

# **Not Your One-Shot Deal: Instructional Design for Credit Information Literacy Courses**

by

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## **Introduction**

The world of “information literacy”—the ability to gather and use information properly—is changing rapidly. Most of us have followed an annual routine of one-shot orientation to the library sessions, classroom introductions to “the literature of theology,” perhaps even more substantial introductory seminars in research method.

Our academic environment, however, is increasingly demanding new approaches to teaching students how to handle information. Added to the phenomenon of “I’ve been out of school ten years and everything I ever knew about libraries is long forgotten” is the growing complexity of our electronic tools. Libraries have become substantially more difficult to use, to the point that our traditional one-shots scarcely scratch the surface of what students need to know.

Accrediting bodies, under the strong influence of initiatives like those of the Association of College and Research Libraries, have begun calling for more information literacy education in higher education, citing the need to meet the demands of the information age and lifelong learning with something stronger than the lip service we have so far been giving to the problem. ACRL, in fact, has provided substantial guidelines on the meaning of information literacy and best practices demanded of informationally literate students.<sup>1</sup>

It is time to begin considering information literacy as a key element in the subject matter of seminary education, both because we live in an information age requiring information skills and because the complexity of systems and tools of information demand knowledge beyond that of simple library use. If we teach exegesis and homiletics, why should we not teach information literacy?

## **Options**

Before leaping into the credit course option, we need to consider less drastic alternatives. The one-shot has always been a lame candidate for information literacy even when it has been tied to a hand-son library assignment. Students consistently find it irrelevant to their real needs. A one-shot session taught within a specific course tends to build more relevance but fails on several other counts. First, it means invading faculty turf, something that few faculty welcome. Second, it offers limited contact time for teaching. Third, subject-specific information literacy tends not to translate well into development of generic skills. While there may be a mystique to theological research, requiring a firm understanding of the theological task,<sup>2</sup> the fact is that our students need to know how to handle a wide variety of information, not just theological but historical, psychological, sociological, and so on. Finally, subject-specific information literacy, while helpful, tends to focus on

bibliography—the literature of the subject matter—rather than the skills and savvy needed to acquire information and use it effectively.

There are further options. Some institutions offer noncredit seminars in research method. The disadvantage is that noncredit almost always means to the student “nonessential and unimportant,” or at least “remedial,” rather than an integral part of seminary education. Even if we make it compulsory, can we ensure student learning if no credit is offered?

There have been many attempts, as well, to provide information literacy through the curriculum and over the duration of each student’s program. Such efforts target certain courses for certain types of input, sometimes along with precisely sequenced seminar sessions. The idea—a good one—is to stage information literacy training so that the student’s knowledge develops over time and is thus given opportunity to mature. The difficulties here make this option almost unmanageable, however. Simply organizing such a program demands considerable effort. Students rarely follow a prescribed program outline, so, monitoring becomes a problem. This approach does not give information literacy the prominence it needs as a viable discipline of its own. Instead, information literacy is buried within other educational venues. And we still have the problem of faculty resistance to invasion of their classroom turf (not to mention the librarian staff time required to do these multiple invasions).

We are thus left with the need to provide fairly complex instruction on information gathering and use, involving complicated tools and search principles related to a variety of subject disciplines. The best vehicle to deliver this kind of instruction is, to my mind, a credit-bearing course.

### **What Does an Information-Literate Seminarian Look Like?**

Describing the information-literate student is not as difficult as it once was, thanks to numerous statements of standards, most notably, the ACRL “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.”<sup>iii</sup> The ACRL standards, in basic form, are:

- 1) The information-literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.
- 2) The information-literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.
- 3) The information-literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.
- 4) The information-literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
- 5) The information-literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

The information-literate seminarian needs to have strong ability in enlisting information to achieve a purpose while at the same time understanding how that information relates to his/her value system and broader societal issues. With the understanding that today's seminarian needs to be both a competent student of Bible, theology, church history, and so on, and a skilled critic of culture and purveyor of ministry to a broken world, it is clear that navigation of information is, for the seminarian, a lot more than bibliographical understanding of the literature of historical theology or form criticism. The information-literate seminarian knows how to find and enlist information to meet the needs of his/her vocation, whatever they may be.

