

Are Your Students Competent Users of Information?

In this age of information overload and media giants, it is vital that students learn to use information competently. With the exception of publicly held stations, all of the news that we hear, see, or read, comes to us from just seven companies! To see who owns what, take a look at these websites:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/giants/>

<http://www.cjr.org/tools/owners/>

Students need to know how to evaluate Internet information. For some examples of bogus websites:

<http://www.cedu.niu.edu/~fiehn/EvaluationWebsites.html>

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has this to say about information literacy and higher education:

“Developing lifelong learners is central to the mission of higher education institutions. By ensuring that individuals have the intellectual abilities of reasoning and critical thinking, and by helping them construct a framework for learning how to learn, colleges and universities provide the foundation for continued growth throughout their careers, as well as informed citizens and members of communities. Information literacy is a key component of, and contributor to lifelong learning. Information literacy competency extends learning beyond formal classroom settings and provides practice with self-directed investigations as individuals move into internships, first professional positions, and increasing responsibilities in all arenas of life.”

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has developed **standards** (competencies) for information literacy in higher education. They state that the information literate student should be able to:

1. Determine the extent of information needed
2. Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
3. Evaluate information and its sources critically
4. Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base
5. Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
6. Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally

CLC has revised the General Education Learning Outcomes and the first of these is critical thinking, which incorporates some of the Information Competencies.

So how do you put these competencies into your syllabus? Pace University Library has suggested several ways to do this:

- Draw on the students' knowledge, **and ask them to think critically**. Ask students to write annotated and evaluative bibliographies, which require them to ask questions about the sources they are using. Ask students to conduct a Web search and a periodical database search on a topic related to the discipline; compare and contrast the information results.
- Ask students to locate an article on their "topic," summarize the article and write a citation. Critical thinking can be encouraged by also asking them to identify a problem described in the article and suggest a new solution, or make a judgment about an aspect of the article based on their personal feelings or experience, or ask them to research their topic using information published in different decades and ask them to compare and discuss why the changes may have occurred.
- Ask students to research a particular topic – medical topics work well – in a variety of types of sources, for example, a scholarly journal, a popular publication, a newspaper and/or a web site. Then ask the student to discuss how the different types of publications treat the topic.
- Ask students in a debate or speech class to work as small teams to research *both* sides of an issue. Don't tell the students which side they will be taking until the day of the debate.
- Ask students to compare a fictional work with social commentary or accounts written about people during the time the fictional work takes place.
- Prepare a list of citations to articles on a particular topic – for example, drinking water – from a variety of sources, such as scholarly journals, popular magazines, newspapers, government documents and/or web sites. Ask the students to identify which items would be appropriate for a research project in a college course called "Environment and Health." The research paper for the course is focused on the pollution of drinking water and its adverse effects on health.
- In a literature class, ask students choose one of the books read in class, for example, *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Handmaid's Tale*. Ask students to use library resources to find three critiques of their chosen book, and then

identify the critics' position on an aspect of the book about which the student has an opinion. Students should then select the passages from the critique to substantiate that writer's position, and select passages from the novel to substantiate the student's interpretation of the author. The purpose of the assignment is to show how scholarship evolves; that an individual's response to a piece of literature has validity and that personal response and collective dialogues contribute to greater knowledge.⁶

- **Use reality-based problem solving activities.** Ask your students to research local or state policy issues related to the discipline and the local community. Ask them to investigate the benefits of possible courses of action to resolve problems facing the community. Results could be sent to local or state officials for review.¹
- Ask students to propose new legislation for a current issue. Conduct research to support the need for the legislation. A variation on the same theme – ask students to propose a new action, procedure or activity in a particular workplace setting (emergency room, classroom, retail setting, etc.) and conduct research to locate materials that support the need for the new action.
- Employ assignments that **highlight connections between disciplines or to real-world applications.** Ask students in math classes to compile a “Math Picture Portfolio” in which they find real world examples of concepts covered in the course (including statistics, probability, and geometry). Creativity in selecting examples could be encouraged and rewarded.¹
- Ask your students to each choose a topic of current national or local interest and write a letter expressing his/her opinion on the subject to the editor of a local newspaper. Then ask the students to work in small groups to critically examine one another's letters and to identify any dubious statements. Each student is assigned to substantiate those statements that were singled out by the group as needing more convincing evidence or authority. Research is required for the process, with documentation in the form of notes and a bibliography.⁴
- Group activity: Ask students to prepare a guide that introduces others to information sources in a subject field. Depending on the discipline, ask the students to list a minimum of one life experience where each of the tools could be useful in their future personal or educational life.³
- Modify research assignments to include documentation of student work in an effort to **minimize plagiarism, and to make clearer the idea that research is a process that takes time.** Students can prepare an annotated and evaluative bibliography of references, keep a journal that documents the research process (including databases selected and why,

search strategies/statements used, pitfalls they encountered, how they changed their strategy, etc.), and/or prepare an oral or written defense of research findings including their personal viewpoint.

- “Read the References” – Ask the students to read the articles cited in a research paper, and then explain how each is related to the paper. This can help students understand when it is appropriate to recognize the contributions of previous authors in the development of a new work or a new idea.

Helpful websites:

<http://www.pace.edu/library/pages/instruct/effectiveassignments.htm#Ideas>

<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill1.htm>

http://www.sciencebuddies.org/mentoring/project_biblio.shtml?qclid=COXu3cLt14YCFRyiWAodv0yw3g

The librarians at U. of C. Berkeley have excellent suggestions as well:

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/assignments.html>

LOOKING DOWN THE ROAD...

Online tutorials:

TILT (<http://tilt.lib.utsystem.edu/module1/tilt.htm>)

All of us in the Murphy Library are committed to student success. If we can assist in any way, please give us a call at the Reference desk (2071)