

Talk Tables

The Indiana Library Federation Bibliographic Instruction/User Education Section (BIUE) sponsored a "Talk Tables" session at the 1997 ILF Annual Conference (May 1-3, 1997) in Indianapolis entitled "Great Ideas." These informal discussions were freewheeling and lively. Participants traded ideas, problems and solutions, explored issues, and offered each other moral support. Facilitators (members of the BIUE Steering Committee) prepared bibliographies on the discussion topics in advance. They also summarized the discussions. These summaries and bibliographies are presented on the following pages.

Instructional Materials in Print: On Paper or the World Wide Web

by

**Mary Pagliero Popp, MS, MLS
Electronic Services Librarian
Indiana University-Bloomington, IN
and**

**Rita Barsun, MAT, MLS
Walden University Library Liaison
Walden University, Indiana University-Bloomington, IN**

Instructional materials in print, whether on paper or on the World Wide Web, are important tools that assist users of library resources in finding the information they need. As library resources are increasingly becoming available in electronic forms and many people are using them from home or office, the need for instructional material is burgeoning. Users need guidance in selecting appropriate resources, designing effective search strategies, and analyzing and improving search results. Remote users face the additional challenge of connecting to electronic resources via disparate hardware and networks.

Print instructional materials can be created for a variety of library goals, including promotion of library tools, as an introduction to services and materials, and to provide an interactive learning experience. The goal or goals that the instructional materials are designed to meet will determine whether they are best delivered on paper or electronically.

The design of a paper handout can be an important instructional strategy that conveys information according to the way the material is organized. Key ideas to remember when creating printed instructional materials include: have definite objectives for the handout; present only as much information as a learner can comfortably process; use simple cues (such as outlines, typeface, illustrations, spacing, boxes) but not too many; use short, concise statements, active present tense verbs, and concrete words; provide an overview and a summary; and give examples.

The World Wide Web holds great promise for instructing library patrons in the use of library resources. As librarians prepare to mount instructional or informational Web sites, the first and most important step is planning. Included in planning is a firm commitment from the library's administrative body for adequate time, skills (i.e., personnel), and resources (i.e., funding). Extensive creativity is not necessary, especially in a first attempt. Instead, find and adapt exemplary sites — with permission from the creators. Leave the HTML mark-up to the technical experts or to a software program, and focus on the concepts. Pay careful attention to the appearance of each page. Seek an uncluttered look, with visual clues to emphasize important points or breaks in content. Limit the amount of material on any one page. Graphics may add pizzazz, but they may also slow the loading enough to discourage potential users. Internal links are essential for leading viewers through the site, but be cautious about over-using external links. Test, test, test the site, and don't be discouraged by negative feedback. Instead, use it to improve the site.

Is a Website the best way to meet the informational and instructional needs of our patrons? The answer is not simple. We must take into consideration ease of access and ease of use, the patron's comfort level and learning style, cost (to the library and to the patron), and the purpose of the material.

Consider the advantages of a Website. It can be updated more frequently and at less cost than paper handouts. It is accessible at any time of day or night and from various workstations. Thus, it is especially beneficial for students in a distance learning situation. Perhaps the greatest benefit of a Website is its interactive nature. It can guide the viewer sequentially or it can permit the viewer to select his or her path to comprehension and mastery of a task. Hypermedia can act as a personal tutor, insisting that the student repeat steps until understanding is achieved.

Paper handouts *also* have advantages. A handout can be picked up and carried to any location and used for instruction in formal and informal

settings without special equipment. It can sit beside the keyboard as a learner attempts to navigate an unfamiliar electronic resource. Materials on a rack in a library are visible and inviting. Printed guides are not at the mercy of different platforms or interfaces. If a patron is already experiencing computer anxiety, telling him or her to "visit our Website" will certainly not reduce the person's anxiety.

How then can we best meet the informational and instructional needs of our patrons? We need to provide both print and electronic handouts. Fortunately, the same creative process can go into either format. What is vital is the recognition that, as more and more resources become available electronically, many of our patrons need more guidance than is presently provided by standard online help screens.

Selected Bibliography

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Selected Websites:

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WWW Virtual Library: The Internet Guide to Construction of Quality Online
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using the World Wide Web to provide services.