The ATS accreditation standards, while not as clearly laid out as those of ACRL, strike a similar note involving "teaching theological bibliography and research methods" and "helping to serve the information needs of graduates, clergy, and the church." There is a focus on developing "independent research skills," leading to "lifelong learning."<sup>v</sup>

### **Determining Options and Overcoming Obstacles**

Before a credit information literacy course is introduced into a seminary curriculum, several questions need to be asked:

- 1) Is there space in the curriculum? If so, how many credits are available, and should those credits to be elective or core?
- 2) Do you have the personnel you need? While you may hope that faculty will lend support to your program, it will likely be library staff who develop the course and teach it.
- 3) Are you thinking of a live course or online or both? Here you need to determine how many students you expect to reach per year and the best venue(s) to reach them effectively, given the resources you have.
- 4) How strong is faculty/administrative support or resistance?

It is the rare institution that will not raise at least some objection to a plan to introduce a new course into the curriculum. Curricula are full. To add something may mean dropping something else or at least adding to the list of electives and thus diminishing yet again average class size throughout the institution.

What is more, there is still a strong faculty assumption that students develop information literacy on their own, so that by the time they reach graduate level they have all the skills they need to do their research. If they don't, then some morning-long remedial seminar will likely do the job. This, of course, errs on three points: students do not learn information literacy on their own (as many studies have demonstrated), many of our students have been out of school for years and have lost what skills they once had, and the advance of technology has left most of our students behind.

How does a librarian convince faculty and administration of the need for a credit course in information literacy? First, continue to articulate the need. This can be done in a variety of ways, from surveying students about their research skills to

offering faculty updating sessions on the library system and Internet to creating a position paper on the info lit issue for faculty to discuss. Second, find a way, logistically, to work within the present personnel configuration to do the task. Asking the institution to provide staff hours as well as a spot in the curriculum is a non-starter. Third, determine a vehicle that will work. Live courses offer better opportunity for hands-on demonstrations, but online versions do succeed if they are structured well.

Compromise may be a bad word in many quarters, but with information literacy, a foot in the door is worth two walking away in defeat. You may not be able to get access to three credit hours, or even two, but perhaps you can get one. You may not be able to make the course part of the curriculum, but maybe it could be a prerequisite.

In our own situation, we have, from inception of our seminary consortium in 1987, run a compulsory one-credit prerequisite research course, in live or (more recently) online versions, to great success. The advantages are that the course is not part of the hour count in seminary programs, and students take it either before they begin their program or during their first year. Our rationale in promoting such a course was that, like the basic Bible and Theology prerequisite courses we provide for students without formal theological background, information literacy is a skill that will be demanded of all seminarians during and after their programs. We make it a credit course because we believe it is academically credible subject matter for seminary instruction.

We did not compromise on one issue, however—the course is compulsory unless the student can demonstrate that he/she has recently taken a similar course elsewhere. Our experience over the years has been that a large number of students would avoid the research course if they could. They start taking it, grudgingly, then discover that it is actually going to help them and come out of it enthusiastic about its value.

Here is an example from an e-mail recently sent to me:

Hello, Bill,

I wanted to let you know that I found your class very helpful. When it was first mentioned that I would have to take it, I was reluctant, thinking it would be unnecessary. I was definitely wrong—it has been very practical and already useful in helping me with a paper I am doing. I can expect that I will be frequently going back to it with future classes.

Good luck with your next class—I am sure you will have ‘converts’ in it as well.

Yours sincerely,  
Gayle

Another example:

I took a class on how to do research 20 years ago in my first year in College and I forgot most of it. This is a learning time for me. But I am glad I am taking this class because I know it will help me a lot when I start with my thesis. At first I resented the fact that [you] required us to take a class in the internet. But I can see the wisdom now. Live and learn.

