

Strengthening Research Skills

By Corinna Schroeder

Classroom Activity: Modeling the Research Process

Rationale

Researched essay assignments offer writing instructors an important opportunity to make the research process legible to all students—to increase students' awareness of and engagement with library and Internet resources, to develop students' digital and media literacy, and to show students the interconnections between the research process and the writing process itself. Instead of scheduling one library visit or holding one research instruction session in class, modeling the research process and having students practice different research skills over multiple class periods can help students understand the intricacies of finding and critically analyzing sources, as well as the time that successful research requires.

How This Works

- To begin, it's helpful to upend the common student assumption that research is meant only to enable students to find sources that support their ideas. Discussing the research process as the process of locating a conversation that a writer hopes to join can be a helpful way of doing this. You might tell students, "In order for a writer to add their voice to a conversation on a certain topic, text, etc., they must find that written conversation and identify who's already said what. Then the writer can figure out what they want to say that will extend or expand or redirect that conversation."
 - Tip: Pair this with North Carolina State University Libraries' three-minute video "[Picking Your Topic /s Research!](#)" This short video offers early undergraduate students an effective introduction to the research process. It focuses on how writers can—and should—use the research process to help them define their topic, limit or expand the scope of their topic, and find a way to enter an ongoing scholarly or popular conversation. The video is particularly helpful to students as they begin to think about picking their topic and creating a research question.
- Early on in the research process, give students a careful tour of your institution's library website—how to access databases, how to find journal titles, where to access the search function for print holdings—or even better, schedule a session with a University librarian to do this. Make sure to highlight particularly relevant databases for students depending on the course and assignment (for example, for a research project on popular culture, you might point students to JSTOR, ProjectMuse, and ProQuest). Creating a Research Guide of these databases for students, if one is not already provided through the library, can be very helpful as well.



- When it comes time to start searching for sources, discuss with students what search keywords are and how to form them. Have students practice writing, using, and revising search keywords, perhaps related to a topic or text that you can use as a class example.
 - Tip: See Indiana University Libraries' helpful PDF "[Identifying Keywords](#)" for one resource you might share with students during this phase of the research process. This PDF explains what keyword searching is and offers an example of how to develop keywords for searching, along with tips for refining the keyword search process.
- Explain the difference between academic databases and search engines like Google—and why it's worthwhile for students to use academic databases and their institution's library resources. Pair this discussion with an investigation of the differences between scholarly and popular sources.
 - Tip: Share Portland Community College Library's "[Know Your Sources: A Guide to Understanding Sources](#)" with students. This webpage offers a helpful explanation and visualization of the different sources and information that students encounter during the research process, from scholarly articles to popular magazines to Tweets. It differentiates between different types of sources based on criteria like frequency of publication, scrutiny a source receives before publication, number of outside sources typically used, degree of author education, etc.
- Beyond the distinction between popular and scholarly sources, discuss the different *types* of research that students might need to do. For example, if students are writing about a film, they might look to see what other authors have written about their film—but they might look to see what other authors have written about the genre of that film; if the film is set in the past, they might research the historical period of the film; and so on. Frame these different types of research as different conversations or "rooms" of research that the student-writer can enter and join.
 - Tip: This discussion is often especially helpful for students writing about recently published texts/films or current events. Encouraging students to explore other related "rooms" of research can help students overcome the challenges they face in writing about a topic that other writers—especially scholarly writers—may not have published on just yet.
- The research process also provides an important opportunity to discuss plagiarism—what it is, why it's considered a serious academic offense, how to avoid it, but also how notions of plagiarism might vary across different cultures/traditions. Talking about plagiarism pairs well with a discussion of how we incorporate others' voices in our writing, whether through paraphrase, summary, or quotation, and how we responsibly cite those sources.
- Holding one-on-one research conferences can also be a powerful way of helping students more fully understand and engage with the research process. You might ask students to bring three or four relevant sources to their conference, as well as a list of questions/challenges that they've faced so far in their research process.

Classroom Activity: “Reverse Engineering” a Scholarly Article

Rationale

This classroom activity is adapted from an activity designed by Professor Trisha Tucker for the Thematic Option Honors Program at the University of Southern California. This activity uses an end product of the research process—a published scholarly article—to help students “work backwards,” considering not only how to find the article through library resources but how the author might have created their piece in the first place. This activity provides a helpful alternative to the more linear research demonstrations that we often carry out for our students.

