

**Assessment of Information Literacy at the GE/freshman level:
Progress Report 2013-2014, by Felicia (Palsson) Kalker**

Background/Contextual Information

This report describes the third year of a program to assess information literacy skills at the freshman level. For full background information and reports on the first two years, see the [SSU Library Instruction Program](http://library.sonoma.edu/about/instruction) website (library.sonoma.edu/about/instruction). At Sonoma State University, information literacy is one of five General Education (GE) learning outcomes required in the freshman year composition classes. For four years, the Library Instruction Coordinator and the Composition Coordinator have partnered to develop an evolving common assignment for these classes and an analytic rubric describing key criteria for meeting the information literacy outcomes.

The common assignment consists of an annotated bibliography and a literature review. Students are asked to engage more deeply with sources than they would by writing a traditional research paper. Our aims for the assignment are to: (a) compel students to read source material closely and avoid the problem of “quote-mining” source material – a problem frequently seen in the research paper genre; (b) collect common artifacts for assessment of student learning; (c) involve instructors fully in identifying our programmatic criteria for student success.

Learning Outcomes for Freshman Year Composition courses

Currently, information literacy is one of [five required GE learning outcomes in SSU’s freshman year composition \(FYC\) classes](#), and written as follows:

“Develop research skills: find, select, analyze, and evaluate outside sources; integrate the ideas of others into texts that express the writer’s own position. Understand the ethical uses of sources of all types, and use appropriate documentation format in writing and in multimedia presentations.”

As written, this outcome (listed as one of five) in fact comprises multiple outcomes. For example, the information literacy outcome might be listed this way:

Develop research skills:

- Find, select, analyze, and evaluate outside sources
- Integrate the ideas of others into texts that express the writer’s own position
- Understand the ethical uses of sources of all types
- Use appropriate documentation format in writing and in multimedia presentations

One could further make the case that “finding, selecting, analyzing and evaluating” are four different outcomes. The [SSU Library Instruction Program](#) describes our learning outcomes for FYC with the following language:

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Students will:

- Identify key concepts and terms that describe the information needed for their assignment.
- Construct a basic search strategy, demonstrating the ability to narrow and broaden search results.
- Retrieve relevant information sources from the Library website as well as the open web.
- Demonstrate awareness of issues surrounding plagiarism.
- Evaluate information sources for authority, credibility, audience, purpose, and relevance.

Since the latter skill (“evaluate information”) pre-supposes, in part, the ability to do the others, i.e. no student can evaluate information without retrieving it, we have focused our assessment time and resources on this higher-order skill. Accordingly we developed a rubric that prioritizes students’ explication of the quality and value of their sources. The assignment we developed highlights the importance to freshmen of using their own authentic voices, thereby emphasizing awareness of plagiarism and asking students to, in the original language of the General Education committee: “integrate the ideas of others into texts that express the *writer’s own position* [emphasis mine].”

Method

Our overall method was similar to the previous year (see those reports for details). We use a scoring rubric against a performance assessment (the common assignment). This year, our scoring team once again revised our rubric, in the hopes of increasing our inter-rater reliability. We simplified and streamlined much of the language in the performance level descriptions.

Also, the Instruction Coordinator and Composition Coordinator attempted to re-create the series of in-service workshops for writing instructors that we offered last year. However, for uncertain reasons, these workshops were very poorly attended and therefore the common understanding and sense of shared purpose among instructors was not achieved.

Collection and Scoring of Artifacts

Library faculty provided direct student instruction in selecting sources, evaluating information, and creating an evaluative annotation for the bibliography. In Spring 2014 we met with about 81% of the freshman composition classes. We taught 697 students. Students were given a consent form explaining that librarians would evaluate their work anonymously for internal purposes/assessment only. We carefully tracked student consent, all identifying information was redacted from their work and each submission was assigned a number for identification. At the end of the semester, we drew a random sample of 158 annotated bibliographies for

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assessment. The literature review component of the assignment was not collected in sufficient numbers to form any conclusions; however, we did read about 40 of these as well.

We scored the annotated bibliographies using our updated rubric. The Spring 2014 version of the information literacy freshman rubric was as follows:

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	3 or mastery	2 or emerging	1 or beginning	0 or no points
Overall description:	At the mastery level, a student can <i>contextualize</i> the information provided by the source. A student knows the audience for a work, knows why the source is credible and knows why it fits in with his or her topic.	At the emerging level, a student is definitely <i>making an effort</i> to evaluate a source. The annotation will <i>show the student's thinking</i> process even if it is incomplete or limited.	At the beginning level, a student is dropping in words and phrases we've used but the annotation <i>doesn't show the thinking process</i> . Statements in the annotation will be formulaic, or blanket statements.	A student shows no comprehension, gives us no clues of thinking, and/or doesn't make any effort to mention one of the criteria. Clearly plagiarized annotations will receive 0 points.