Rudy

## **Determining Outcomes and Approach**

With the standards now available to us, determination of outcomes is not a serious challenge. The one element we must insist upon, despite the view of those that the teaching of theological information literacy is of a separate order, is that the information-literate seminarian is able to navigate information in virtually any discipline. This is not to disparage the important role of the professor in teaching the bibliography and methodology of discipline-specific research. Librarians may well also be involved in that task. But at the end of the day, a student not schooled in a variety of approaches to researching the subjects taught in a seminary may not have the skills to handle information that may be encountered in ministry.

You may well want to poll your faculty to discover the skills that subject specialists believe their students should have, but beware of the “subject dragon,” the beast that drags the student away from the knowledge and skills of information handling and substitutes merely the knowledge of the subject itself and its literature. A student who can “do theology” or “do biblical criticism” has gained something, to be sure, but not the ability to pick up any topic, quickly develop a working knowledge of it, determine what its main issues and controversies are, formulate a research question related to one of these issues, locate resources on the topic in a variety of formats, and handle that information in an effective and responsible way. Such skills, while they may be informed and even shaped by the subjects the student is covering, are not subject specific.

Out of your determination of outcomes will come your approach, based on your philosophy of information literacy. There are several options:

- 1) Theological bibliography, focusing on resources and a strong understanding of the literature of each discipline covered in seminary education.
- 2) An architectural model involving learning to use each part of the library and its resources. In this case, the physical library serves as a blueprint of the student’s research process (e.g., reference sources to books to periodicals, etc.)
- 3) A research strategies approach that walks the student through the research process but sees the library as a nexus rather than a location, focuses on strategy development, and is cross-disciplinary, viewing research as a life skill.
- 4) A combination of methods, e.g., starting with architecture, moving to strategies, and encouraging bibliography in individual classes.

While each of the above has its merits, my experience in close to twenty years of teaching information literacy is that a strategies approach is foundational to everything else. The architectural model tends to teach students how to use tools without understanding the overall strategizing of research operations, and bibliography without foundational strategies leads to knowledge of the literature and the goals of research in it without teaching strategies (the savvy of doing research). We will thus, from this point, focus on design of courses taking primarily a strategies approach.

### **Live Course Design: Strategies Approach**

You must first harness your goals. You may have many hopes for such a course, but the limitations of time will demand that you rein in your expectations to the foundational elements that you can reasonably cover. The ACRL guidelines and ATS standards present the elements of what is required. Recognize, however, that you will likely be teaching an introductory course, providing the basic tools on the assumption that students will build on these as they move on through their programs.

Recognize that, no matter how your course is structured or delivered, student practice is essential. If your classroom has computers available to each student, you can do much of that practice during class time as you walk students through various aspects of the research process. But you must also include out-of-class assignments that are short, many, and frequent, rather than long, few, and infrequent. It is essential that your students reinforce the strategies you are teaching by performing them in real situations.

Guarantee relevance by arranging with other faculty in your institution to allow students to do their assignments with real topics they are working on in other courses. Normally, I have had a student in the live class choose a topic from a paper due for another course, then do a set of assignments that result in the research being done on that topic. Since the student has to write the paper anyway, this procedure both makes the assignments relevant to the student and avoids duplication of effort.

It is time to recognize that in today's information environment, the library is a nexus, rather than a location, for research. Thus you need to be sure you can provide access to a variety of avenues for research in your course, including online databases and the Internet. Your library home page provides a good model for understanding the nexus model. Available from off site, your home page gives the student access to the catalog, to proprietary databases not housed in your building, to the guides and pathfinders produced both in-house and outside, and so on. The fact that your library has a physical location is only significant for those who want to locate hard-copy materials or consult with a reference librarian (and the latter can increasingly be reached by e-mail). This new conception of "library" has strong implications both for the role of the library and for the increasing need among students for discernment as they access materials not directly controlled by the library collection development process.

In information literacy education, think beyond research papers. Students need to be intelligent consumers of information in general. While your assignments may shape themselves around a research paper or subject area, class sessions should teach skills that foster information gathering and use for a variety of purposes.

Frame the course around the research process (a narrative framework), from topic selection to gathering of materials to final product.

## **Live Course Design: The Nuts and Bolts of a Strategies Approach**

### 1) Course Description

The course description should indicate the approach to be taken and the sweep of subject matter to be covered. For example: “A study of the basic strategies required for the effective researching of a wide variety of topics. Areas covered include . . .”

