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Overview of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

EXPLORING Novels, 2003

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[In the following essay, James, a doctoral candidate at Yale University, relates the history of controversy surrounding *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and particularly its portrayal of the slave Jim. She argues that how the reader interprets Jim's character can affect the interpretation of the novel's problematic ending.]

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has been a source of controversy since its publication in 1884. It was banned from many public libraries on its first appearance for being "trash." Although today it is widely regarded as a—if not *the*—classic American novel, it still poses problems for its readers. *Huckleberry Finn* has long been identified as expressing something essentially American: in the words of Bernard De Voto, "the novel derives from the folk and embodies their mode of thought more purely and more completely than any other ever written." In some ways, the debate about the Americanness of *Huckleberry Finn* reveals the larger struggle to define American identity. Those who first condemned the novel as being "trash" objected to it on grounds of both literary merit and racial, social, and economic class: they rejected its portrayal of a slave and an uneducated, poor boy as the most typical kind of American citizens. The opposite point of view, which celebrates the novel as an expression of the "folk," asserts its subject is the quintessential, or typical, American story: characters without social advantages trying to "make good."

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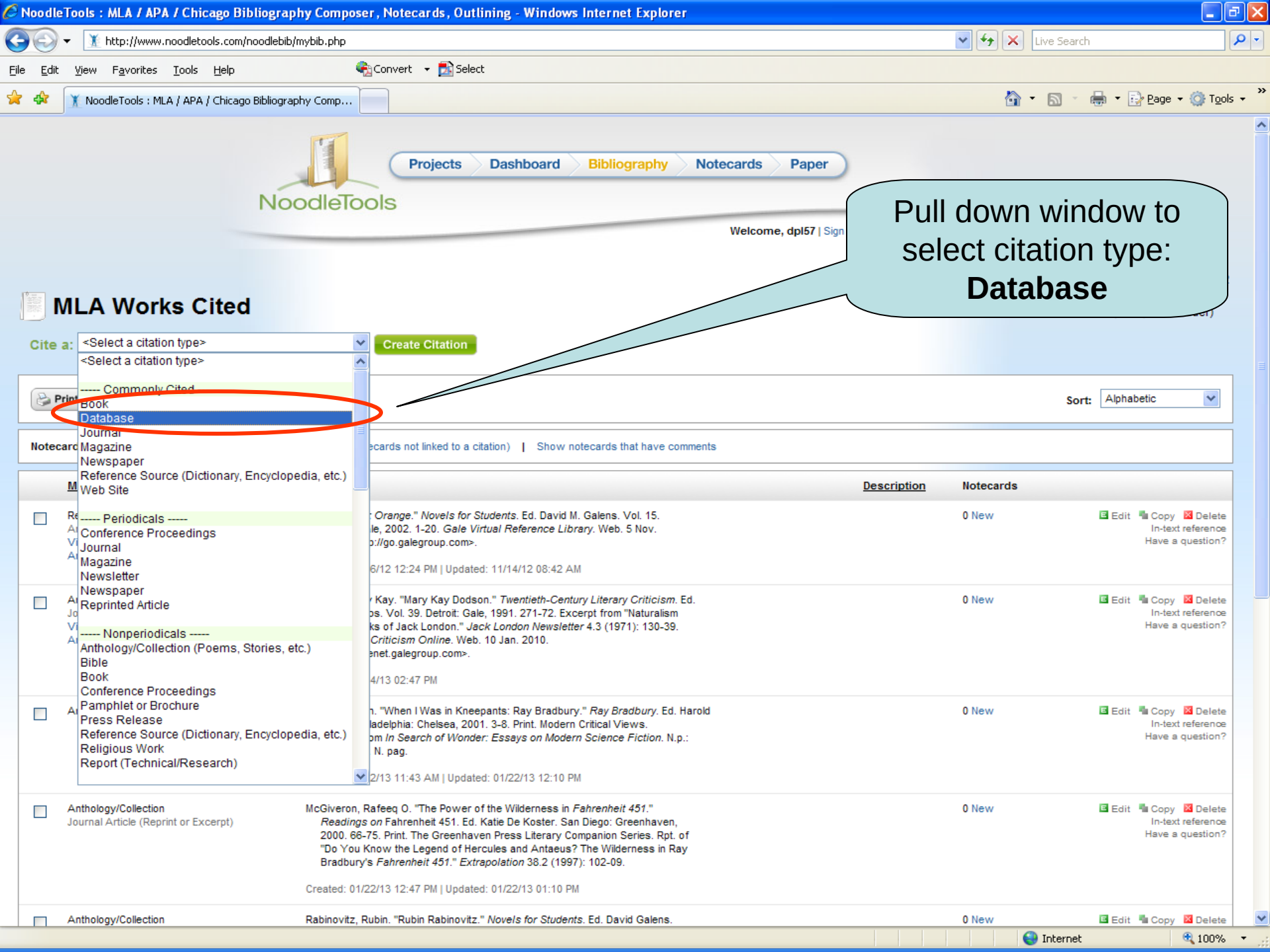
