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## Alternatives to the Term Paper: Creative assignments that develop information literacy skills

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# Alternatives to the Term Paper: Creative assignments that develop information literacy skills

## Summary

Information literacy skills are core university competencies that should be mindfully woven into course curriculum (ACRL, 2000; Grafstein, 2002). Creative alternatives to the typical research paper have been recommended by librarians and scholars as a valuable means of developing information literacy skills in students (Calkins and Kelley, 2007; Mahaffy, 2006; King's College, 2004). In this workshop, participants will be introduced to the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ACRL, 2000) and, through group discussion and active learning activities, participants will be provided with basic tools for designing assignment alternatives to the typical research paper that will creatively develop information literacy skills in their students.

## Keywords

group discussion, active learning

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## Objective

By the conclusion of this workshop, participants will have basic tools for designing helpful and creative assignments that develop information literacy skills in students.

## Selected Supporting References

1. Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (a division of the American Library Association) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2000. Web.

< <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm#f1> >

Recognizing the worth and place of information literacy in higher education, the ACRL identifies five core standards for competency (ACRL, 2000). The information literate individual:

1. Determines the nature and extent of information needed
2. Accesses needed information effectively and efficiently
3. Evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system
4. Uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and
5. Understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally

Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000

The ACRL provides performance indicators and observed outcomes for these core standards, offering helpful elaboration on how the standards might be observed in practice and what may be required for further student development (ACRL, 2000). I use this source as my primary authority on the nature and role of information literacy in a university curriculum.

2. Calkins, Susanna and Matthew R. Kelley, "Evaluating internet and scholarly sources across the disciplines: two case studies". *College Teaching*, Vol. 55, no. 4, 2007: p151-156. Print.

Calkins and Kelley identify various studies that suggest that students have difficulty properly assessing credibility in online sources (Calkins and Kelley, 2007: p151-2). They present two case studies of creative information literacy assignments in two separate disciplines (psychology and history); both exercises are designed to help students develop critical skills in evaluating online and print sources. Details regarding implementation, student reaction, and qualitative outcomes are discussed and some of the instructive materials for the assignments are included in tables. (Calkins and Kelley, 2007)

I use this source to inform one of my assignment examples and as a helpful case study illustrating implementation methods and projected outcomes.

- Spanfelner, Deborah L. "WebQuests, an Interactive Approach to the Web", *Community & Junior College Libraries*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2000: p23-28. Web.

Spanfelner describes a collaboration between a librarian and a college English professor in creating a course WebQuest, an inquiry based activity structured around the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information on specified web sources (Spanfelner,2000). The WebQuest in question is appended to the article.

I used this source to inform how WebQuests might effectively be used in a course. The appended WebQuest provided an example of their effective design and application to course content, as well as how WebQuests might effectively promote skill development within a specific discipline.

- Ford, Madeline and Clay Williams, "Research and Writing in Sociology", *Public Services Quarterly*, Vol. 1, Issue 3, 2002: 37-49. Web.

Ford and Williams describe a collaboration between a librarian and a Sociology professor in developing and implementing four carefully constructed assignments that successively guide the student through the research process, culminating with the research paper itself (Ford and Williams, 2002).

This article describes an example of successfully implementing the popular "Anatomy of a paper" assignment, which is often included on online lists of information literacy assignments (Lawrence University, 2003; King's College, 2004). I use this article to inform a possible method of implementation.

- Mahaffy, Mardi, "Encouraging critical thinking in student library research: an application of national standards." *College teaching*. Vol. 54, Iss. 4, Fall 2006: p324, 4 pgs. Print.

Mahaffy considers the ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* and discusses the design of undergraduate assignments that develop critical research skills in each of these areas. Various examples of assignments are offered.

I use this source to help situate the information literacy competency standards for higher education into alternative assignment design. The assignment examples are, of course, helpful and are considered in tandem with examples and tips presented on numerous university library websites (ex. Lawrence University, 2003; King's College,2004).

- Grassian, Esther S. and Joan R. Kaplowitz, *Information Literacy Instruction: theory and practice*. 2nd Ed. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2009. Print.

