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Testing and Templates: Building Effective Research Guides

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Testing and Templates

Building Effective Research Guides

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Our Environment

The Savannah College of Art and Design

- 12,000 students and 670 faculty across 5 locations
- 40 Majors
- Over 2000 classes offered per quarter
- Access to 200k books, 1800 physical serial titles, 90 databases
- 215 existing guides, 14 current guide authors
  - 45 subject-specific guides
  - 97 course-specific guides
  - 28 other published guides
Opportunity

We wanted to do this because...

- Transition to LibGuides 2.0
- Staffing changes
- Growing student population and course offerings

Can we develop a template that can be applied across course and subject guides?
Planning: Literature Review

● What did we look at?
  ○ Steve Krug’s *Rocket Surgery Made Easy* and *Don’t Make Me Think*, related website
  ○ Articles from librarians at University of Washington libraries and Metropolitan State University that conducted usability tests on LibGuides
  ○ Articles on teaching with LibGuides
  ○ Recent blog & social media discussions on critical pedagogy and research guides

● What outcomes did other usability tests see?
  ○ LibGuides are built for librarians rather than students
  ○ Too much content, too much jargon, too confusing
Procedure: Planning

- **Permissions**
  - No IRB, but did require leadership approval

- **Resource requirements**
  - Minimal budget for student incentives
  - Used existing equipment for audio & visual recording

- **Call for participants**

- **Writing the script**
  - Modified from Steve Krug’s “Don’t Make Me Think” script

- **Writing the questions**
  - Specific to common tasks and processes
  - Consider question order - it can have an impact!
Procedure: Testing

- Student disclosure & agreement
  - Usability.gov
- Technology setup
  - Capturing student’s screen and audio via Adobe Connect
  - Projected screen overhead for librarians to observe student’s navigation (without hanging over their shoulder)
- Asking the questions, taking notes
  - Had at least 2 librarians in the room for all test sessions
  - Note-taker observed student’s navigation and verbal/facial reactions to the questions and guide experience
Procedure: Testing Breakdown

- Tested 10 students in total
  - 5 graduate, 5 undergrad
  - 9 majors
  - 3 male, 7 female
  - 5 international
- Average test length: ~28 minutes
- Shortest test: 19 minutes
- Longest test: 45 minutes

Note: After first round of 6 students, we revised one question and altered the question order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Class Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animation</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animation</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustration</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior Design</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design Management</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Design</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Task List

Course guide-specific
1. For your Art History (or “20th Century Art History”) class, you are writing a paper about Gerhard Richter, a contemporary German painter. Your professor wants you to use scholarly, academic articles. Find one article about Richter for your paper that meets these criteria using the library guides.

Subject based (open-ended)
2. For a design history class, you need to find an image of a chair designed by Charles Eames. You’ll be printing it and using it in a Powerpoint presentation to your class, so it needs to be of good quality. Locate one image or resource you can use to find an appropriate image.

3. You’re taking a class on scriptwriting for an animation class. You’ve read parts of your textbook but want to learn more about storytelling for animation/animated films in general. Find a resource you can use in your paper using the research guides.

4. You’re taking a course in your discipline and want to learn what current professionals in your field/industry are writing about or working on. Locate a resource on your topic, published within the last 3 years.

5. You are taking a course in your discipline and need to learn more about the materials you’ll be using for your final design. Your professor wants you to use books or databases for this. Find a resource that meets these criteria using the guides.

Pre and Post-Test Questions

Considerations for Observers

Pre-test Questions:
- What is your name?
- What is your year?
- What is your major?
- Have you ever seen a research guide before?
- Have you, with a class, had a library introduction/orientation?
- If yes, which class(es)?
- How often do you use the library?
- How often do you use the library website?

General questions to consider for the OBSERVER:
- Was any prompting or assistance necessary other than clarifying the question/task?
- Did the student complete the task?
- Did they read the descriptions by the search boxes or database choices?
- Did they go back and repeat a search or move forward?
- Did they have problems with the navigation (not noticing tabs/dropdowns/multiple links under subject guide headings)?
- Were they confused by the descriptions or lack of descriptions?

