
Foreword

Barbara Fister,
Gustavus Adolphus College

All of us feel overwhelmed, at one point or another, by the seemingly unstoppable accumulation of mail in our inboxes, the stream of news coming at us from so many directions, often feeding yet more news across cryptic flowing banners, the mysterious switchbacks we encounter as we navigate common medical advice – that thing that was good for you? It’s not, after all – and the frustration of hearing two equally passionate sides to every debate, when we know the truth doesn’t come in neat binaries. Information is too much with us, and too much of it is trivial or dubious or drawn from unconvincing evidence. But when we need to figure things out, we do the research.

Those of us teaching first-year college students usually confront another problem that also feels overwhelming at times. Students have always had trouble writing research papers, but on top of the usual culprits – choosing topics that are too narrow or too broad, providing a data-dump rather than an analysis, misusing words, splicing sentences together with commas when they aren’t fragmenting them – we have to help them find their way through an abundant but increasingly complex information environment. Instead of going to the library, students go to Google, where scholarly sources, advocacy, government documents, personal narratives, news sources, scans of nineteenth-century books,

and home-made videos are all shelved together, millions upon millions of documents available on any topic. If students are savvy enough to turn to the library's website, they are likely to search an aggregated database that includes more articles from more journals than any undergraduate library previously subscribed to. They have endless choices to make, but they can't fall back on a scaffold of understanding that more experienced scholars take for granted. They don't know the simplest things: that books have indexes, and that by using an index or table of contents they could get information from a book without having to read it cover-to-cover. They probably have never seen a scholarly journal in print, and don't realize such periodicals are published serially. They think 'argument' means a fight to the finish, not developing a reasoned position based on evidence. And they aren't sure, but they think *Time* magazine is what their teacher means when they say 'use scholarly sources.'

Lacking experience with traditional research tools is one thing; they also lack experience with developing researchable questions, drawing conclusions from evidence, examining sources critically, or having their minds changed when confronted with data that conflicts with their preconceptions. And (though this is nothing new) they lack a sense of urgency or commitment to doing research. A research assignment is just another jump-through-the-hoops demonstration for their teacher, another checkpoint that will show they did their homework, however grudgingly. An efficient strategy for getting through a research assignment with a minimum of effort, though rarely an effective one, is viewed as a survival skill, and rather than learn new ways to find out about the world, students will almost always draw on whatever tools and strategies they have used in the past. They are busy people; they don't have time to mess around. The fact that their college has a vast library of resources and their teachers

have high expectations doesn't budge them from their course. Google has worked before, and everyone knows essays should be five paragraphs long. Come up with something to say, find a few sources to support it, and you're done. That shouldn't take more than a few hours, right?

The research paper remains the most common writing assignment on college campuses, more popular than ever (Lunsford, 2008). In the first year, just as students are encountering the conventions of academic writing, we also hope to ground them in the mechanics of using a print/digital hybrid library, probably much larger than any they've ever used before, to make informed choices among possible sources, and extract meaning from them in order to support a well-organized synthesis or argument. We know they will be asked to do this in the future, so we try to get them acculturated quickly.

This puts a lot of responsibility on those who teach first-year students the ropes of academic writing. Many instructors are dismayed to find, when they collect drafts of papers, that the library tour they scheduled in the second week of the course seems to have had no effect at all. No matter how much detail they put into the assignment prompt describing how to recognize high-quality sources, the bibliographies are full of sites from About.com and Knowledge Quest. And worst of all, the students seem already jaded, indifferent to the thrill of the hunt or the opportunity to pursue a question they care about. Yet apart from preparing inexperienced students for college, instructors know that these skills are for life. We need citizens that can find and interpret information, that respect evidence, that are prepared to question assumptions and ask the right questions. We know what happens in that first year matters. And it's not easy.

This book, written by an experienced academic librarian, is for every first-year instructor who has tried semester after

semester to refine their research activities with students, only to be defeated by a new crop of novices. It's for every teacher who is puzzled by students who seem so savvy about technology, but so incapable of using it for academic purposes. It's for every librarian who wants to work more effectively with the faculty who help new students negotiate an unfamiliar and challenging set of expectations. It's for anyone who cares about the success of those first-year students.

Molly Flaspohler, who has observed students' confusion from the front lines of their forays into research and who has collaborated successfully with faculty to make research a more meaningful opportunity for learning, presents a well-organized and entertaining review of what we know about how students today approach research assignments, suggests how (and why) librarians and teaching faculty should collaborate fruitfully, and offers practical, experience-tested pedagogical approaches to introducing reluctant researchers to the intellectual work of articulating questions and seeking evidence-based solutions, work that can turn novice researchers into engaged students, ready to take the next step in their academic journey.

Work cited

- Lunsford, Andrea A. and Karen J. Lunsford (2008)
‘“Mistakes are a Part of Life”: A National Comparative Study.’ *College Composition and Communication* 59.4: 781–806.