# Promoting Transferable Research Skills: A New Take on English Composition Assessment

*Melissa N. Mallon*

## Introduction

In an era of efficiency studies and evolving academic environments, the need for libraries to communicate their value to the university is more important than ever. One logical way to demonstrate this value is by highlighting the library's contribution to the assessment of student learning. But how can libraries accomplish this while still providing authentic, student-centered assessment? This paper describes a collaborative partnership between an academic library and English Composition program to design and implement a wide-scale assessment program that not only measures student learning, but also encourages students to develop transferable skills that they will take with them throughout their academic and professional lives.

## Literature Review

The collaboration between academic libraries and English composition programs is not a new phenomenon; there are many different models of collaboration, from course-integrated library instruction sessions to working with instructors to develop specific library assignments.[1] Regardless of the format they take, these partnerships provide librarians with a consistent method of integrating information literacy skills[2] into the general education curriculum. A recent study by Project Information Literacy found that college freshmen valued their English composition courses as a way of introducing them to college-level research[3] in a scaffolded manner. This first year course is a logical place to begin teaching critical thinking and information literacy skills that students will use throughout their college career.

English composition courses also provide an opportunity for students to become familiar with the skills they need to succeed in their professional lives,[4] a crucial component of lifelong learning: "writing offers [students] a material way to make strong connections with spaces outside the academy, outside the United States …. the writing that English students do can feel quite removed from their lives outside academe— from the jobs they might pursue."[5] By providing a more relevant experience for students, even in library research instruction, librarians are helping to reinforce that these skills will extend well beyond the classroom.

Composition courses also provide the opportunity for librarians to establish themselves as resources for students:

> Freshmen said they found campus librarians (29%) and their English composition instructors (29%) were the most helpful individuals on campus with guiding them through college-level research. They helped students chart a plan for tapping the wealth of research resources through the library.[6]

Course-integrated instruction is a particularly successful way of encouraging communication and

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points of contact between librarians and students,[7] especially when librarians create online course guides, one-on-one appointments with students, and self paced assignments.[8]

Additionally, librarians and instructors can collaborate in the instructional design process. While most of the teaching of the mechanics of paper writing and even some aspects of research falls on the shoulders of composition instructors,[9] librarians can lend their expertise in teaching students the research process and critical evaluation of sources. Attaching a grade or some other form of credit to library-created assignments is, however, an important consideration in regard to student motivation and completion.[10]

## Collaboration and Assignment

This assessment project began after many years of collaboration between Wichita State University (WSU) Libraries[11] and the WSU English Department. An increased institutional focus on reporting assessment data for accountability led library administration to look for an opportunity for wide-scale assessment of student learning.[12] The Library Instruction Coordinator (the author) suggested a revamp of the library instruction component for ENGL 102 (College English 102) because a relationship had already been established between the Libraries and the English Department. She was eager to find a way to teach students research skills that they could apply to their coursework while at the same time gathering usable assessment data to report to university administration. In particular, the Instruction Coordinator wanted to know if library instruction actually helps students develop the skills they need to successfully complete research papers.

### *Library Research Sessions*

Starting in Fall 2012, all instructors teaching English 102 were required to schedule a research workshop with a librarian, with required attendance for students. The research workshop occurs around weeks five to seven of the semester, when students are working on an essay that requires them to find and evaluate an

article on their topic. All instruction librarians share the teaching of the research sessions. However, rather than having each librarian individually come up with a lesson plan for the sessions they taught, the Library Instruction Coordinator worked with the English 102 Coordinator in the English Department to develop a set of learning outcomes that would be used in all library research sessions. Additionally, the Instruction Coordinator created an outline of topics and active learning exercises for librarians to use in their 102 instruction sessions. The English 102 Coordinator vetted the learning outcomes and the lesson outline in order to make sure they fit the department's and the university's curricular standards (Appendix A). The Instruction Coordinator developed the following learning outcomes to guide this new curriculum and to identify the assessment method for the assignment:

As a result of the library instruction, students will be able to:

1. Select the appropriate level of information sources for their information need.
2. Critically apply information found to their topic/thesis statement.
3. Evaluate information sources for authority and relevancy.
4. Blog their responses on the blog post set up for their class section.