This source is a well recognized, informative resource for information literacy instruction intended for a librarian audience. A particularly relevant chapter includes "Critical Thinking and

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Active Learning”. I have used this source as a general resource for inspiration about teaching information literacy, with due recognition of its orientation to a library format.

7. Grafstein, Ann. “A discipline-based approach to information literacy”. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 28, Issue 4, July 2002: p197; 8p. Print.

A convincing argument that information literacy development should be incorporated into a discipline’s curriculum, as student development will importantly involve the building of discipline-specific knowledge and discipline-specific research and inquiry methods (Grafstein, 2002). Arguments such as this and others have convinced me to include a section in my workshop encouraging participants to actively reflect upon their discipline’s unique skill requirements and knowledge base when creating course assignments.

### Content and Organization

**Total Time: 120 minutes**

A: What is Information Literacy? Why is it important? (20min)
<p><b>Set:</b> Ask question “What is information literacy?” Use a developmental questioning method to bring people’s understanding to some of the basic features of information literacy. (brief)</p> <p><b>Body:</b> Present the ACRL’s <i>Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education</i> (ACRL, 2000). Mention sources that recognize the difficulty students face in conducting research and assessing sources (ex. Calkins and Kelley, 2007).</p> <p><b>Close:</b> Discussion: “What are your experiences of students having difficulty conducting research and evaluating sources? What information literacy skills did they lack?” &lt;Segue&gt;</p>

B: What would it mean to be information literate in <i>your</i> discipline? (20min)
<p><b>Set:</b> Mention sources that recommend that information literacy instruction be discipline specific and/or be incorporated into course curriculum (Grafstein, 2002; ACRL, 2000; etc).</p> <p><b>Body:</b> Group brainstorm activity: what research and critical skills do students need to excel in 1) the arts generally and 2) your discipline specifically? How might this involve expanding a discipline’s knowledge base (provide examples)? Compare different disciplines—look for commonalities and differences in desired skills.</p> <p><b>Close:</b> Ask participants to plan with discipline specific skills and knowledge development in mind when creating information literacy assignments.</p>

Break: 10min

C: Alternatives to the term paper: creative assignments that foster critical research skills (20min, 10min)
<p><b>Set:</b> Explain group activity and divide people into groups of three or four.</p> <p><b>Body:</b> Activity: Each group is given an assignment example and are asked to 1) prepare to present the assignment to the class, 2) identify the information literacy skills that it would</p>

develop, 3) discuss when the assignment might be best applied, its benefits and drawbacks, 4) identify what it might require of the instructor, and 5) postulate adapted versions of the assignment for the different disciplines of the group members and how it might assist skill and knowledge development in their respective disciplines.

Possible Assignments:

- 1) Webquests (ex. Spanfelner, 2000 etc)
- 2) “Anatomy of the paper”: students complete research components in stages. (ex. Ford and Williams, 2002; Lawrence University, 2003; King’s College, 2004)
- 3) Have students follow up a small research paper (marked and returned) with a project evaluating the credibility and use of 3 of their major cited sources.
- 4) Have students choose a website related to a course topic that seems authoritative to them, then have them assess it according to professional evaluation criteria and, perhaps, compare it to scholarly sources on the same topic etc (ex. Calkins and Kelley, 2007).
- 5) Divide students into teams and have them prepare arguments, counter arguments, and evidence for a debate—don’t tell them which side they are on until the day of the debate.
- 6) Provide students with an information source that cites a study. Have them trace it back to the original source—was the study presented faithfully? etc... (Lawrence University, 2003; King’s College, 2004)

**Close:** Each group presents their assignment and findings/versions in a poster.

D: Group work: problem based learning (20min Group work, 15 min presentation and discussion)

**Set:** Explain new group activity. New groups are created with members of the previous groups equally dispersed among the newly created groups

**Body:** Problem based learning activity: each group is given a scenario in which they are instructors creating a curriculum for a course in a specific discipline and for a specific course topic. They are asked to create an assignment that develops a skill assigned to them. A list of general assignment creation tips is provided on an overhead to assist the organization of the assignment (ex. clear assignment objectives, course relevance, detailed assignment instructions, and example(s) etc). In the end, the participants must present their assignment, promote their choice (its benefits and suitability), and discuss what it will require of the instructor and students. Be creative and have fun!

