Much like my research process, my preliminary research topic search was filled with false starts, inspirations, excitements, and pivots. My original research question was one posed by my professor: “Should the U.S. suspend “expedited removal,” which requires asylum seekers to prove their eligibility for asylum at the border? If so, what is a viable alternative?” After a few days of deep digging into the intricacies of expedited removal, I began to sense that the root of the problem was embedded in the very legal structure itself, not in singular policy debates. I had continuously stumbled upon a larger structural reform proposal for a new form of immigration courts in my earlier research, so I formulated the new question: “should the U.S. create an Article I immigration court system?”

Once I had locked in my research questions, the challenge of finding sources arose. Early on in the process, Ms. O’Brien introduced our class to the BEAM research method, which I used to structure and balance the sorts of sources I drew upon. Beginning with “B” (Background) and “A” (Argument), I read opinion articles published in newspapers and watched reporting segments to put the subject into easily digestible, nonacademic language to gain some framing. I then moved to legal and governmental glossaries to solidify my understanding of key terminology I had come across in my perusal of the subject. From there, I developed keywords for my database research and dove into more complex “E” (Exhibit) academic and legal texts. A late find in my research process was the testimonies of immigration lawyers and other professionals in front of the Senate and House of Representatives. These transcripts were a game changer. Before finding them, I had been relying solely on secondary sources to summarize a one-sided account of the debates, but the transcripts provided a window into the real-time dialogue between prominent policymakers and the legal advocates for the changes I was proposing, and I gained an invaluable understanding of the stakes and tensions of the debate.

Despite these great triumphs, my research process was far from smooth. In fact, I found myself stuck down multiple tangential rabbit holes. It was here that I found the research librarians to once again be invaluable. In a check-in meeting with Sarah, I mentioned that I was having trouble putting down unhelpful sources once I felt I had committed to them. Although seemingly intuitive, I needed someone to tell me it was okay and even smart to pivot away from sources that were not going to serve me, and to take only what I could from them. With this advice in mind, I was able incorporate a different section of the report into my counter argument section.

My counter argument section was by far the most challenging. Because an Article I immigration court system had yet to be publicly recognized as a viable policy, I was unable to find any sources that focused on objections to it. In my first draft, I noted that an Article I immigration court system would not solve the issue of expedited removal, as those immigrants
subject to it were barred from an immigration courtroom. However, I was dissatisfied. It felt like a cop-out to utilize a counterargument that identified the one thing that my proposal was structurally not designed to do. The turning point was our required class presentation on our research, which required me to take a step back from highly academic and legal jargon. When I got to the counterargument section, I realized I had been approaching it entirely wrong. A general audience would not draw upon another highly complex policy question, but they would resort to the basics: if it’s such a good proposal, why hasn’t it been implemented yet? Why are policymakers against it? Those were concrete questions I could piece together some answers to, so I went back to my core sources and ran with them. In the end, I was much prouder of this section, and feel that it achieved its original purpose of presenting another side to the issue.

This research experience gave me great confidence in my ability to redirect and reshape my arguments as my questions and material shifted. This, coupled with the support and wisdom of the research librarians allowed me to keep my work in perspective, making even the most complex topic feel manageable. I am immensely thankful for all I learned, and use these skills in all of my current work.