General questions to ask the STUDENT:
- What terms did you scan for when trying to find the appropriate subject guide, database, or resource on the guides?
- What might someone find confusing about these guides?
- How likely would you be to use these guides in the future?
- What might someone find to be useful in the guide?
- Rate your level of ease in using this guide (1 – not at all easy → 10: very easy, everything worked the way I expect it to)
- Do the tabs make sense?
- What does (potentially jargon-y term) mean to you?
- How many places do you generally search for resources/information?
- What have you done in the past when you can’t find a useful resource?
- What made you choose one resource over another?
- Did you read the descriptions by search boxes or databases?
- Did you get the results you expected after running a search?
- What kinds of results did you expect from running this search?
- What do you do if you’re lost or confused/Where do you look for help? (On the website/guide)
Procedure: Wrap Up

- Review recordings and write transcripts
- Discuss: what factors determine if the student successfully completed the tasks?
- Look for common elements and themes
  - Note outliers and unusual outcomes
Results

Here’s what the students had to say...
Our guides are useful!
“Definitely, yes! **This makes life much easier** knowing that I can use it online. Because so often you don’t have time to come down to the library, and you want stuff immediately, so you can find stuff here.”

“Yeah... I know some resources such as the books and magazines that I always go to, **but I’ll come back to this one.**”

“Were the guides useful? Would you come back to use them again?”
...sometimes.
“ Honestly, it’s a bit confusing for me [...], there are so many tabs and so many buttons on it. ”

“The website, is really... it has lots of resources for sure, but it requires a lot of work, to read stuff. [...] A lot of stuff is on one page, and [students] are too impatient to look at all that stuff.”
“I just think there’s like a lot of noise... you know, when you try to find one thing, and there’s, like, different things and you’re just like ‘whoa!’ [...] so you’re quickly trying to push what’s needed and what’s not out.”
When students understand the purpose of the guides, they’re more likely to return and use them.

When the guides fail or overwhelm, students are just as likely to abandon them for safe, familiar harbors.
Conclusions

● Simple changes
  ○ Add links/hyperlinks
  ○ Reduce size of images
  ○ Embed search boxes
  ○ Descriptive information - always have it, but keep it short and sweet

● Long-term considerations and changes:
  ○ How is the information arranged and presented?
    ■ Locked into one of two LibGuides formats, but can adapt from there
  ○ How is information presented in other forms of media?
  ○ Can arrangement aid in instruction?
Recommendation 1

Eliminate Libguides Search Box (site map search)

All 10 users assumed this was the Catalog Plus (discovery tool) search and used it repeatedly throughout testing.

Librarian: “So what do you think that search box searched?”

Student1: “Uh, not really anything.”

Librarian: “So what do you notice about the results that come up? What do you think this search box searched?”

Student2: “Nothing.”
Recommendation 2

Link all Journal Titles lists and Book lists

Lead users back to the Catalog to find more sources.

(looks at list of Journal titles)

Student: “Uh, how do I read these?”

(looks at list of books)

Student: “Is this all you have?”
Recommendation 3

Revise Labeling

Ensure guide tabs do not include jargon. Rather than naming a tab with the library’s search tool (“Catalog Plus”), name it plainly (“Find Journal Articles”).

When asked why they clicked on, then navigated away from “Catalog Plus” tab:

“I thought that it was just for the books, I mean like... if I’m looking for scholarly articles, [...] I was looking for language that would be specific to ‘scholarly articles’.”

Database descriptions should be concise, in plain language, and tailored to the guide.
Recommendation 4

Embed More Search Boxes

Rather than instructions to “search in the library catalog” with no link or directions, embed the library catalog search box across the guide, not just on homepage or “book search” boxes.

When needed, use tailored search boxes (by discipline, resource type, etc).
Recommendation 5

Use images sparingly

When images are meant to be instructive, include enough descriptive text - otherwise, it’s just more clutter.