**Close:** Presentations and Discussion

**E: Conclusion (5min)**

- 1) Minute paper—imagine a course that you have taught or may/will teach in the future. What creative assignment that develops information literacy might be incorporated into the curriculum? How might you go about designing/implementing your idea? (2min)
  - 2) Minute paper—what was helpful for you about this presentation? What would make it more helpful? (2min)
  - 3) Resources for further study—on *blog* (1min)
- \*\*Thank people for coming out and wish them luck in their teaching.\*\***

### **Presentation Strategies**

This presentation was designed with the objective in mind — to develop skills in the participants for designing information literacy assignments. It is, more accurately, a workshop crafted to mimic a teacher’s reflective thought process in assignment design from personal experience, through reflection and abstract conceptualization of design elements, to application and implementation. Not surprisingly, it intentionally loosely follows Kolb’s learning preference model from *concrete experience* through *reflective observation* to elements of *abstract conceptualization* and to *active experimentation*. By doing so, it both 1) makes the learning experience as individually meaningful as possible to participants by encouraging personalized application and 2) incorporates the full breadth of learning styles to accommodate all group members.

Various active learning elements are incorporated to encourage maximum take away value. Collaborative learning activities are incorporated into sections C and D and section D involves a practical problem-based learning activity. Indeed, it would be most effective if the participants’ background disciplines are determined at the beginning of the workshop. If so, the final groups (D) can be loosely organized according to similar disciplines, allowing for the assigned topics to be as participant-relevant as possible. Section A has a lecture format, but will actively involve class discussion and segue from general features of information literacy to the personal experiences of participants and the needs of their specific disciplines. The timing of sections has been arranged to move naturally from subject to subject to ensure that learners are never bored. The “Set, body, close” format was used extensively to facilitate this. The presentation ends with helpful resources for further study (organized in a blog for quick, reliable access) and two minute papers that perform two important functions. The first minute paper completes the workshop goal: the participant has an action plan that they can use to create information literacy development assignments. The second minute paper acts primarily as an instructor assessment device, but is a useful tool for the participant in a) driving home their most useful takeaway message and b) informing what else they might need to create great assignments.

### **Personal Motivating Factors and Participant Value**

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This session has been formed with a mind to my future profession as a librarian, which may very well involve giving such workshops and/or collaborating with instructors. As I will be taking a course this coming semester in information literacy instruction, it presents a convenient opportunity to apply my skills from the advanced teaching program to this important subject.

From the perspective of participants, the gains from attending this session are numerous. By designing assignments with information literacy in mind, instructors provide their students with essential skills for the students' future educational and personal goals. It has also been speculated that such assignments can reduce marking time, offer variety, and can be designed to inhibit plagiarism (Lawrence University, 2003; King's College, 2004). This workshop was intended to be discipline non-specific and, thus, can appeal to a wide audience. With notice, it can also be made subject specific, with the second section organized to highlight a particular discipline's desired skills and knowledge base.

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Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2000. Web. <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm#f1>

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King's College Library, "Term Paper Alternatives: Ideas for Information-Based Assignments". *Kings.edu* Wilkes-Barre, PA: King's College, 2004. Web. Retrieved January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. <http://departments.kings.edu/library/termpaperalternativesjul.04.htm>

Lawrence University Library, "Alternatives to Term Papers: November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2003." *Lawrence.edu* Appleton, WI: Lawrence University, 2003. Web. Retrieved January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. <http://www.lawrence.edu/library/instruct/alternatives.shtml>

Mahaffy, Mardi, "Encouraging critical thinking in student library research: an application of national standards." *College teaching*. 54.4, (Fall 2006): 324-327. Web.

Pace University Library, "Creating Effective Research Assignments: Developing Student Information Literacy Skills". *Pace.edu* . Pace University Library, 2005. Web. Retrieved January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

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Spanfelner, Deborah L. "WebQuests, an Interactive Approach to the Web", *Community & Junior College Libraries*, 9.4, (2000): 23-28. Web.

Additional Readings:

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<http://www.beloit.edu/library/infolit/2008forumschedule/2008biblio/#disciplines>