### 2) Course Objectives

Make the objectives student centered and emphasize both skills and attitudes, e.g.:

The student will:

- Demonstrate the ability to formulate a strategy for research
- Demonstrate the ability to make a topic viable and organize its sub points
- Demonstrate an appreciation for planned research from topic to completed paper.

### 3) Textbook

You may want to write your own or create a course pack. There are several good textbooks now available.▼

### 4) Course Outlining

Establish, on the basis of standards, what learning goals must be accomplished. Begin with topic and move to product. Research is the whole process, not just identification of a bibliography. Chronology is primary. Begin where the student begins and end where the student ends. Avoid mere architecture and the subject dragon. While students may be doing assignments within a specific topic, you must ensure in your course that they are learning cross-disciplinary skills. Structure the course into distinct modules, evaluating each for its fit within the research process and achievement of standards or goals. Here is a sample 10-module outline:

- a) The nature of research
- b) The research question and preliminary outline
- c) Boolean searching and the Internet
- d) Optimizing the catalog
- e) Information hierarchies and the use of existing bibliographies
- f) Periodical literature searching
- g) Other databases (e.g., ERIC) and evaluation of Internet resources
- h) Reading for research
- i) Note-taking and note organization
- j) Tips on research writing<sup>vi</sup>

You would, of course, include instruction on the effective and ethical use of information, the publishing process, peer review, primary and secondary literature, and so on, as these issues came up within the various modules.

#### 5) Assignments

Minimize busywork by avoiding assignments focused on trivia. Base your assignments around a real research project that the student will actually have to do for another course. Each module should have an assignment focused on the strategies discussed so that the student will likely have an assignment due for the beginning of each class. The final assignment can be submission of a copy of the project that the student completed for the other class.<sup>vii</sup>

#### **Online Course Design<sup>viii</sup>**

In some ways, online courses are not radically different from modularly designed live courses. In other ways, additional care must be taken to provide the educational experience required by a student who does not have direct access to a class and professor. Here are some suggestions:

- 1) Keep the course modular in structure. The format that I have found works best involves assigning reading, providing a background to an assignment set (to lay stress on the most important factors to be considered when doing the assignment), then putting out an assignment with clear steps to its completion.
- 2) Your course layout must be simple, with clear and easy navigation. Explanations must be comprehensive and clear because students do not have the luxury of asking you to go over again what you just explained. Any course feature or instruction that creates repeated queries from students likely needs to be revised.
- 3) Students must have off-site access to all relevant databases.
- 4) Your availability is paramount. Any professor who cannot guarantee 24-hour response to an e-mail, with the average response time being closer to one to four hours, should not be teaching an online course. You will need to answer questions of many types as well as respond to assignments with detailed notations.

- 5) Student-to-student interaction is generally a norm in the classroom, and many online teaching gurus advocate replicating this interaction with chat sessions, bulletin boards, or listservs. You may well try such venues, but in my experience, student interaction in an information literacy course is overrated. Most students in information literacy courses are content to have a relationship with their professor and do not really have the time nor interest to seek out fellow students.

It would be better for students who have limited computer experience/equipment, who know they lack personal discipline, or who have been out of school and/or are unfamiliar with current library systems to take a live course.

It is possible to mount an online course directly on the Internet, but platforms like Web CT or Blackboard make a course easier to package and operate. If you have the technical know-how, it is generally better to write and mount the course yourself. If you do not, find an expert to do it for you, but keep a close eye on the product. You must ensure that the site will be almost always accessible and easy to use. Avoid slow-loading graphics and animations, remembering that not every student has broadband access. Provide many navigation tools on the site. Since the course is online, take advantage of the online feature to provide links to the resources that students will be using.<sup>ix</sup>

I have begun experimenting with adding an assignment template—a web page that lays out a structure for the response to each assignment so that a student can paste the template into a word processor and have a ready-made structure for answers. This, I believe, will help avoid the common problem that students overlook parts of assignments and have to resubmit. Here is an example:

### **RES 500 Assignment #3**

**Name:**

**E-Mail:**

I have completed the assigned reading. \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) My research questions are:
  - a)
  - b)
  
- 2) First Periodical Index search, First Topic
  - a) Index used:
  - b) Search terminology used:
  - c) Ten relevant articles:

### **What if a Credit Course Won't Fly?**

Many institutions are still resistant to seeing the need for credit research courses. Don't lose hope, however. Accrediting boards are increasingly demanding more information literacy instruction. Our day will come.

