

Get a List, Then Ignore it: Using Google to Make the One-Shot Less Boring and More Effective

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Deconstruct the assignment. Craft a path around the obvious landmines. Take stock of the available databases. Figure out which one has the best content for this assignment. Because *that* one has a terrible interface, figure out which database does the second best job. Teach students to click around in said database, add in another database and repeat, probably for about 50 minutes. Hope they can apply this information later when they actually sit down to do this research.

This is the basic approach many of us apply to the library instruction process. We add a combination of personality, strategy, and handy tips about citations to make it more palatable, but it's still a library database demonstration. It's a completely valid tool-based approach. Unfortunately it's boring to teach and, based on student feedback I have received, it's relatively boring to absorb. It's also hard to create much space for critical thinking if the primary goal is to get someone to memorize where the full-text checkboxes and peer-review limiters are located.

Instead, my goal is to make the checkboxes less important than the search boxes – to emphasize the process of trying (and failing) various searches and improving with each iteration. I'm trying to convince students that search expertise is about persistence and critical thinking and to achieve that, I haven't done a database demo in many months. It might work differently in your classroom, but what's the harm in trying?

Address the Existing Habit

There's a tendency to begin library instruction sessions as though each were a blank slate, a chance to start over and embrace "the research process." So, when we ask our students where they are going to start their research and the majority respond "Google", we then endeavor to convince them that our tools can do things that Google can't do and that their research will be better if they can just learn to love EBSCOHost.

In reality, of course, there are no perfect searches and no perfect search tools; there is simply the right tool for the job based upon the available options. Rather than force students to abandon their existing search habituation, acknowledge what it is that they usually do. Address what it is that works and doesn't work about the general approach. Work toward a process that starts with the user-friendliness of Google and moves the searcher toward the precision and content access of library tools. It's a sure bet the student will become a more effective searcher along the way.

Put Something in the Box

You have to start the search somewhere, and there's no perfect search. Put this concept out in front of your class early and often: there is no perfect search. Searching is essentially about putting stuff, junk, *words* into the search box. The more time you spend thinking about what goes in the box, the better your results.

This is the place to talk about how to distill a topic into its useful components and leave out the extra verbiage (garbage in/garbage out). If you must use library or search jargon, be sure that you briefly explain the underlying meaning, e.g., "keyword" is really just "descriptive words about your topic." The important bit here is for students to grasp that language is critical and requires consideration at every point in the search process.

One approach to teaching this is to start searching in Google and to think out loud. Share the assumptions you make every time you choose one search term over a similar term, and how sometimes those assumptions are wrong. Allowing students to see that librarians are persistent people who fail really quickly helps to bridge the gap between what happens on the big screen at the front of the classroom and what happens "in reality" when students do research. The great thing about working through this process in Google is that there are no confusing interfaces to distract the student from the most critical part of searching: the language.

Get a List, Then Ignore It

Now that students know search terms matter, tell them those terms are just the starting point to getting a truly useful list of links. Assure them it's easy to get started – they just need to hit a button. Can't find this "Go" or "Start" button? Hit "Enter" on the keyboard. This is all familiar; it's what happens when they use Google to find a dentist, a hockey score, or a replacement manual for grandma's sewing machine.

After the student hits the button it's time to break the search habituation they bring to the classroom. This is the stage where most students put their "list blinders" on and slog through the marginally relevant list looking for three (or whatever the teacher-required number of articles is) somewhat relevant hits. Search tools offer a variety of ways to make a results list much more useful, but in my experience the novice searcher seldom utilizes these aids unless prompted. Once they get engrossed in the results list itself they tend to lose focus on ways to make that list more effective.

Ask your students to retrieve from Google a results list and then to ignore it in favor of utilizing the tool to make the list better. Impress upon students that the options available depend on what the tool was designed to do. Most tools will have at least two sets of options. One set is concerned with what type of information is in the list, the other with how the list is displayed. Encourage students to look for these options in **every** search tool they use.

In many search tools, these options are to the left of the list. It is useful to remind students that in some search tools options and limiters are presented on the right, and sometimes at the top, but pretty much never at the bottom. (Google, depending on the type of search, utilizes the left or the top). The easiest way to figure out how to use a new search tool is to “read the screen”—take a couple moments and look at the options on its perimeter. It seems obvious, and I take great pains to make sure students know I’m not insulting them when I say this, but it does solve most problems. It’s also gratifying to hear students counseling one another to read the screen when they are stuck.

Contextual Help Menus

Contextual help and options menus are one of the most fantastic elements of a search tool. When you limit a search to images, Google responds not only by displaying images in your results list, but also (once you click on ‘Search tools’ in the top bar*) by changing all of the options at the top of the results list. Now you can be more specific: only want pink photographs of faces larger than 640 by 480 pixels, matching your search terms? Google will attempt to comply. It’s worth exploring Google Image search options with students because it’s the one thing they likely do *not* need to do for their research assignments and it’s incredibly obvious to see the options and limiters at work. Do mention that in library jargon options that remove unwanted items from a results list are often called limiters or filters, and are sometimes labeled as such in research databases.

