WIGWAM Research

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Overview: To address transfer of knowledge after First Year Composition (FYC) about use of sources as demonstrated by USCA’s Proficiency Portfolio in Writing

Research Question: How can faculty in the content areas design library projects that address pedagogical principles for discovering and evaluating sources?

FYC Goals / Objectives – Most FYC programs introduce first-year students to researched writing, often sequenced as a progression of assignments to include summary, analysis, and synthesis of sources. By the end of FYC, students have been introduced to researched writing as a process, and they have been given tools for studying college-level essays and academic articles. They should be familiar and practiced in summary and paraphrase skills, and they should understand differences between primary and secondary sources. They should further be able to decode a source, to understand that academic articles are contextualized rhetorically as part of an on-going discussion and argument, and that scholarly articles are organized and stylistically represent conventions of academic disciplines.

When assigning a research project, FYC instructors typically present research as an open-ended and recursive process. Included in this experience, FYC instructors usually include information literacy instruction which typically elicits the assistance of the library information specialist, and often involves the following:

- Generating and refining research questions (and keywords for data searching);
- Finding and accessing various sources (books, articles, web resources, etc.);
- Reading database entries and extracting information for bibliography and citation;
- Using library resources such as PASCAL, interlibrary loan, etc.

The assigned research project in FYC may also involve coordination between the instructor and information specialist in critical assessments of sources, such as:

- Evaluating sources for usefulness and relevance as well as for authority;
- Providing background to establish relevance or an overview of discussion surrounding a topic;
- Establishing a point of view to be argued or defended;
- Developing new questions for further analysis;
- Distinguishing between primary and secondary sources within a particular discipline (for instance, in literary studies the differences are explained as the text being analyzed and the texts being used to support the analysis, while in history, the differences are explained as documents written by eyewitnesses versus secondhand accounts);
- Making intelligent use of tools like EasyBib and MLA / APA style guides.

Beyond FYC, the reality of research assignments … USCA’s Proficiency Portfolio in Writing and failed portfolios – Many failed papers were obviously “researched” at the eleventh hour, depended on cut/paste methods. According to George (2009), librarians often hear “confessions” such as “I have no idea about the topic / assignment” or “I need to change my topic because there’s not enough stuff about it.” George suspects that students rely on “Wikipedia-Internet-Google-Without Anything More (*WIGWAM research) because “most students simply do not retain the concepts and logic (never mind the principles for evaluating sources) that arise in library instruction sessions.”

Conclusions: Minding the Gap: FYC pedagogies must be continued and reinforced.

- In the content areas, instructors can pair up with information specialists to avoid “last minute writing.”
- Writing in the content areas should not be used only as an “end product.”
- Acknowledgement of personal interests and accommodations of personal voice can motivate students.
- Exploratory work can be collaborative, group-oriented, and socially motivating.

Common arguments that instructors often make?

- A writing-intensive approach takes time away from delivery of content…
- Grading papers takes too much time…
- The writing / information specialists teach students to write / conduct research…

Recommended sources