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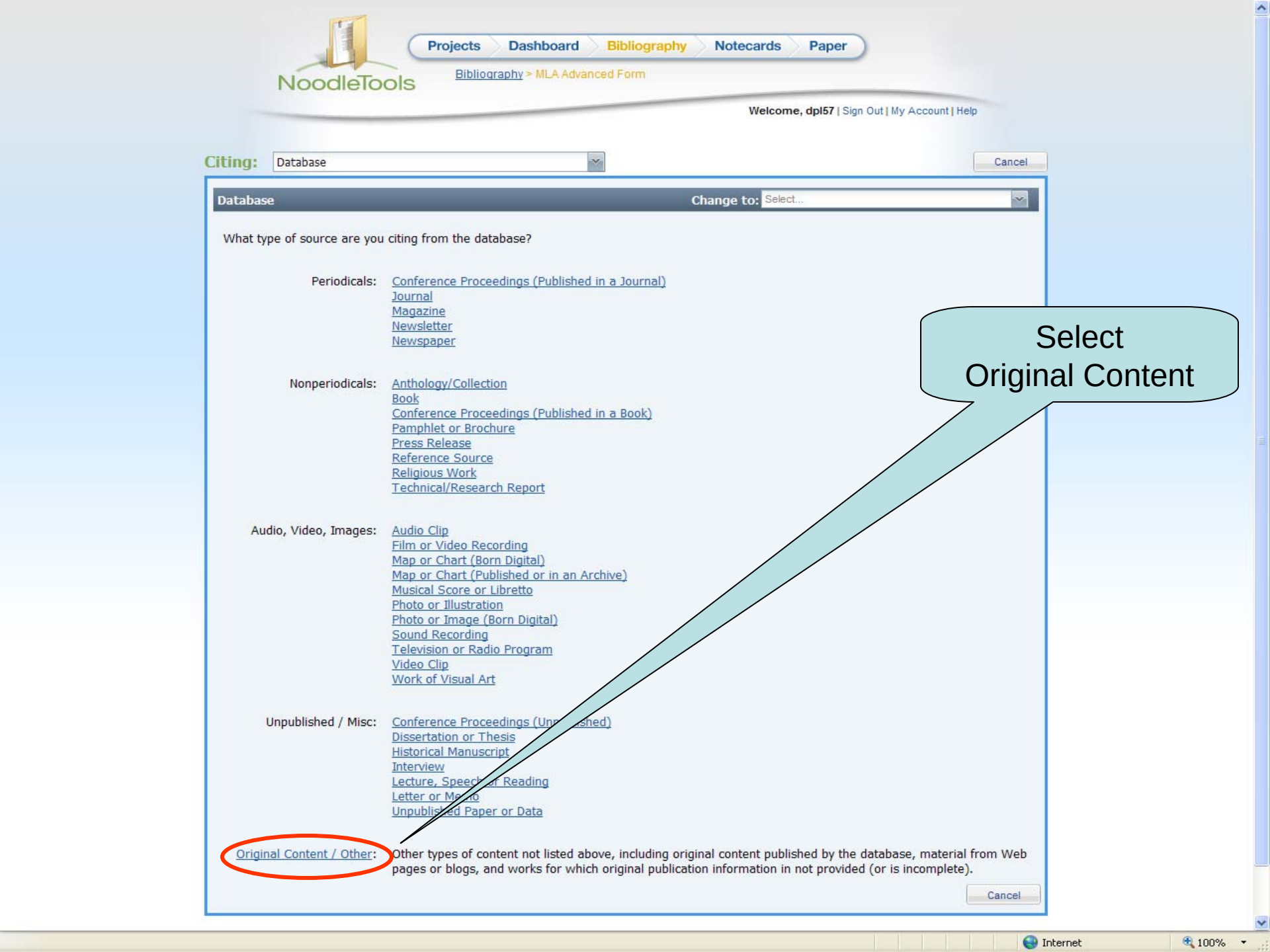
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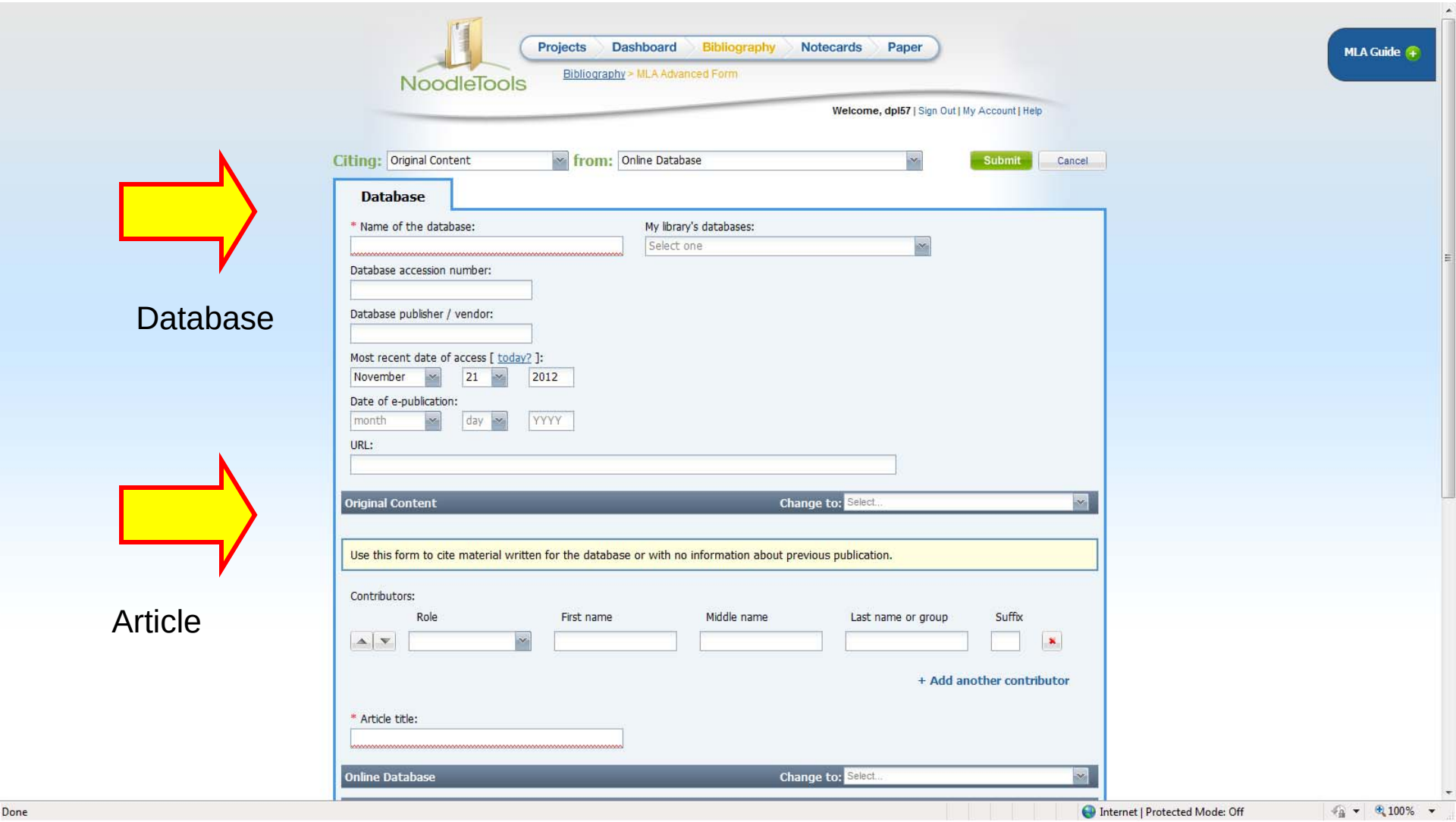

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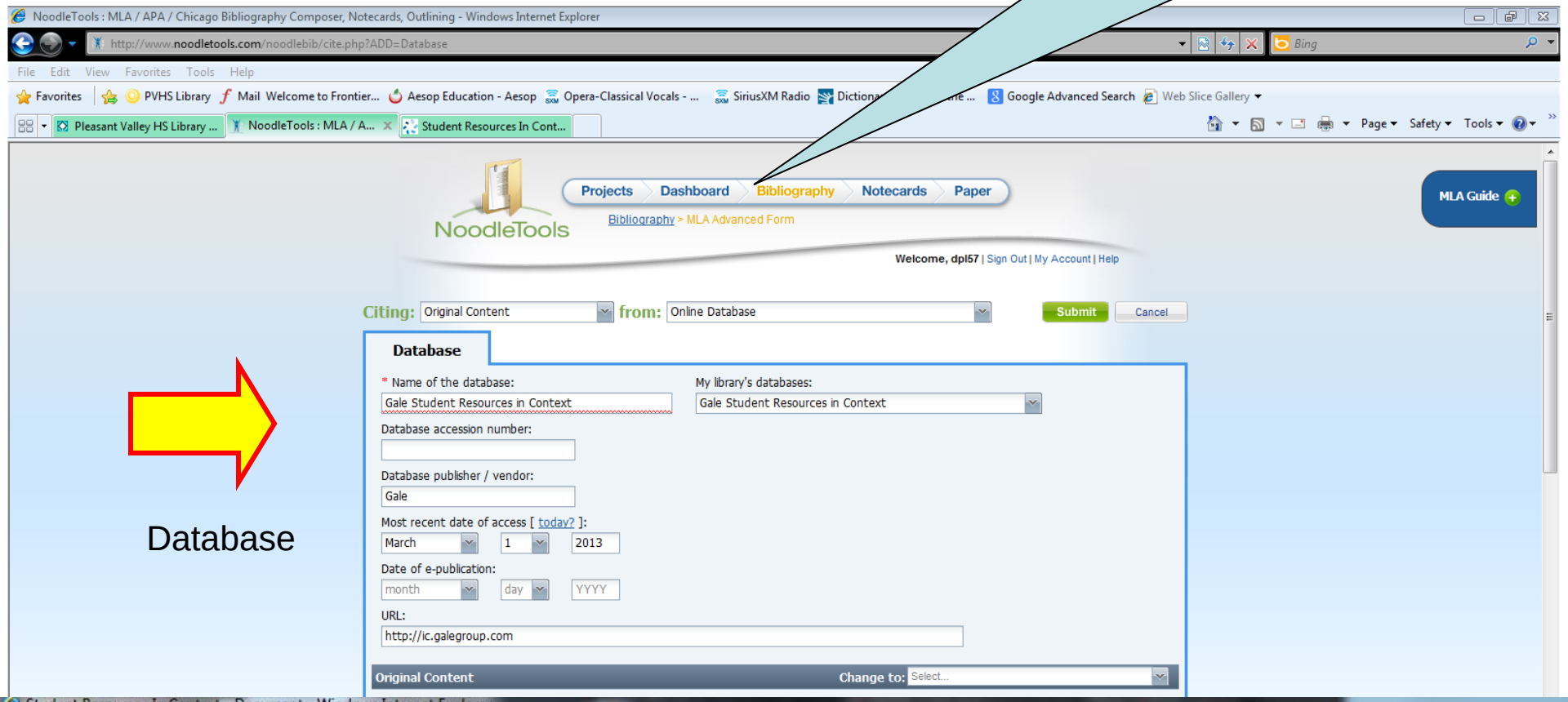

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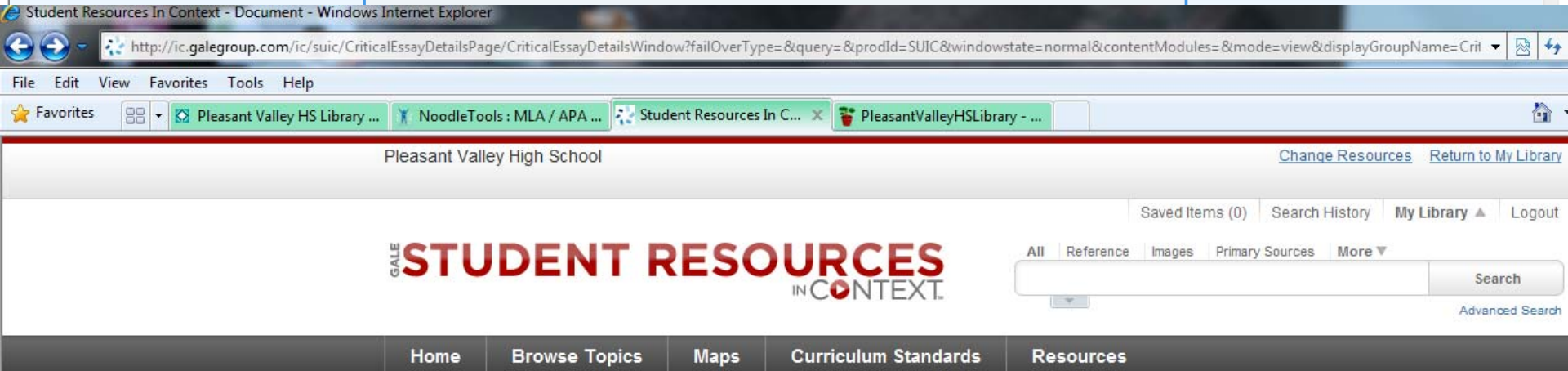