The outline for the research session was kept purposefully brief so as to allow some customization depending on individual teaching styles and preferences; the outline focuses on concepts related to the research process including narrowing a topic, picking an appropriate database, critically evaluating article results, and strategies for revising a search. Not only does having a common curriculum streamline the teaching process, it offers consistency for students that missed class or have questions. They can approach any librarian with questions, and the librarian will know the content that was covered in the 102 sessions.

Blog Post Assignment

After the research session with the librarian, students complete a ten-point assignment that is designed to reinforce the concepts covered in the ses-

sion and help them find an article for their first assignment, the Analytical Comparison Essay. In order to introduce digital literacy skills, the assignment is completed in a WordPress blog rather than on a paper worksheet. This digital format provides more transparency for students, allowing them to see the results of their peers' research, as well as providing them with the opportunity to use an online communication tool that they may be required to use in other classes and/or their professional careers.

Students are required to find and access the blog post for their class section on the English 102 library blog[13] and submit their answers to the following questions, worth eight out of the ten total points for the library assignment:

1. What is your topic?
2. Which database(s) did you decide to use to search for articles? Why did you make this choice?
3. Write the keywords you used to search for articles in the database.
4. Provide the citation in MLA format for one of the articles you think will be useful for your essay.
5. Why did you choose the article listed above? How is relevant to your topic? Your answer should include an evaluation of the source (hint: think about the criteria on the CAARP test).
6. What are some strategies for revising your search to find additional articles?
7. How might the results from your new search be different than your first search? (Appendix B)

These questions take students through the steps in the research process as taught in the library research session. Librarians reiterate in the sessions that, at the end of completing the library assignment, students will have chosen an article for use in writing their essay. Reinforcing this helps students see the connection to the work they are doing in class, and provides librarians with a valuable opportunity to provide feedback to students early in the research process.

In order to learn about scholarly communication and collaborative research, students are also required to respond to at least one other classmate's post. The blog format is particularly useful for this part of the assignment, since students can easily access their classmates' posts online, even from home. A student's comment to their peer makes up the final two points of the assignment.

## Methodology
### Demographics
Four semesters worth of data was collected: Fall 2012, Spring and Fall 2013, and Spring 2014. Over the four semesters, 1,929 students in 91 sections of ENGL 102 attended a library research session. Spring 2013 had the largest number of sections compared to all other semesters, with 26 sections. Of the students that attended a library research session, 79% (N=1,527) completed the Blog Post Assignment. Two coders used the rubric to score student assignments; these scores were averaged for the final grade.

### Assessment Instrument
The Library Instruction Coordinator and one other librarian use a rubric to score the assignments individually (Appendix C). A rubric has several benefits, including providing students with guidance in completing the assignment and "making the assessment process more accurate and fair."[14] The Instruction Coordinator filled out rubrics for each student and then compiled them into a document that the she shared with the English 102 instructor. A shared Google document allowed the Instruction Coordinator to access both sets of coders' scores, while keeping the scores separate until it was time to compute averages.

## Results and Discussion
### Student Performance
ANOVA analysis revealed that the total average scores for Spring 2013 were significantly higher than all other semesters. This can be attributed to the higher overall campus enrollment in Spring 2013, which resulted in a higher number of English 102 sections offered. No

**FIGURE 1**
**Average Blog Post Assignment Scores by Semester**
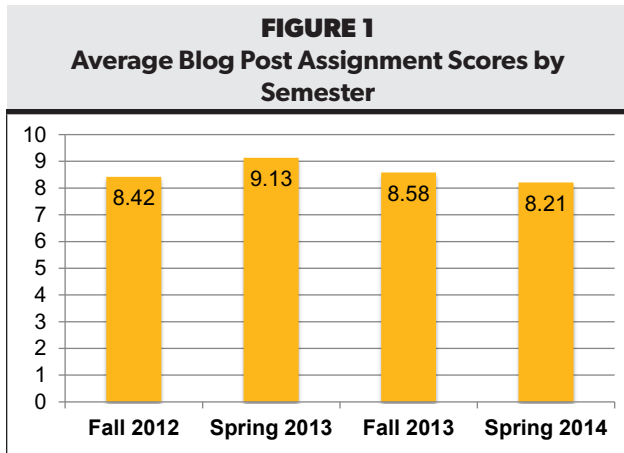


significant differences in the average total scores were found between the other three semesters.