“It’s a bit confusing for me [...] the information is more like descriptions rather than more images.”
**Recommendation 6**

Busy tabs and pages need better hierarchy, maybe an index

Reduce visual noise: too many boxes without hierarchy or arrangement, quickly becomes overwhelming

Consider using alternative LibGuides v2 template, moving away from “tabs” arrangement to “menu” arrangement

- Not possible, or don’t want to confuse users too much? Build your own menu into the guide with simple links.
Illustration - usability updates: Illustration Techniques

I need to find something that will teach me how to use different materials, media, or software:
- Search for the medium name or materials with the word "technique" ex: "drawing technique" or "photograph technique"
- By synonym or specific media type: ex: charcoal, photograph, printmaking, acrylic, gouache

I need to find examples or artwork from artists who worked in a specific medium:
- Search for the artist's name (full name or just last) and the medium or style: ex: "Rembrandt drawings," "Thomas Nast cartoons"

Search for books in the library catalog using the keyword(s) below:

Preferred to browse the shelves in-person in the library instead?
Look for these suggestions on the library shelves to browse a topic:

**Drawing**
- Sketching from the Imagination
  - Publication Date: 2013
  - Concepts are conceived & useful tips. "Sketching from the Imagination" is an excellent resource for concept design to inspire artists of all abilities.
  - See drawings and techniques in SCAD Libraries.

**Digital**
- Complete Digital Illustration
  - Call Number: NC1994.4.Z43 2010
- 500 Digital Illustration Hints, Tips, and Techniques
  - Call Number: T365.A18 2009
  - Safari Books Online (ebook)
  - eBooks and videos covering all areas of technology including digital media, software, programming, web applications, and business and professional development.

**Painting**
- Acrylic Fusion
  - Call Number: ebook
  - Experimenting with alternative methods for painting, collage, and mixed media
- Water Paper Paint
  - Call Number: ebook
  - Need technical info on programs like Illustrator or Photoshop? Safari includes eBooks and videos covering all areas of technology including digital media and software.
Getting Started: What do you need to do?

What do you need to do?

Learn the basics about an artist or art movement

Find the basics about an art movement or artist in reference sources - check your next step after Wikipedia.

Learn more about my artist or art period: get a broader view of my topic

Find books that look at the artist's life and work.

Find expert analysis, opinions, or very in-depth information on my topic

Search for scholarly articles on a specific topic, exhibition reviews, or museum articles.

Find Images

Locate high-quality images in the library or online.

Required and Recommended Readings

These books are located behind the library front desk and may be used for up to 2 hours. Please provide the call number to desk staff and they will retrieve it for you.

Note: Reserve materials are only available in person at the SCAD Libraries. If you are a fully online student and not near the SCAD Savannah or Atlanta locations, you may be able to find these materials at a local college or university library.

Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition by H. W. Janson, et al.
Call Number: N6360 .J3 2011
ISBN: 0764913851
Publication Date: 2011 (7th Edition)

A Short Guide to Writing about Art by Sylvan Barnet
Call Number: N7476 .B37 2011
ISBN: 0321579523
Publication Date: 2011 (10th edition)

A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations by Kate L. Turabian, et al.
Call Number: QA3.A54 2003
ISBN: 022683902X
Publication Date: 2003 (6th edition)
Broader Recommendations & Discussions

- Consider the student’s studio/research processes and ways of thinking vs. librarian/faculty-endorsed list of resources
  - Prioritize **process** over **format**, or offer varying paths to information

- Do we need to change or clarify the way we think about Libguides?
  - Are these a list of resources and “authorized” links, or will these be more instructive and contextual?
  - Consider how the new frameworks can inform the modifications
    - How do ideas of “research as inquiry,” “searching as strategic exploration,” or “authority is contextual” potentially aid or hinder good guide practices?
Ongoing Steps

- Iterative testing
  - Work with one or two courses to rework their guides and monitor guide use
  - Informal testing with students on-site

- Input from student groups & faculty
  - Avoid “design by committee” by focusing on their bigger needs and issues
“Okay, but how does this apply to my school?”

Caveats:

- SCAD is a student-centric institution, not a research university
- Findings may seem more applicable to career-focused programs (business, technical, law)

However:

- “Bigger picture” issues can be relevant to any institution!
- Focus on processes and addressing student needs, vs. prescriptive list of “librarian-approved resources” to make it meaningful to them.
“Why should we test our guides?”

- Can reveal valuable information about your students’ information-seeking behaviors
  - Are they talking to their peers and professors? Where do they start their research? Where do they end it? How persistent are they when it comes to quality/appropriate sources vs. convenience and “just getting it done”? 
- Opportunity for librarians and other guide producers/stakeholders to critically evaluate their content
- Conversation starter about the actual usage of guides


