, Brown’s poetry successfully linked the cultural past with the concerns of the present for the African American community. The three chosen poems contained in the book *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, “Frankie and Johnny,” “New St. Louis Blues,” and “Strong Men,” all have similarities to the Negro folk stories and songs which gives the African Americans that connection to their cultural ancestry while
providing the African Americans with a sense of togetherness in fighting social injustices based on racism they faced in their everyday lives.

The research to support this thesis began in the Bankier Library’s online database. Having used the online database for prior course research, I had an idea of where to begin; however, I had never used the Literature Resource Center previously. Using this specific database I began with a search using the keywords “Sterling Brown” which provided for quite a few entries, too many in fact to skim quickly to see if they were relevant to my thesis. When I changed the search to include “‘Sterling Brown’ and ‘blues,’” fewer results were listed, but these seemed to be more appropriate. I then had the process of narrowing further to relevant material by skimming articles, eliminating those that did not connect the poetry to cultural ties or blues songs and which did not make reference to any of my selected poems. In this manner, I was able to narrow the list significantly to include the five essays in my bibliography.

Among those listed in the bibliography located through the Literature Resource Center database is the article “Sterling A. Brown and the Afro-American Folk Tradition” by Charles H. Rowell originally printed in the *Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined: A Revised and Expanded Edition* which highlights the connection between the poem “Strong Men” and the endurance of the black man since the Middle Passage. This article also discusses the racist overtones in society by reversing the victimization in “Frankie and Johnny” and the continual exploitation of the black community by white society in “New St. Louis Blues.” This article, therefore, successfully connected all three poems to the thesis and was an excellent source for my paper.
Other essays found in the Literature Resource Center which support the thesis include: “Authenticity and Elevation: Sterling Brown’s Theory of the Blues,” by Lorenzo Thomas found in *African American Review*; “The Literary Ballads of Sterling A. Brown” by Gary Smith found in *CLA Journal* in *Poetry Criticism*; “The Human Image in Sterling Brown’s Poetry” by Clyde Taylor found in *The Black Scholar*; and “Songs of Racial Self” by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. found in *The New York Times Book Review*. These specific critical essays which I located within the Literature Resource Center at the Bankier Library’s online database are essential to my paper in supporting the thesis that Brown’s poetry connects to both the African American cultural past and the problems faced in the present and each one highlights in some manner the specific chosen poems to the cultural past and the oppressive present.

Although only three critical sources were required for this paper, and I had already fulfilled this requirement with the five Literary Resource Center articles, I conducted a J-STOR search as well. I discovered J-STOR through the research process in a previous semester with the guidance of Library Professor Jeanne Vloyanetes and J-STOR has since become a staple in my research process. Again using the keywords “‘Sterling Brown’ and ‘blues,’” I located two additional critical essays linking Brown’s poetry to the oppression of the African American community through his use of language as well as content. The essay entitled “The Heavy Blues of Sterling Brown: A Study of Craft and Tradition” written by Stephen E. Henderson focused primarily on “New St. Louis Blues” as a study of the subjugation of the common black man in America. Furthermore, David Anderson’s essay entitled “Sterling Brown’s Southern Strategy: Poetry as Cultural Evolution” highlights the importance of Brown’s poetry in the conservation of the African American cultural past because, as Brown saw it, the folklore of the African
American culture was a necessary tool for survival in the oppressed community which essentially ties the past to the present. These two additional critical essays found through the J-STOR search are vital to the entire thesis because of the clarity of the connections of the past and the present which was the basis of my paper. I feel these two J-STOR essays serve to strengthen the thesis. Had I not taken the time for the J-STOR search, I believe that the paper would not have been as strong as it is with the support of these two additional essays.

The Bankier Library’s online database search has been an instrumental tool in my research process since I returned to school after a twenty year hiatus. Because the research process has changed dramatically with the addition of computer technology and online sources, my research skills have had to adapt with the assistance of Brookdale professors including Professor Vloyanetes. I believe that the research process is an ever-evolving learning tool. Each time I research to support a thesis, I come away with additional knowledge and research skills because research is a “process” by which we continue to learn. Each search brings new challenges, especially within the online databases, including finding the best database for the particular search and the precise keywords which will locate the most appropriate sources. This thesis was no different in that I used a trial and error process in narrowing the search within the Literary Resource Center. Overall, my educational experience at Brookdale Community College has been enriched by the use of the Bankier Library’s resources. The Bankier Library staff and the Brookdale professors have been supportive in this research process and I could not have had a successful Brookdale experience without the support of either the library staff or the professors.