#### Figure 1. *Average Blog Post Assignment Scores by Semester*
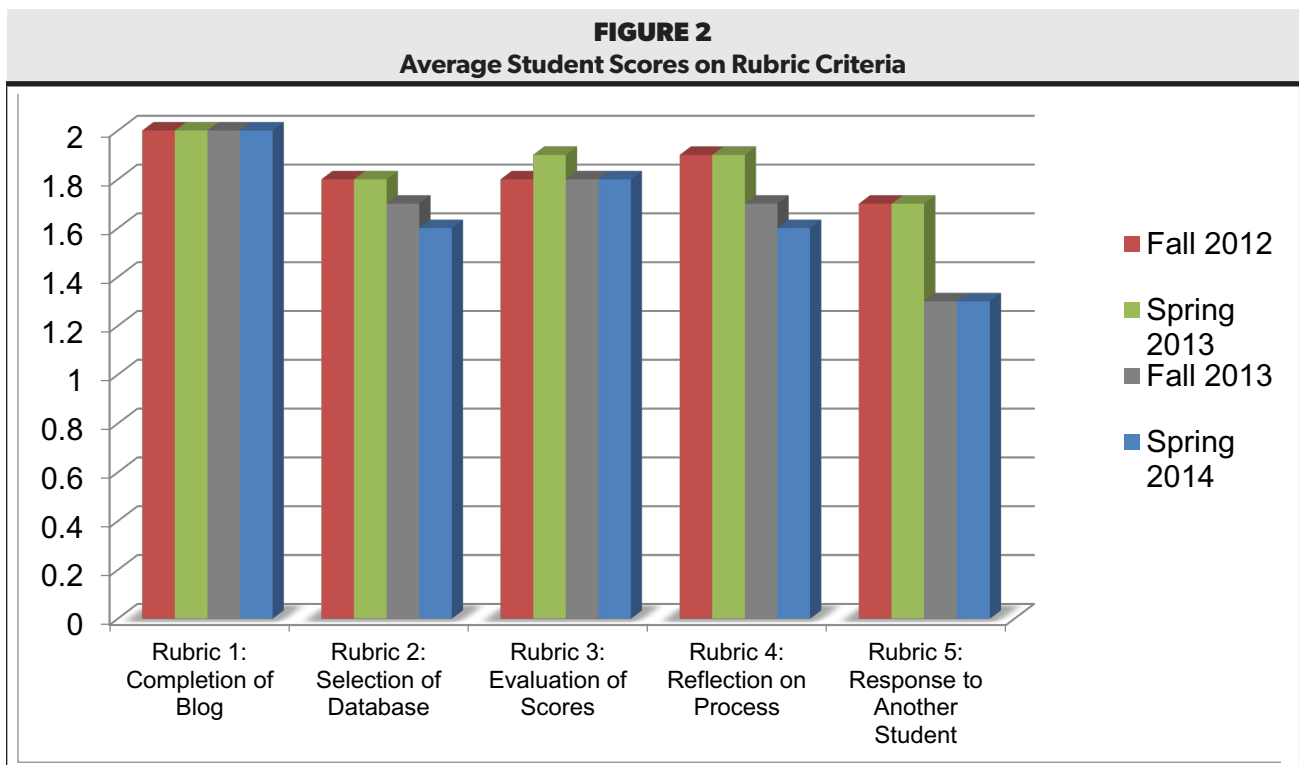
Students scored highest on the completion of the Blog Assignment rubric criteria (Rubric 1), which is not particularly significant, since the highest performance description