We are all familiar with the adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words”, and we understand that even complex ideas can be conveyed in a single well-chosen image. The current proliferation of electronic screens of every size vying for eyeballs makes the race for page views more urgent, with every Web site on the Internet trying everything for a win.

It only makes sense then that online library Web pages providing bibliographic instruction or user education similarly employ every tool available to join this competition for visitors to our Web sites, especially among our primary clientele.

However, most Web pages at library sites remain predominantly text. An occasional graphic illustrating a resource may be added, and at times even a picture that is not too relevant. While examples of these text-heavy pages can be found at Web sites of most of our library institutions, I will use examples from the Library of Congress web site, as our “Nation’s Library” (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Finding Aids (Library of Congress)

http://www.loc.gov/rr/ead/

How much skill and resources are required to reverse this state of affairs? Not as much as you think.

**Visually Indexing Information**

What this paper proposes and illustrates is just one simple option to bring visual clarity to the instruction which librarians offer in their user education pages, that are provided online. I am calling this process “visually indexing information.”
No special skills are needed, beyond the existing reference skills required to provide the bibliographic instruction itself, which is in a reference librarian’s skill set. The tools employed are available online for free, and easy-to-follow directions are provided by those who provide them.

What it is. Visually indexing information is a process of adding visual impact to an instruction page, module or widgets, to promote a higher level of understanding and retention to the end users of these online delivery modes of user instruction. The resulting credibility gains and buy-in are also welcome outcomes.

Here is an example of a use of visually indexing information to convey the top three information needs relating to job-hunting, that is, seeking information: on a known employer prospect, on a known target industry, and on screening prospective employers by specific attributes (Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Career Research in the Rosenfeld Library](http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/x27281.xml)

Why it works. It may be obvious that adding pictures, to engage the sense of sight more thoroughly, would add attention to any Web page. However, more than simply adding pictures as eye candy, what is involved here is employing images to instantly create buy-in for a complex research strategy. This involves careful planning, even before the first picture is chosen. The instruction goals need to be analyzed for key actionable areas which users can quickly relate to as information they need. This foundation is important for the plan to succeed.

How to do it. This recommended plan for incorporating an image for visually indexing information into any online instruction will take just five steps, or six steps for the truly innovative. Here are the steps.

1. **RE-FOCUS TO A STRATEGIC APPROACH**

   Almost any existing user education product can be improved by visually indexing the information being conveyed. Can your research guide be made visual? Can you walk your user through a research strategy that he or she can relate to? Yes, a re-focus can be done, as these two different approaches to country information resources illustrate – text-only one at the top and the one with visually indexed information at the bottom (Figure 3).

![Figure 3: Multi-Regional Internet Business Resources](http://www.loc.gov/rr/business/multi1.html) (top) and **Country Information - A Briefing** [http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/x14672.xml](http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/x14672.xml) (bottom)

Approach your instruction goals in terms of a strategic path to the user’s ultimate research goal, instead of a static list of library resources. Resist focusing on identifying information types by format. For example, question whether your users would relate to a category called Newspapers and Article
Databases, instead of a category called News and Trends. Your user may question why they would need information from Article Databases, but they would easily understand their need for information about Trends on their chosen topic.

2. **Identify Actionable Steps**

   It would help to put yourself in your users’ shoes, to identify their needs in their own terms, which would make the step actionable. From experience in reference assistance, librarians can collect exact examples of how users ask for the information they need. Ideally, keep to only five to seven steps in a single research strategy. On research about countries, for example, let’s say your users often ask for information on the trade deficit, so for your country research guide, you choose “trade deficit” as one step.

3. **Conceptualize Steps Visually**

   Even if you do not have an artistic bone in your body, you still can recognize which visuals appeal to you and which images convey specific messages to you. If you need help translating the actionable steps to visual images, there are convenient online tools available to help you formulate your ideas. Here are some resources to get you started in conceptualizing the images for your actionable steps. Search the keywords “trade deficit.”

