

Finding, Evaluating, and Ethically Using Information: Information Literacy in the A&I Seminars

By the Liaison Librarians - December 2009

The following list of questions that we want students to ask themselves provides a sketch of what we mean when we say that information literacy, like other critical literacies, is a habit of mind. Don't be overwhelmed! Just as you select elements from your discipline for inclusion in an introductory level course rather than try to cover the entire discipline in 10 weeks, so also not every topic here needs to be explicitly addressed in an A&I seminar. Chances to practice these habits of mind come in many forms (in classroom lecture, discussion, group work, and assignments) and are developed through discussion with many kinds of people on campus, including classmates, faculty, and librarians. The traditional research paper is not the only way to encourage students to develop these habits.

As you prepare to develop or revise a syllabus for inclusion in the suite of A&I courses, we offer the following set of questions, which we have found useful when taking broadly defined Information Literacy learning goals and translating them into specific daily practices.

1. Am I mindful that researching is a creative, intellectual and iterative process?

- Are there standard starting places (sources and finding aids and the like) and do I know what those might be? Do I know where I might look next?
- After doing an initial search, do I know to step back and reflect on what I've found? "What have I learned?" "Do I need more?" "Do I need to synthesize?"
- Do I plan for the need to go back and search at multiple points in the writing process: after conducting initial searches, reading some of the literature, and after beginning the writing process?
- Will I know when to stop collecting information?
- Do I realize that the inclusion and exclusion of sources in a bibliography is an intellectual choice?
- Do I know when it's appropriate to consult with people who can help me (faculty, librarians, writing center, academic technologist, etc), and how to go about getting that help?

2. Who makes up my community of inquiry? And am I participating in this community appropriately and ethically?

- Which community am I currently addressing?
- What methodologies resonate with and are appropriate to my community?
- Am I familiar with the rhetorical tools of this methodology within this community?
- What counts as evidence within this community and this methodology?
- How am I building on existing work and have I acknowledged that relationship with proper attributions in a bibliographic style that makes sense to my community?
- How is my project couched in the larger discussion within this community? How am I contributing to the discussion? Is mine an interesting question to the community?
- What other communities may contribute to my understanding of this question?
- Am I aware of the ways in which the venue and audience for my academic work

informs the breadth of Fair Use that may apply to the images, text, or other work that I have incorporated into my own project?

3. Do I understand the rich array of paths I can take while exploring this question?

- Do I know what I'm looking for? Do I know where I'm going to look for it? Who might have disseminated it?
- What are some of the indexes and other means to discover the literature in my areas of inquiry? Do I know where to look beyond JSTOR?
- Do I understand the differences between these indexes and know how to choose which to use, to what purpose, and how that will impact my search strategy?
- When searching on the free web, do I realize that the library may subscribe to restricted access items I find? Do I know to check the library's journals list to attain access to journal literature? (i.e., not getting stuck at the Sage Journals web site or paying \$40 for a working paper).
- Are standard sources the most appropriate sources for this question? If not, what else might help me investigate this topic?
- Do I know to look (and how to look) beyond our library's collection when time permits and use interlibrary loan?
- How else might I use what I have already found (i.e. bibliographies, key terms, and key author's names) to locate more? Can I read and interpret information from citations as I encounter them?

4. Am I aware that the content I need may be in found in a variety of formats?

- Do I realize that how I evaluate what I find will be dependent upon its format and how I intend to use it?
- Do I know about books, scholarly journals, newspapers, web-born publications, statistical compendia, government reports, dissertations, grey literature, video, audio, images, 2-D and 3-D art work, letters, memoirs, manuscripts, ephemera, public records, maps, special collections, microfilm collections, datasets, etc.?
- Do I realize that I may need to look in different places for these varied materials?
- Do I have a sense of the search strategies and terminologies I may need to employ when searching for different formats?

5. Throughout the research process, am I thinking critically and reflectively?

- Could I ask a more interesting question? Or one that fits the assignment more closely (narrower, less time consuming, broader, taking advantage of local collections and access, etc.)?
- Looking at the sources I have, can I evaluate my overall strategy? Are my sources predominantly drawn from standard sources, obscure sources, sources not available at Carleton, sources from another discipline? What does this tell me about my research strategy?
- What can I learn by evaluating the results of a search? Is there terminology I'm missing? Are my search goals feasible?
- Can I look at a specific source and evaluate its relevance, usefulness, and authoritativeness?
- As I am writing, am I discovering that there is more information I need to go back and find, gaps to fill, and additional evidence to add?