for this criterion is listed as *Fully completes the questions, showing proficiency with the blog format*. This criterion is also used to assess stu-
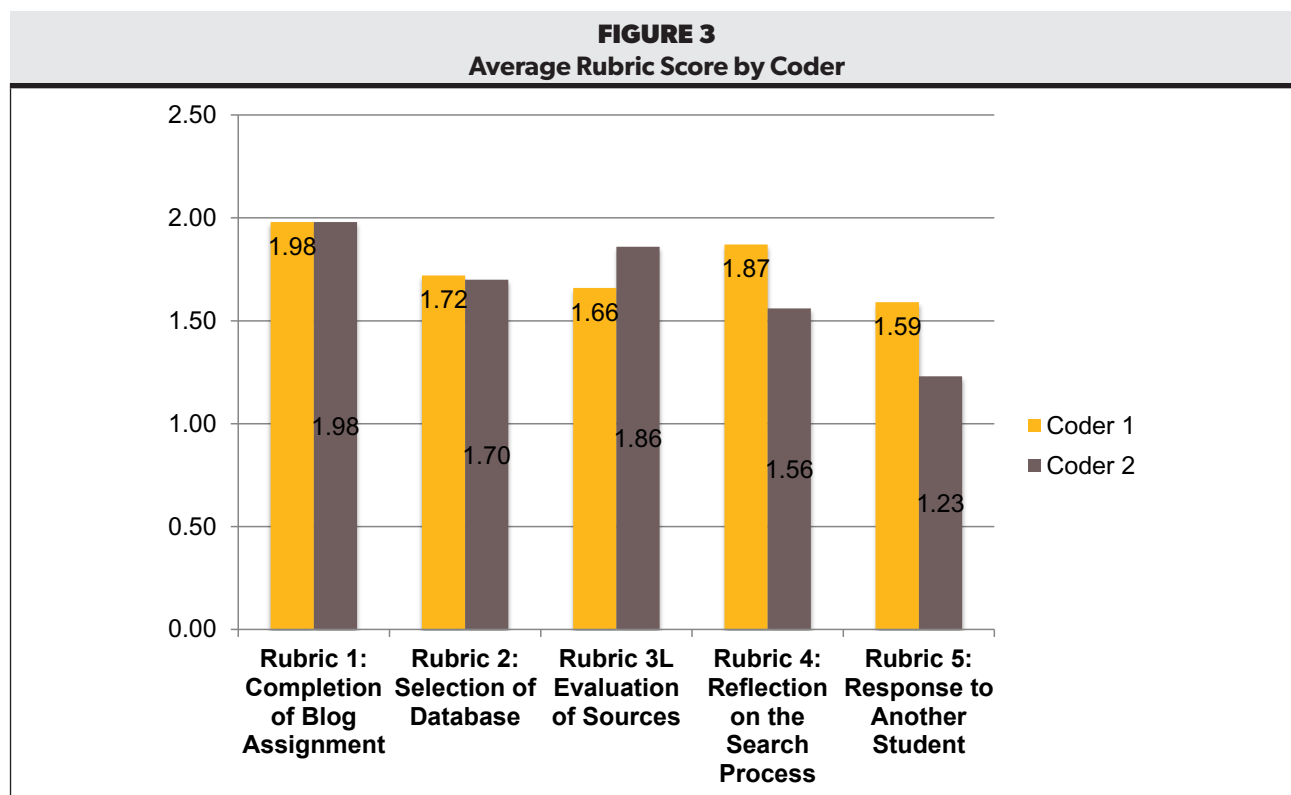
dents' mastery of the blog format, which is useful in gauging digital literacy skills.