How This Works

- Give students a scholarly article without the title or author’s name and have students work together in small groups or as a class to answer the following questions:
 - o How could we use the University’s library website and databases to find this article?
 - o How might the author have created this piece? What was their research question? What sources did they consult?
 - Tip: This question provides an excellent opportunity to discuss how to read a bibliography or Works Cited page and how reading those pages can help student researchers find relevant sources and locate written “conversations” about their topic.
 - o You can also use this same scholarly article to practice critical reading strategies, annotation, and evaluation. Students will then have practice with this work before doing it with their individual sources.

Classroom Activity: Creating a Shared Research Bank

Rationale

Through the use of a shared Google Sheet, this activity makes the research process a collaborative process, allowing students to practice finding sources on a class topic in a low-stakes environment before they begin searching for sources on their individual topic.

How This Works

- Have the class look for secondary sources on a topic that can serve as the class’s case study. Each student or small group is responsible for inputting one entry (or more) into a shared Google Sheet, recording the source title, source author, year of publication, type of source (book/print journal article/etc.), whether it’s a scholarly or popular source, and a few sentences of evaluation regarding the relevance of the source to the research assignment. This activity provides an opportunity to (1) explain how students should be evaluating research in the context of their discipline and to (2) come together as a class (during and/or after the activity) to discuss what issues students encountered as they conducted their research.

- o Variation: Have small groups or each half of the room look for specific sorts of information—historical context on a topic, new perspectives on a topic, etc.
- o Variation: Assign different types of sources to different students/groups: scholarly journal article, scholarly book, encyclopedia article, popular newspaper article, review, blog, etc. Having students find different types of sources effectively sets up a conversation about the differences between types of sources—how frequently they are published, what the review process looks like for each type of source, how different types of sources engage with outside research, etc.
- This classroom activity can continue outside the classroom through a homework assignment. Try assigning students their own section of a shared Google Sheet, asking them to fill in the same information recorded in class (the source title, source author, year of publication, type of source [book/print journal article/etc.], whether it's a scholarly or popular source, and a few sentences of evaluation regarding the relevance of the source to the research assignment) for at least five sources relevant to their individual writing project.
 - o Variation: Have each student find different sources on one specific topic, considering how that topic is discussed/treated by different authors in different contexts.
 - o Variation: Create a research timeline and have students find sources over time, uploading one source to their Google Sheet per class period, for example. Emphasize the time required for research and how we need to find more sources than “required” in order to locate the best, most helpful, most relevant sources for our writing project.

Homework Assignment: Library Adventure: Exploring Print Holdings

Rationale

Let's face it: no matter how often we as faculty praise the libraries, no matter how often we schedule class visits with a University librarian, our students rarely take advantage of all the library resources available to them. Part of the reason for this is that libraries can be overwhelming and intimidating spaces for students. Indeed, as much as libraries are sites of knowledge available to all students, they can also be sites of exclusion, whose resources are not legible to all students. This activity, which sends students into the physical space of the library, encourages students to become more familiar with their campus libraries. While the activity asks students to find particular print holdings, it could easily be expanded to include finding the circulation desk, finding the reference desk, finding a workspace, etc.

How This Works

Have students visit the print holdings of your university. Assign partners or small groups a series of particular texts or types of texts to find and have them go on a scavenger hunt, documenting their search and retrieval of various print holdings with photos. This can happen during class time or outside of class time as a homework assignment. During the next class session, have a

follow-up discussion about how the libraries are organized, what the experience was like, how challenging it was to locate a text and why, what barriers to entry students face in navigating the libraries, and how students can more fully utilize the library resources available to them.

Helpful Online Resources for Teaching Research

[“Research and Citation Resources,”](#) Purdue Online Writing Lab

Purdue’s OWL offers students information on how to conduct research, how to use research in one’s writing (quoting, paraphrasing, avoiding plagiarism), and how to use various citation systems, including APA, MLA, and the Chicago Manual of Style.

[“Identifying Keywords,”](#) Indiana University Libraries

This short PDF by Indiana University Libraries is a helpful handout to distribute to students early in the research process. It explains what keyword searching is and offers an example of how to develop keywords for searching, along with tips for refining the keyword search process.

[“Picking Your Topic /s Research!,”](#) North Carolina State University Libraries

This three-minute video by North Carolina State University Libraries offers early undergraduate students an effective introduction to the research process. It focuses on how writers can—and should—use the research process to help them define their topic, limit or expand their scope, and find a way to enter an ongoing scholarly or popular conversation. The video is particularly helpful to students as they begin to think about picking their topic and creating a research question.

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