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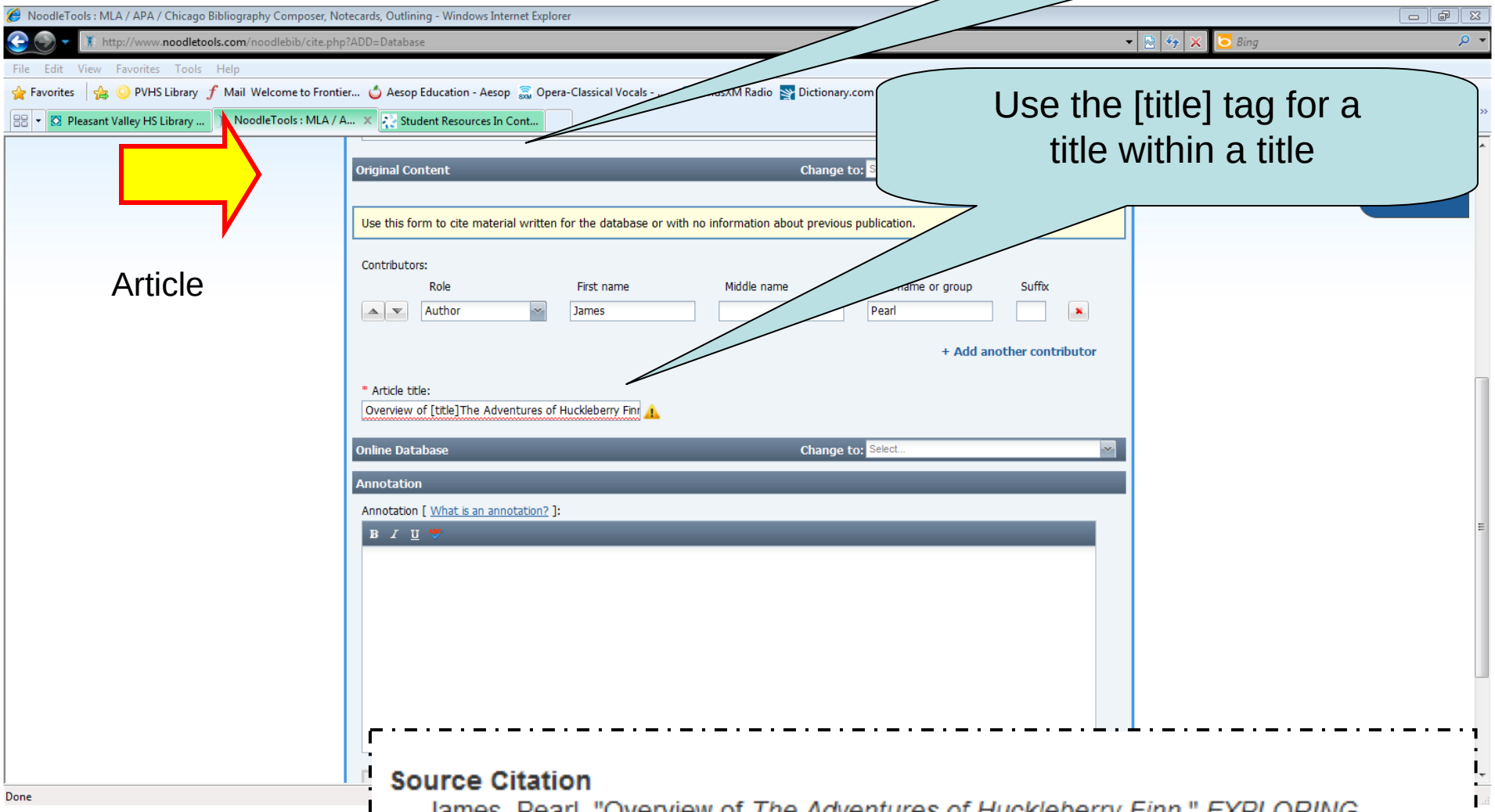

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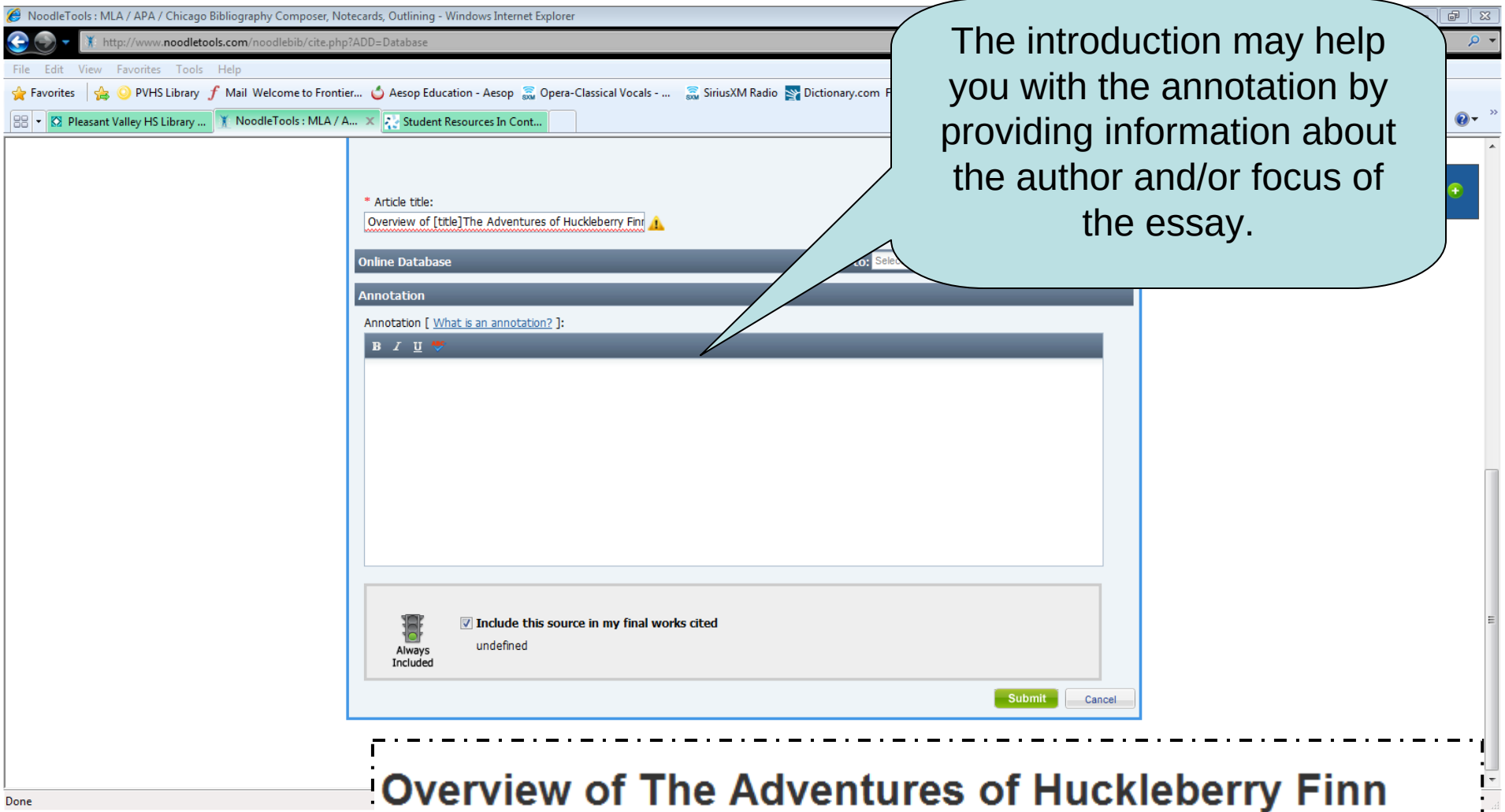

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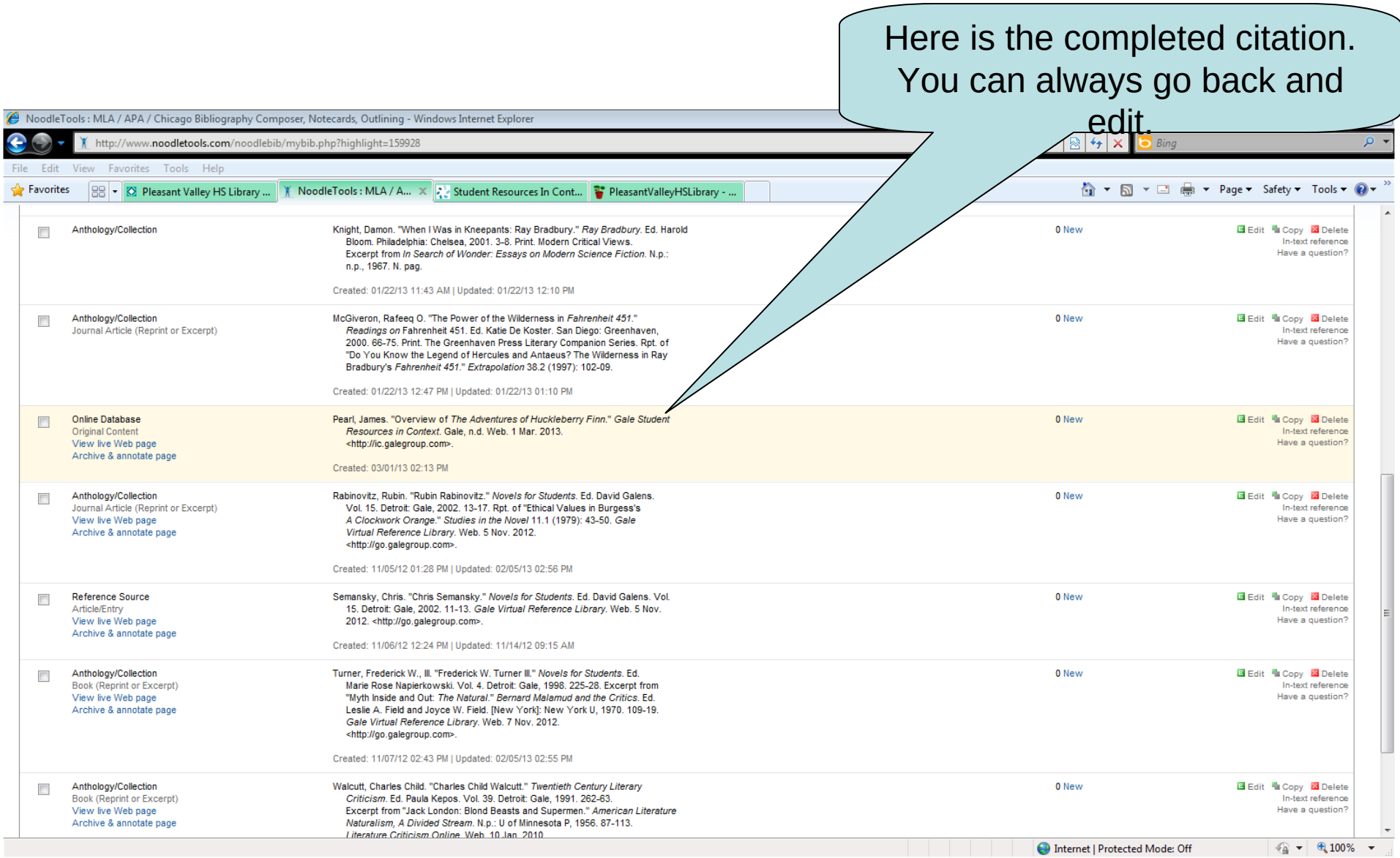
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