Students scored lowest on the Response to Another Student rubric criteria. The average points awarded for this criteria dropped quite a bit in Fall 2013 and Fall 2104; since several students neglected to complete this part of the assignment, the librarians might need to provide more emphasis on this point in the future. This section also proved to be one of the rubric criteria that showed a significant difference in scores by the coders (see *Rubric Validity* section below for a discussion).

#### Figure 2. *Average Student Scores on Rubric Criteria*

While the completion rate of the Blog Post Assignment was not quite 80%, most students scored an average of 8.5 out of 10 points on the assignment. Completion of the library assignment has been an issue over the four semesters. This may be attributed to the lower number of points that can be earned from the assignment, varying due dates (some instructors give students only a couple of days to complete the assignment, while some may give up to a week or more), or

**FIGURE 2**
**Average Student Scores on Rubric Criteria**

**FIGURE 3**
**Average Rubric Score by Coder**



*Figure 3. Average Rubric Score by Coder*

students forgetting to complete the assignment. Most English 102 instructors have been very good about supporting the library assignment, and reinforcing its importance to students. As one instructor reported to the Instruction Coordinator, "for those that do the assignment, it is incredibly beneficial."[15]

## Rubric Validity

Since the results of this assessment were going to be reported to university administration, the Instruction Coordinator for this project chose to have two librarians participate in grading to test for inter-coder reliability of the rubric.

T-test analysis of each coder's average score per rubric show that there is a statistically significant meaningful difference in the average scores given by the coders for Rubric 4 (Reflection on the Search Process) and Rubric 5 (Response to Another Student) criteria.

*Figure 3. Average Rubric Score by Coder*
Rubric criteria 4 and 5 were two of the more subjective components of the criteria description, which

can affect rubric reliability.[16] In particular, the two-point description for the Rubric 5 criteria is *Provides a thoughtful 1-2 sentence comment showing critical thinking*. Based on the analysis, it is quite likely that the librarian coders had different thoughts on what a "thoughtful" comment entailed.

Paired t-test analysis shows that there is a statistically significant difference in total scores by coder, however Cohen's d analysis shows that this difference is not meaningful. To further test reliability between coders, a Cohen's Kappa analysis was conducted. Results from this analysis show that the inter-coder reliability is significant, but low.

*Figure 4. Average Total Score on Assignments by Coder*
While the paired t-test analysis results prove statistically significant, it is worth considering that, "reliability is not the only critical concept that has to be taken into account when designing performance assessments. The concept of validity must also be explored in relation to more authentic forms of assessment."[17] Likewise, "when the assessment is relatively

**FIGURE 4**
**Average Total Score on Assignments by Coder**
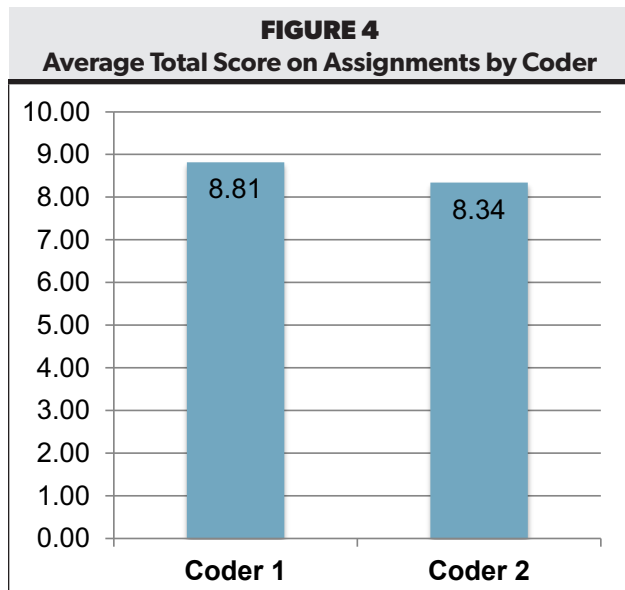


low-stakes, lower levels of reliability can be considered acceptable."[18] Given that the Instruction Coordinator created this assignment as an authentic learning experience, and students reported that the Blog Post Assignment helped them feel more comfortable completing their research for English 102, this level of inter-coder reliability is considered sufficient.

### Assignment Format

Anecdotally, both students and instructors expressed satisfaction with the assignment. From an informal survey of English 102 instructors, 75% strongly agreed that the Blog Post Assignment was beneficial for students, and 50% agreed that the library research session effectively met the needs of their students.[19] One instructor reported that the assignment "kept [students'] attention" during the research session, indicating that connecting the library assignment to the coursework had a positive affect on student work.

