

PA-118: Accio Sources! Information Literacy Instruction Through Harry Potter's (Glasses)Frames

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Introduction/Background

J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series is familiar to millions of first-year college students and provides a frame to structure instruction on information literacy and research skills. Through the use of Harry Potter-related vocabulary, students learn how to Locate information using physical and online resources and Evaluate information on the validity of its source, its level of scholarliness, and appropriateness of use for different types of college research projects.

SUNY Geneseo's first-year students are required to take an interdisciplinary writing class, which includes a research paper component and a mandatory information literacy and research skills lesson. It is unfortunate but true that students tend to view these lessons as boring and unnecessary. To enliven the instruction and "meet the students where they are," I used the world of Harry Potter to frame two of the goals of the research skills class, Locate and Evaluate. By dividing students into "Houses," discussing databases in terms of "Infocruxes," determining keywords and concepts and Boolean searching strategies as spells, choosing articles on Harry Potter to evaluate, and developing a mnemonic using a Harry Potter spell, the skills of Locating and Evaluating information and sources can be learned through hands-on activities and discussion in a way that's more appealing to the first-year audience.

Both formative and summative assessments are used during the course of the instruction. In the Evaluation section of the lesson, the students' choice of what's most and least scholarly and the reasons why they chose the rankings they did allow for discussion and the providing of further information on how to decide the level of scholarliness of the various articles. In the Locate section of the lesson, the instructor observes the searching strategies and techniques that students are using and supplies appropriate feedback and suggestions for improvement. Summative assessment is done at the end of the instruction session through a self-reported grade by the students on how well they think they'd do if they were tested on their information literacy and research skills, and three open-ended questions (what they learned that was most helpful and least helpful, and what additional information they'd like to share about the instruction).

Impetus

The words “information literacy” generally don’t strike fear in the hearts of first-year students, but they can in the hearts of instruction librarians faced with teaching these concepts to first-year students who have never heard of the concept before and have no understanding of what it means or why it’s important. As an instruction librarian, I’ve found my heart sinking when in the midst of teaching I see a sea of glazed-over faces staring back at me...or just as likely, a sea of glazed-over faces sneaking looks at their phones in their laps. Consequently, I decided to find a way to do my own sneaking: sneaking the concepts of information literacy into an active-learning lesson by using Harry Potter as a frame.

Locate

Learning objective: Explore databases (“Infocruxes”) to:

- Identify keywords and synonyms for keywords
- Learn Boolean searching
- Follow citations forward and backward in time

Evaluate

Learning objective: Understand how to evaluate resources:

- Learn about various types of sources, both scholarly and non-scholarly
- Learn criteria to determine whether something is a scholarly or non-scholarly source
- Understand when it’s appropriate to use different types of resources

The acronym I chose is **ACCIO SOURCES** (if you’re not familiar with Harry Potter, “accio” is the spell that means “bring me” or “come here”). ACCIO are more the criteria to use when looking over a resource as a whole; SOURCES are criteria that relate more to the content of the source.

A: Author(s)/Affiliation: Who wrote this? What organization is/are they affiliated with (university, think tank, government agency, newsmagazine, blogger, etc.)?

C: Current: When was the source published? Is it recent?

C: Citations: Does the source contain citations? Footnotes?

I: Illustrations: Does the source contain illustrations? If so, what type? Pictures, tables, graphs? Are there advertisements on the same page?

O: Objective (1): Why did the author(s) publish this? What is their argument?

S: Structure: How is the paper organized? Does it follow the general outlines of a scholarly paper (abstract, summary of past research in the area, section on methods, discussion, conclusion)? Or is it more general in nature?

- O:** Objective (2): Is the material presented in a factual manner? Does it rely on logic, not emotions, to make its points?
- U:** Users: Who is/are the audience(s) for this work? Experts/researchers in a field or anyone with a general interest in the topic?
- R:** Relevant: Is the material covered related to the subject of your paper?
- C:** Complete: Have the authors included research on all aspects of their topic? Or have they ignored certain areas that contradict their argument?
- E:** Expert-reviewed: Was the source peer-reviewed before publication?
- S:** Supported: Is the argument in the source backed up by other credible sources? How about the supporting points?

Post-Class Assessment

If you had to take an OWL exam in research and library skills after this class, how do you think you would do? Please put a check next to your anticipated grade.

Outstanding: Madam Pince is retiring and has recommended me for her job!

Exceeds Expectations: I've been recommended for a researcher's job in the Ministry of Magic!

Acceptable: I know to check the sources in the *Quibbler*, but think everything in the *Daily Prophet* is always right.

Poor: When Professor Umbridge saw all of my sources came from Google, I had to write three feet of lines: "I will always use scholarly sources."

Dreadful: After reading my paper, Professor Snape is making me clean all of the cauldrons in the Potions lab...without using my wand.

Troll: Professor McGonagall says that I can probably manage to write for that Muggle communication device called "social media."

What did you learn that you think will be most helpful to you in your research work?

What do you think will be the least helpful?

Additional comments:

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