Criteria:

Identification of Bibliographic Information (Citation)	A perfect, complete citation. Student correctly identifies author, title, publisher and date. The citation is complete and formatted correctly.	The citation format may have errors. Student correctly identifies four primary elements: author, title, publisher and date. The citation is complete.	Student correctly identifies two or three elements of the bibliographic information. (<i>Title and author included but not publisher or source.</i>)	Student cannot identify more than one element. (<i>E.g. student can only name the title of a website, and provides no other information.</i>)
Understanding Purpose, Audience	Addresses the intended audience of the source and why it was created. Uses specific details to show where this work fits into the bigger picture. <i>Example: "The goal of this source is to explain what domestic minor sex trafficking is, who is at risk and what social workers can do to stop this problem."</i>	Audience is addressed, but generalized rather than specific. Student is making an effort. Engages with the work, but doesn't provide specific context. <i>"This article is most likely intended for parents because it discusses the implications that technology might have on their children."</i>	Audience is shallowly addressed. Student is not engaging with the work. <i>Example: "the audience is anyone who is interested in X."</i>	Audience and purpose not addressed. Student shows no comprehension of the purpose of the material.
Argument for Credibility	Credibility is clearly addressed using appropriate factors. Shows how the author's credentials are a good match (<i>contextualizes</i> experience to the topic). <i>Example: "The author, Kimberly Kotrla, is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. She was a social worker for 10 years and does a lot of research about human trafficking."</i>	Lists credentials or mentions the author's background knowledge. An alternative would be recognizing the publication as a reputable publication. <i>"Written by Tara Lohan, a senior editor at AlterNet..."</i> <i>"This article was published to the internet directly from American Journal of Public Health magazine, which is a well-known organization and resource"</i>	Credibility is mentioned but not explained. States that the source is credible because it is academic, factual, or because it came from the library. <i>"This article is credible because it states all the facts."</i>	There is no attempt to address evidence for credibility.
Relevance to Research	Clearly addresses appropriateness to the project. Situates this piece within specific goals for the project. Treats each source as unique. States how information will be used. <i>Example: "I plan to use part of this article to show how the government treats those graffiti artists."</i>	Addresses why this is a relevant source but with less specificity. Annotations all seem to be equally relevant. <i>"Some of the information on how the fish were farmed was useful for my paper... it has a lot of useful information about toxins for my paper."</i>	Relevance is briefly addressed but not explained (<i>"this is a good source for my paper"</i>). This is a formulaic / automatic response.	Relevance is not addressed; the source seems arbitrary.

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Results

Four faculty (The Library Instruction Coordinator, two additional librarians, and the Composition Coordinator) participated in reading student work. As we have every year, we held a “norming” session in which we discussed the rubric using samples of student work. Each bibliography was scored by two (blind) readers. Raw scores were then analyzed for inter-rater reliability. The inter-rater reliability was so low that we began to consider a new approach to the assessment.

In addition to this problem of a lack of inter-rater agreement, we faced other significant (*related*) obstacles to our assessment. The majority of the papers were clearly outside the guidelines of the common assignment and were not aiming for the same goals. Most of the instructors had not participated in the program. They were willing to submit student work for reading, but the nature of the assignments was so varied that it was difficult to compare. Our hope that students would be engaged in critically evaluating sources was not reflected in the work.

This contributed to our inability to use our rubric effectively, and we concluded that this year we could not conduct a formal assessment at all, but would rather have an open discussion of what we saw in the students’ work and what was possible to achieve given the constraints of our organizational structure. The factors that impact us are: the writing instructors’ group changes from year to year; the instructors may or may not be engaged in the process; there is no umbrella structure to account for information literacy and the Library’s relationship to the composition program is strong only when the specific individuals are willing to collaborate.

Also, 2014 saw the hire of a new First Year Instruction Librarian, whose new ideas and goals the Instruction Coordinator was eager to support. We decided to consider this year’s discussion an opportunity, a way for the newest librarian to transition to taking the reigns of freshman instruction. What was most useful to her was a thoughtful discussion of what students actually *do*, given the different types of assignments. So, we analyzed where the students’ strengths and weaknesses lie. Given that this was our fourth year of reading student work, certain patterns emerge that resemble the results of more formal assessments. We conclude that:

- Students do not succeed at critical evaluation at this developmental stage, when they are new to college. They don’t tend to think sufficiently independently to be critical, preferring to seek strict formulas and step-by-step direction as they approach a new piece of writing. We may be asking too much to require freshmen to undertake this task of evaluating sources, while they are still developing their reading comprehension with higher level forms of writing.
- There are other more minor yet still significant learning goals we can set for students at this stage – more foundational steps we can teach them that will lead to greater success

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at critical thinking later in their college careers. For example, we could assign a project that asks freshmen to *explore* different information sources, beginning with those that are most familiar – then *compare* differences in language, structure, presentation.

- Students can be very creative in their approaches to writing. They are also resourceful and skilled at deduction – they excel at recognizing patterns.
- Our curriculum for the first year needs serious revision and refinement.

Changes for 2014-2015

Ironically, looking back at this year's assessment, we all agreed that we liked the direction our rubric was taking and the shape it was in, while at the same time it was rendered irrelevant by the context and the fact that the majority of assignments didn't share our goals. It may ultimately become a useful tool in a different context – perhaps sophomore year cohorts or a critical thinking assignment in an upper division course.

In the broader context of this course, freshman composition, writing instructors already contend with meeting four other large GE learning outcomes to build students' college-level reading comprehension and writing ability. Students at this stage are only beginning to grasp the demands of college. Instructors respond to these challenges in different ways, and the group of composition instructors is made up of Teaching Assistants and Adjunct Instructors with a wide variety of backgrounds, teaching styles, and interests. This group also changes every year, and so apart from a few exceptions we are working with different individuals every year who may or may not share our goals. It will be important to reconsider the best way to work with these individuals, understanding their needs and challenges, without losing a sense of shared curriculum.

The most important thing to come out of this year was a lively and insightful discussion about where our students' skills are. The new First Year Instruction Librarian has creative ideas in abundance about how to tap into their strengths and help steer them in the right direction.

As a transition year, 2014-2015 will enable us to try new things and re-think the assessment approach we have taken for several years now. Although we hoped to continue using the same method over time for a longer-term sustainable approach and the ability to analyze multiple years of results, the Library Instruction Coordinator and Composition Coordinator believe now that it is more important to be flexible when a method has proven to be unsuccessful.