Using a blog format for the assignment allowed for a paperless system and provided for flexibility in grading (e.g. the librarians could access the students' assignments on the blog and grade them from the reference desk, their office, etc.). While only two librarians coded the assignments, librarians that taught individual instruction sessions were encouraged to view their students' blog posts and provide comments and

feedback. This allows students to make personal connections with a librarian and also serves as a useful tool for librarians to informally evaluate the teaching and learning process.

### Scalability

As mentioned earlier, grading assignments for over 350 students per semester can be a bit daunting, and does take up quite a bit of time. For librarians teaching similarly large numbers of composition classes, or at institutions with fewer staff, some modifications might need to be made to scale this assignment. Given proper training, student workers would make appropriate coders, especially if they are employed long-term (to avoid having to retrain and re-norm the rubric over time). Librarians could also grade a sample of assignments and/or composition sections, rather than the entire population, which would save time in grading and still provide data on student learning that can be communicated to university administration.

The Blog Post Assignment, or a similar assessment, can also be replicated without the 10-point designation, which would eliminate the grading component. Students could complete the activity (perhaps for extra credit or participation points offered by their instructor), and librarians could provide feedback on selected blog posts for the section(s) they taught. Taking out the grade incentive may reduce student participation, but will still provide the reinforcement of transferable research skills. Given that the assignment can be completed in approximately 30 minutes, it can even be integrated into a one-time library research session's work period.

### Future Research and Conclusions

Based on this analysis, the Blog Post Assignment is viewed as a successful method for assessing both the impact of library instruction in English 102 and student learning as a result of this instruction. As the results indicate, assignments were analyzed primarily to determine the reliability of the rubric and for connection to the student learning outcomes. Due to the wealth of data collected from the blog posts,

it could be interesting to analyze how well students do in relation to the time of day their class is held, date of the library instruction session, the number of students in their class, or many other data points. Instruction coordinators can also use the data collected to determine if librarians that taught the session need further training or support in teaching the information literacy outcomes indicated in the rubric. A more complex assessment in the future may extend to analyzing student essays written after the research workshop.

Rather than simply lecturing to students about the research process, the library Blog Post Assignment is designed to authentically assess student learning in the English 102 library research sessions. Librarians are able to evaluate how effectively they instructed students based on their performance on the assignment. At the same time, students are using the skills they learned in the research session to find an article they will use for their essay. These skills are also trans-ferable, and can be used in other classes that require research. Most importantly, this method allows students to demonstrate critical thinking by providing meaningful feedback on the research process outside of their own experiences.

Composition courses "encourage students to think about literacy, about the ways of learning and becoming expert."[20] By making connections between coursework and critical thinking, library and composition program collaborations can successfully measure learning on a large scale, while encouraging students to develop transferable digital and information literacy skills that they will take with them throughout their academic and professional lives.

## Acknowledgements

# Appendix A. Library Research Session Learning Outcomes And Lesson Plan

**ENGL 102 Library Instruction Component**

Student Learning Outcomes

As a result of the library instruction, students will be able to:

1.  Select the appropriate level of information sources for their information need.
2.  Critically apply information found to their topic/thesis statement.
3.  Evaluate information sources for authority and relevancy.
4.  Blog their responses on the blog post set up for their class section.

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In-person Research Workshop (75 min)

**Introduce ENGL 102 research guide & how to get help**

**Steps in the Research Process**

1) Picking out a topic

*   ask if they've already chosen their topic; if not, discuss a few strategies for picking a topic—there is a tutorial on the research guide
*   Sample example topic: **What effect texting has on the development of literacy skills.**

2) Picking an appropriate database

*   general (Academic Search Complete) vs. subject specific (talk about differences/reasons)
    *can use discovery tool as opposed to Academic Search Complete

3) Selecting keywords

*   Keywords/synonyms for the topic
*   **SmartBoard Activity (optional)**
*   BRIEF demo of Academic Search Complete OR discovery tool (**if needed**)

4) Evaluating articles

*   CAARP Test (Currency, Authority, Accuracy, Relevancy, Purpose)