   The [AP Images](http://www.apimages.com) (subscription required for full access) provides photos used in Associated Press news stories. Use it to review how related news was conveyed visually, and let it help you to arrive at your own ideas on how to convey this concept to your users.

   The [Bettman Archive](http://www.corbis.com/BettMann100/Archive/BettmannArchive.asp) offers over 11 million images covering “every topic imaginable”.

   [Google Images](http://www.google.com/imghp) provides additional search options, among them: size, color versus black-and-white, and photo versus line drawing.

   Using the Advanced Search of [Google Images](http://www.google.com/imghp) allows results to be limited to .gov sites, for more likely public domain graphics. However, not all images at government sites are copyright-free, see for example these restrictions from the Prints & Photographs Division of the Library of Congress: [http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/195_copr.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/195_copr.html).

   If you have been following this exercise, you will find that the images most used to portray “trade deficit” include cargo ships at port and bar charts. However, there are some interesting out-of-the-box examples to spark your own imagination, such as UPC codes with “Made in China” and other U.S. trade partners.

4. **Collect/Create Your Pictures**

   At this point, your vision should be set in your mind, as to what your visual message to your users would look like. This is how you are visually presenting your research recommendations to your users.

   Can’t create graphics of your own? There are also websites offering clip-art and photos that are copyright-free. I will leave the legal issues covering use of photos, whether copyright-free or in the public domain or otherwise, to the law librarians and your legal counsel.

   If what you have now is a group of pictures representing the research steps, then this is the time to decide how you will pull these steps together into a single cohesive image conveying a fluid research process. This pulled-together image may be a series of staircase steps, or connected circles, or a flowchart, or other image to convey the unified process. In the conceptual image in Figure 3, the continents on the globe are used to link the steps.

5. **Insert Conceptual Image**

   You are ready to insert you conceptual image of the research process involved into your user education product. Follow your Web authoring program, such as Dreamweaver, for instructions on inserting an image into your Web page.

   Some content management systems (CMS) may appear to restrict some insertion of images, however, if you can insert the needed HTML code, I have found that the CMS can happily accommodate these images.

   The HTML code to insert can be as simple as `<img src="yourpicture.gif" />`. Easy step-by-step instructions providing the HTML code needed to insert an image is available at these sites:


   For LibGuides, I have had a SpringShare representative tell me that they do not support graphics on LibGuide pages, but simply inserting the HTML code should work here too. I will be transferring some of my pages to my institution’s LibGuides site to illustrate this soon, see: [http://guides.library.ucla.edu/profile.php?uid=23039](http://guides.library.ucla.edu/profile.php?uid=23039)

   Congratulations, if you have followed this plan up to this point. You now know how to add Visual Indexing of Information on all your user education and instruction products. You will notice, as has been my case, that users will remember your instruction pages more readily. I have had faculty comment positively on the use of this visual indexing in assignment support pages I have created for their courses. Some web pages, outside of the Library, have created similar visual indexes to information at their sites, reportedly based on our experience. Our Competitive Intelligence, one of our earliest examples, continues to generate fans nationwide. (Figure 4)
6. CODE IMAGE MAPPING AND LINKS

Now for extra points, adding image-mapping to your conceptual image will allow your users to click to specific steps in you research strategy, directly from the visual index. You can also add mouse-over messages, where you can provide brief relevant research advice at that specific point. These are not as difficult as they may seem, with the help of image map generators, many freely available on the Internet.

We have successfully used the Online Image Mapper <www.image-maps.com/> for their free image mapping tool, but they are not alone. There are even sites with instruction on hard coding an image map, which I have been known to use to tightly map a special graphic.

One final lesson to share, when using text in your conceptual image, use the font style Lucinda Sans to retain readability despite reducing the font size. This was the recommendation given to us when we sought professional advice, and we have found this to work very well for us, as you can see in Figure 4.

When you start visually indexing information, I predict you will never create any instruction without one.