

## Preparation for Undergraduate Bibliographic Instruction: A Personal Experience

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**Abstract:** Effective library use by students is one goal of most bibliographic instruction librarians. The content of bibliographic instruction varies between institutions and more importantly, between groups within the same institution. This article reminds us that preparation for a library instruction class involves more than the “grabbing of materials” five minutes before the class arrives. The intent of this article is to share certain steps of preparation for bibliographic instruction classes that this librarian has found useful and that can be used with any orientation class.

### Introduction

At some point in the education process, a student should develop an ability to use a library effectively. At least that is the hope of this librarian. This ability, hopefully, will be one that will transfer to lifelong learning in an information society. As an academic librarian, I encounter many students at various levels in their education process who do not possess adequate library skills, and an exceedingly large number of these students are college freshmen who do not know even the basics of using a library. Bibliographic instruction is one process librarians have established in an attempt to familiarize students with the physical layout and services of the library, and to introduce them to basic search strategies and information resources. Students need to be able to apply search strategies in their various coursework. An initial tour or a single instructional session is only the beginning for developing a student’s library use skills.

Recently at Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), a faculty member approached me prior to a scheduled orientation for her class. She had quizzed her students on their library use in order to give me an idea about their library backgrounds. Six of the students were college seniors; not one of them had ever set foot in our library during their four years at the institution! The professor was appalled that students could reach this level without ever using the library. This is not atypical of our students since many are commuters, and probably use their local library (at least, hopefully, they are using some library).

The term “library orientation” is not a new one. The term has been used for many years to describe an attempt at teaching students how to use a library. For some instruction librarians it may mean simply walking a group through the library, pointing out various spots of interest, or resources. For others, it might mean an audio-cassette package that the students will use on their own, or a printed self-guided tour. For others still, orientation activities might always take place in a classroom setting, either in the library itself or in an academic department classroom.

### Background on Library Instruction at IUPUI

At IUPUI bibliographic instruction and orientations are provided in both the library and departmental classroom locations. The Library has its own classroom which accommodates 30 to 50 students. The

room has the advantages of an overhead projector, screen, blackboard, and sample resources for use during instruction, e.g. indexes and abstracts. Since the instruction classroom is located within the Library, actual resources for which there are no samples can be brought to the room without difficulty. In the departmental classroom environment the instruction librarian must rely solely on lecture and/or printed handouts since the location is remote to the Library; often a frustrating arrangement. Therefore, the Library's classroom is preferable to a department's classroom.

Subject-specific/course-related bibliographic instruction at IUPUI is arranged between teaching faculty and a library liaison. Most sessions are at faculty request, although sessions have been arranged for groups of students at their request. The latter request is usually made when a specific course assignment is given which requires knowledge of using specific sources. Student-requested instruction sessions are set up at the convenience of the students (often during their lunch or free time).

Sessions arranged through teaching faculty are usually held in the library classroom during a normal class period and the instructor is usually present. This promotes "library awareness" and allows for an "on-site introduction" to actual resources and services of the library. Usually, only one session is scheduled for a given class. While one session is better than none at all, single session instruction severely limits how much information a student can reasonably absorb in one class period. For the new library users the session may produce an overload situation, while others in the class may find the information repetitious. It is truly difficult to meet the needs of everyone.

### **Scheduling and the Librarian/Faculty Interview**

An important advantage of subject-specific library instruction is that it provides opportunities for establishing good library/faculty relations. In order to ultimately achieve an effective instructional experience, the librarian must establish contact and clear communication with the faculty well in advance of the scheduled session.

Oftentimes, a professor requests a library instruction session because he recognizes a lack of "scholarly credibility" in the resources most frequently used by students, e.g. popular magazines over scholarly journals, general encyclopedias over specialized subject works, etc. When I am first approached by a faculty member to present a library orientation, I ask if the students are to complete an assignment in relation to the library instruction session and if there are specific resources that the professor would like to have presented to the class. Also, it helps me to know what resources the students might already be familiar with. Further, I ask if students will be picking their own topics or if they will be selecting one from a list of topics compiled by the professor. This information is helpful in terms of my determining which resources might be most appropriate for the instruction session. During our preliminary discussions, I also encourage faculty members who request a library instruction session to be present if at all possible during the session, since many times they will remember a particular source or point of interest during the actual session that they might have forgotten to mention during the initial scheduling interview.

Another advantage of subject-specific instruction is that students establish a contact within the library. Many times after such sessions, students will specifically request the librarian who taught their class, even though the reference librarian available is perfectly capable of assisting the student.