5) Citing Sources

*   Can point out resources on the "Citing Sources" page—but they learn MLA in class

*Remind students that research builds upon what you have already done and is NOT an isolated event (they can ask questions & talk to librarians, instructors, classmates)

**Explanation of Blog Post Assignment** [Please confirm due date with instructor]

*   Go over instructions on student handout & LibGuide—make sure they understand they will have to post a response with their answers and respond to a classmate's post
*   Explain that this assignment is worth **10 points** and will help them find an article for their Analytical Comparison Essay. The questions they answer will be the types of things they need to talk about in the essay. By responding to another student's post, they can learn that research is not an isolated act.
*   Let students work on assignment for remainder of session (30 or so min)

**Blog Post Assignment** (*Information for Librarians*)

**Grading**
Two graders will grade the assignments using the rubric and will average the scores for the final grade. These will be forwarded to the GTA.

**Providing Feedback**
Even if you are not grading the assignment, please feel free to provide feedback to students in order to keep them engaged and as a way to let them know how they did on the assignment (even though we won't post their grades online).

To provide feedback, click on the blue "Reply" button underneath the student's answers. You can type in your response and hit "Post Comment" to submit the reply.

If you need help or have any questions about the rubric/student responses, just let the Instruction Coordinator know.

# Appendix B. Student Handout Provide in Library Research Sesssion

## ENGL 102. Library Research Workshop

**ENGL 102 Library Research Guide**
http://libresources.wichita.edu/engl102

**Blog Post Assignment Instructions**
*Posting your Answers* (**8 pts**)
1. Go to the 102 library blog: **http://wsulibraries102.wordpress.com**
2. Find the post with your instructor's last name and the days/time of your class and click on the heading (ex. **Wirtz MW 9:30**).
3. Scroll down to the bottom of the page where it says "Submit Your Answers."
4. Type in your answers, numbering each answer (1-6). You can also copy and paste your answers from a Word or text file.
5. Be sure to put your name on your reply so that we can give you a grade!
6. Before posting your reply, check the box "notify me of follow-up comments via e-mail" so that you can read comments and suggestions from the librarian and other students in your class. Click the "post comment" button to post your response.

*Responding to a Post* (**2 pts**)
1. You will also need to comment on at least one other person in your class's response.
2. Choose a response, and hit the blue "Reply" button underneath their response. Write a sentence or two about something surprising or interesting about their research experience—your comment should be more than just "good job." Please be respectful and write an appropriate and well thought-out comment.
3. Hit the "post comment" button to post your reply.

*Due Date*
**2 days** after Library Research Workshop (check with instructor)

**Questions? Contact Your Librarian!**
Melissa Mallon, melissa.mallon@wichita.edu, 316.978.5077

**Questions to Answer**
1. What is your topic?
2. Which database(s) did you decide to use to search for articles? Why did you make this choice?
3. Write the keywords you used to search for articles in the database.
4. Provide the citation in MLA format for one of the articles you think will be useful for your essay.
5. Why did you choose the article listed above? How is relevant to your topic? Your answer should include an evaluation of the source (hint: think about the criteria on the CAARP test).
6. What are some strategies for revising your search to find additional articles?
7. How might the results from your new search be different than your first search?

Don't forget to submit your answers on the blog!
http://wsulibraries102.wordpress.com

## Grading Rubric

|  | **NOVICE (0)** | **DEVELOPING (1)** | **ACCOMPLISHED (2)** | **SCORE** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Completion of Blog Assignment** | Does not complete any of the questions on the blog. | Partially completes the questions on the blog. | Fully completes the questions, showing proficiency with the blog format. | |
| **Selection of Database** | Does not choose an appropriate database for the topic/information need. | Chooses an appropriate database for the topic/ information need, but does not explain why it was chosen. | Chooses an appropriate database for the topic/ information need and provides an explanation on why the tool was chosen. | |
| **Evaluation of Sources** | Does not provide an evaluation of the article chosen. | Provides an evaluation of the article chosen, but does not comment on relevance to the topic. | Thoroughly evaluates the article chosen, and comments on the relevance to the topic. | |
| **Reflection on the Search Process** | Does not reflect on strategies for revising a search. | Lists other database(s) or keyword(s) to search, but does not reflect on how this might change the results. | Gives options for revising their search, and reflects on how this might change the results. | |
| **Response to Another Student** | Does not comment on another student's response. | Comments on a response, but comment is brief and lacks depth. | Provides a thoughtful 1-2 sentence comment showing critical thinking. | |
| **Total Score** | | | | |

