Before this summer I had never done research in the humanities outside of school assignments. As this past school year drew to a close I knew that I wanted to learn how to conduct intensive humanities research, but I did not yet have a research topic. By reaching out to different professors in the English department, I became acquainted with Dr. Max Cavitch. He was in the process of unearthing information about Richard Nisbet, an English poet of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Nisbet’s writing and life touched upon such controversial topics as the slave trade, trans-Atlantic relations, and treatment of the insane. Although he was born in England and spent some time in the West Indies, Nisbet ended up spending the last years of his life in a Philadelphia hospital as a mentally ill patient. Even though he owned slaves he believed in the possibility of their moral improvement and gradual emancipation. Because I was traveling to London for five weeks through a summer abroad program, it was decided that I would try to supplement Dr. Cavitch’s research during my trip.

Prior to leaving for London, I began looking into the British Library, which was to be my first stop. I found out how to register and tried to see if it housed any pertinent material. Over the course of my initial visits to the B.L. it became clear that I would not find any new information regarding Nisbet, but my trips there were not made in vain. I was able to obtain information relating to another project for Dr. Cavitch regarding the 19th century figure James Sanderson. By looking at magazine articles pertaining to select dinners during the late 1800s that had been held in London and featured American fare, I not only learned how to handle material that was hundreds of years old, I also gained a better understanding of what life was like during the 19th century. I was required to learn the different media in which information can be presented, including microfilm, newspaper articles, and magazine collections, and the most effective ways to make research notes. I also tried the National Archives of the United Kingdom in search of
Nisbet, but was unable to turn up anything. It is possible that the paucity of material on Nisbet owes to his having done a lot of overseas traveling, or to his having been associated with then-taboo topics. I learned that you might not always find what you are looking for, but the process can be just as important as the information itself because it can open up avenues that one might not have pursued otherwise. Luckily, Dr. Cavitch had collected letters written by Nisbet and his friends and relatives. I spent the rest of the summer transcribing these letters.

My research training has also helped me home in on my research topic. I am interested in looking at relations between England and the United States between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War in America, and how these interactions influenced prominent British writers during the time period. I would want to investigate the lives of these writers, focusing on their attitudes toward America. My first step would be to make a comprehensive list of prominent authors at the time by collecting a record of novelists who not only sold the most number of copies, but who also were considered writers of popular fiction. I would then pursue material that would provide commentary on the interactions between England and the United States, including how the two countries conducted trade, politics, and social interactions with each other. I would explore the connections these transatlantic relations and British literature produced at this time in order to obtain a more thorough understanding of how British authors were impacted by their country’s interactions with the newly formed United States. I hope this project will also provide greater insight into how the United States presented itself as a new nation, and how its presentation was received by another nation.