One question that I have been asked by both faculty and students is "Don't you ever get bored teaching the same thing over and over?" My reply is that each class is totally different. Questions and responses vary as greatly as do the students, and I usually learn something new with each session I teach. For example, I might learn not to use a specific term or technique, if later I discover that they only confuse the students.

Usually, bibliographic instruction is requested by faculty who are teaching entry-level courses in particular departments. My subject liaison responsibilities at IUPUI are to the School of Social Work and School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA). However, I also assist in bibliographic instruction on a volunteer basis for other general subject areas such as communication and writing and guided studies. Each session is unique and I approach each one according to the faculty member's specific request and the students' library use background, if such information about their prior use of libraries is available. Receiving some class background beforehand can be most useful to your presentation. That is one of the reasons I find the initial interview with the faculty most important. It gives the librarian an opportunity to learn basic information about the class and the material the faculty feels needs to be stressed.

### **Selecting Appropriate Strategies and Materials**

Preparation for the class instruction begins as soon after the interview with the professor as possible. I find that important information about the group is best remembered later if I sit down immediately following the interview and list background information on the students, resources that the professor wants stressed, topics that will need to be covered, and other resources which might also be useful. Next, I determine what handouts (if any) would be appropriate for the session. If the students have little or no previous library experience, I usually provide a one-sheet handout which includes a layout of the library; library hours and lending rules; a brief outline of Library of Congress Classification; and my name, room number, and telephone number at the bottom. If the session is for an introductory course, I distribute a brief bibliography which includes a selected listing of dictionaries and encyclopedias related to the subject, basic reference items, specific indexing tools, and selected major periodicals related to the course subject. This bibliography gives them a start when they later return to the library to begin work on their assignment. I also discuss each of the bibliography's sources during the session and try to have them available at the session so the students see what they actually look like. When presenting sources such as *Sociological Abstracts* or *Social Science Citation Index*, I usually have a handout with examples of citations from each to clarify abbreviations or terms used within a citation.

If students' topics are known beforehand, I try to present reference materials that will cover as many of the topics as possible. I also present various indexes that will aid in finding current and/or scholarly articles on the topic. I have found in the Social Work classes that the professors stress scholarly journals most often. In almost every presentation, I at least introduce government publications as an important collection. There is a wealth of information in these documents and many times faculty members and

students either forget about their usefulness or are unaware of their value altogether. Our computerized INFOTRAC system makes locating government documents by subject much easier than manual searching of the print index sources for government publications.

One of the most important things I try to remember throughout a session is that I want to make the students feel at ease in the Library. This is not always easy and may seem unimportant to some readers, but I have found that many students (of all ages) are hesitant to admit that they do not know how to use the library. If they can be made to realize that while all libraries have certain things in common, each individual library is slightly different. Everyone needs to learn how to use the specific library in their particular environment. Not long ago, I asked one of the speech classes I had oriented to evaluate my presentation. One of the students remarked that she did not feel as intimidated after I had admitted that I had to learn about the IUPUI Library when I came here as a librarian, even though I had been working in libraries all of my life. Humans, by nature, do not like to admit to fault, and college students are certainly no exception. If they can associate using the Library with a successful experience, they will be more apt to use it again.

### **Conducting the Session**

When I actually begin a session, I introduce myself and give a brief account of my background with the Library. I then try to determine which students are current users of the Library and which are using it for the first time. I also encourage their questions at any time during the session. During a presentation, I might use the blackboard and overhead to emphasize points being discussed or examples from sources. I also try to include some hands-on use of the sources being discussed, for example, indexes. I might ask the students to determine the subject to check in the index. Even though they are all using different index samples, many of the subjects I use as examples will be covered in all of them. I try to have them participate as much as possible by getting them to suggest index topics as examples. This seems to give greater meaning to the instruction since the students can relate the exercise to something they are interested in.

At the end of the session, I ask for any questions they may have, or if they are unsure of any of the tools presented. Time permitting, I take them on a walk through the Library. This will help them with where different resources and services are located when they later return on their own. I usually end a session by encouraging students to come to me for specific help with their topics if they like, and I give them my office hours.

### **In Conclusion**

Establishing good rapport with students may help in their continued use of the Library. Not all sessions are successful and some students tune out as soon as I have started. However, I hope that some will leave the library instruction session with a little more confidence in their ability to use the library than when they walked in the door. One of the most gratifying experiences is to have a student return to the library and say, "Thanks for the orientation. It really helped me and I'll be back for more help." I find that these students usually do come back, again and again. And I feel that if I have made even one student a better user of the library, then my efforts have been worthwhile.

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