# Appendix C.

## Blog Post Assignment Rubric

| | NOVICE (0) | DEVELOPING (1) | ACCOMPLISHED (2) | SCORE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Completion of Blog Assignment** | Does not complete any of the questions on the blog. | Partially completes the questions on the blog. | Fully completes the questions, showing proficiency with the blog format. | |
| **Selection of Database** | Does not choose an appropriate database for the topic/information need. | Chooses an appropriate database for the topic/information need, but does not explain why it was chosen. | Chooses an appropriate database for the topic/information need and provides an explanation on why the tool was chosen. | |
| **Evaluation of Sources** | Does not provide an evaluation of the article chosen. | Provides an evaluation of the article chosen, but does not comment on relevance to the topic. | Thoroughly evaluates the article chosen, and comments on the relevance to the topic. | |
| **Reflection on the Search Process** | Does not reflect on strategies for revising a search. | Lists other database(s) or keyword(s) to search, but does not reflect on how this might change the results. | Gives options for revising their search, and reflects on how this might change the results. | |
| **Response to Another Student** | Does not comment on another student's response. | Comments on a response, but comment is brief and lacks depth. | Provides a thoughtful 1-2 sentence comment showing critical thinking. | |
| **Total Score** | | | | |

## Notes

1. Michael Mounce, "Academic Librarian and English Composition Instructor Collaboration: A Selective Annotated Bibliography 1998-2007," *Reference Services Review* 37, no. 1 (February 2009): 44-53, EBSCO*host* (accessed January 22, 2015).
2. Ibid.
3. Alison J.Head, "Learning the Ropes." *Project Information Literacy Research Report,* (December 4, 2013): 33, http://projectinfolit.org/publications/ (accessed December 15, 2014).
4. Jean F. Carr, "Composition, English, and the University," *PMLA* 129, no. 3 (May 2014): 435-441.
5. Ibid, 438.
6. Head, "Learning the Ropes," 3.
7. Margaret Artman, Erica Frisicaro-Pawlowski, and Robert Monge, "Not Just One Shot: Extending the Dialogue about Information Literacy in Composition Classes," *Composition Studies* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 93-110, *Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 3, 2015).
8. Ibid, 101-102.
9. Heidi L. M. Jacobs and Dale Jacobs, "Transforming the One-Shot Library Session into Pedagogical Collaboration: Information Literacy and the English Composition Class," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 73-74, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed February 3, 2015).
10. Artman, et al., "Not Just One Shot," 103.
11. Wichita State University is an urban-serving university in Wichita, KS, with an approximate FTE of 14,500.
12. For more information about WSU's assessment initiatives, see: http://www.wichita.edu/thisis/home/?u=shockerassessment
13. The English 102 research guide is available at: http://libre-sources.wichita.edu/engl102 and the Blog Post Assignment is available at: http://wsulibraries102.wordpress.com
14. Kenneth Wolf and Ellen Stevens, "The Role of Rubrics in Advancing and Assessing Student Learning," *Journal of Effective Teaching* 7, no. 1 (2007): 12, http://uncw.edu/cte/ET/articles/Vol7_1/index.htm (accessed January 22, 2015).
15. Feedback was solicited from English 102 instructors via e-mail.
16. Wolf, "The Role of Rubrics," 16-18.
17. Anders Jonsson and Gunilla Svingby, "The Use of Scoring Rubrics: Reliability, Validity, and Educational Consequences," *Educational Research Review* 2 (2007): 136, *ScienceDirect* (accessed January 15, 2015).

18.  Ibid, 135.
19.  See note 15.
20.  Carr, "Composition, English, and the University," 436.

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