At this point students are often ready to put some search theory into practice, which allows for customization specific to the research assignment or class you are supporting. Ask students to put the basic process in action with different Google products. Consider having students contrast and compare different Google search products such as “Books” or “News”. Ask them to apply their critical thinking skills to selecting the most appropriate Google for specific topics or types of research. Here’s an obvious time to divide students into groups if you enjoy group work in your instruction sessions. Challenge students to find how to access Google Scholar, which for some reason Google doesn’t make easy to find (give hints if necessary).

There are three purposes for taking this roundabout approach to connecting students with Google Scholar. First, by this point in the class at least one student may have suggested that no one but a librarian would know most of these

“tips and tricks” about Google. Second, if you’ve been reinforcing the “read the screen” approach to figuring it out, this really shores up your point. Third, there will always be students who got there a different way – they Googled it, they asked a friend, they found a link somewhere like Wikipedia. That’s fantastic, let’s reward the kind of approach that says “I’m no expert at this tool, but I can find a way to make it work.”

Tools are Bridges to More Tools

Spend enough time in Google doing scholarly research and you’re eventually going to end up at a library website trying to access a library database. It’s inevitable. Google does a really fine job of bridging students to subscription library search tools through products like Scholar and Books. Once you put Google Scholar and Google Books on the table it’s time to start talking about other search tools (i.e., the ones your library owns) in earnest.

For example, students sometimes ask reference questions about why they have located articles that request money to access them; this usually means they’ve used Google or Google Scholar from off-campus to find an article, but don’t know how to see if their institution owns the item and, if so, how to freely access it. Thus, it’s important to show students how to utilize your library’s link resolver to connect to full-text articles via Scholar. I like to show them this *after* I send them off to figure it out on their own, but of course your approach may differ.

Once you’ve explained link resolvers (and why sometimes the full-text just isn’t there, despite what it says) challenge your students to continue searching. An easy way to do this is to ask them to stay in the database in which their article resolved and begin a new search, using the process learned in Google. After having students explore databases to which Google bridges them the next step is to have them select databases without the Google bridge (direct from the library website) and to continue to use the process. Encourage students to let you know if they find a database where the process does not work—they do exist. If they find such a database, push them utilize the “read the screen” method of troubleshooting to find familiar features.

Generally I like to spend the last 5-10 minutes of class having a lightning round of likely database interfaces. This allows me to talk briefly about database vendors and to show some of the known quirks. We identify that usually print/save/email commands are found in a section called “Tools”, “Toolbox”, or maybe “Toolbar” and discuss where to locate these options in each interface. We look at EBSCO and find the full-text and the citation help. Preview Gale and

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discuss the idea of search boxes to “refine” a results list. Explore ProQuest and find the limiters are on the right. The intent here is not to get them to memorize a list of vendor quirks, but to understand that there are compatible features in most tools if you look for them.

I finish by telling students again that there’s nothing wrong with the process of typing some stuff in a search box, hitting the button, and getting back a semi-random list of results. I do suggest that they could make it better, faster, less frustrating by applying some tool savvy and critical thinking. Everyone wins, and is hopefully less stressed about how to perform a “complicated” library search. They now have a simple, but sophisticated approach that works not just in Google, but anywhere, and they are better searchers for it.

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students’ learning and their preferences, has in part led to a more fruitful conversation.

Lastly, this project helpfully highlighted several support needs that GVSU’s new instruction program might fill, such as pragmatic concerns like developing an intranet tool for instruction data or a template for reporting our instruction statistics. GVSU’s librarians can now speak with the voice of experience by providing a case in point. This dialog has helped engender a strong, shared interest in student evaluations and a tested foundation that can be built upon by our new Head of Instructional Services, putting GVSU that much closer to an articulated and shared practice of teaching within the library.

All of this happened, and will continue to move forward, thanks to a grassroots effort started by a small group of librarians. We encourage others to not wait for an explicit administrative mandate or be concerned about not having the authority to compel participation from their colleagues—by approaching a project in a thoughtful way and gradually building consensus, there is a great deal that can be accomplished.

References

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(Grids...Continued from page 3)

layered design that uses an overlapping, two-column grid scheme on the main layer. It also sports big, bold text in visible grid boxes that suggest the form fields of a web log-in page. All the text is right-aligned and features spatial zones that break the right-side margin.

In her monograph *The Grid Book*, art historian Hannah Higgins states, “. . . grids are endowed with a most human contradiction: a vigorous free spirit and a propensity to control.” While we may associate the grid with control and order, clearly, it can provide a way to free our creativity. A good designer practices **both** inside, and outside, of the box thinking.

**Editor’s Note: Google recently changed the way it displays search results, which are reflected in the article (essentially, they moved some advanced tools to the top that were formerly on the left). More details: <https://plus.google.com/+google/posts/FkDZdfkXRrA>*

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Figure 1

Library Instruction Evaluation

1. Is this your first library instruction session? YES NO

If no, about how much of today’s session repeated content from previous sessions?

None 1 2 3 4 5 All

2. What year in school are you? 1 2 3 4 5+ GRAD

3. From the following list, please identify the first (1), second (2), and third (3) most useful elements of today’s presentation:

 [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1]
 [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 2]
 [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 3]
 [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 4]

4. Is there anything you wish we had spent more time on?

5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being highest) how useful do you think this session will be as you do the research required for this course?

Least 1 2 3 4 5 Most

6. How else could the library improve this session?

THANK YOU! Your comments help us improve student learning.