In the meantime, you may want to consider replacing your tired old one-shot library orientation sessions with an online tutorial. I have been experimenting with a format that has instructions and a quiz on one browser, while students on another browser do assignments using resources linked to the library home page. The result of each assignment is the answer to the quiz question.<sup>x</sup>

## What about International Students?

International students face many struggles beyond their limited command of English. Most have come from a discipleship model of education that stresses memorization of traditions and allows critical thinking only to advanced scholars. They generally have experienced only smaller and less high-tech library systems.

Information literacy for international students will involve a library skills seminar, a term paper seminar, and then an information literacy course (preferably in a classroom setting).<sup>xi</sup>

## Endnotes

- i Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education ([www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards\\_and\\_Guidelines/Information\\_Literacy\\_Competency\\_Standards\\_for\\_Higher\\_Education.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards_and_Guidelines/Information_Literacy_Competency_Standards_for_Higher_Education.htm)); Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries ([www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards\\_and\\_Guidelines/Guidelines\\_for\\_Instruction\\_Programs\\_in\\_Academic\\_Libraries.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards_and_Guidelines/Guidelines_for_Instruction_Programs_in_Academic_Libraries.htm)).
- ii Such as, for example, Barry Hamilton, "Introduction to Theological Research," ([http://acc.roberts.edu/NEmployees/Hamilton\\_Barry/INTRODUCTION%20TO%20THEOLOGICAL%20RESEARCH.htm](http://acc.roberts.edu/NEmployees/Hamilton_Barry/INTRODUCTION%20TO%20THEOLOGICAL%20RESEARCH.htm)).
- iii See note i.
- iv Standard 5.2: [www.ats.edu/accredit/ac5.htm](http://www.ats.edu/accredit/ac5.htm).
- v William B. Badke, *Research Strategies: Finding your Way through the Information Fog*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press/iUniverse.com, 2000; Cyril J. Barber and Robert M. Krauss, *An Introduction to Theological Research*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000; Nancy J. Vyhmeister, *Quality Research Papers*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001. See also ACRL's reviews of textbooks: [www.ala.org/Content/ContentGroups/ACRL1/IS/Publications23/Textbooks\\_for\\_Students.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/ContentGroups/ACRL1/IS/Publications23/Textbooks_for_Students.htm).
- vi For a sample syllabus as well as an example of a 3-credit syllabus, see: [www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/sampsyllabus.htm](http://www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/sampsyllabus.htm).
- vii See assignment samples at [www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/sampsyllabus.htm](http://www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/sampsyllabus.htm).
- viii For a further paper on development of online courses, see William Badke, "Guidelines for Information Literacy" (2003), available as a Word document at <http://library.athabascau.ca/copdlforum/projects.htm>.
- ix For one-credit and two-credit courses using these methods, see: [www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/research.htm](http://www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/research.htm).

- x For more information on this approach, see the last three pages of my “Guidelines for Information Literacy” (2003): <http://library.athabasca.ca/copdlforum/projects.htm>.
- xi See William B. Badke, “International Students: Information Literacy or Academic Literacy?” *Academic Exchange Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 60–65; William B. Badke, *Beyond the Answer Sheet: Academic Success for International Students*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press/iUniverse.com, 2003.

## Important Links

### ***Information Literacy Portal Sites***

*ACRL Information Literacy*: [www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Issues\\_and\\_Advocacy1/Information\\_Literacy1/ACRL\\_Information\\_Literacy\\_Web\\_Site/ACRL\\_Information\\_Literacy\\_Web\\_Site.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Issues_and_Advocacy1/Information_Literacy1/ACRL_Information_Literacy_Web_Site/ACRL_Information_Literacy_Web_Site.htm).

*Directory of Online Resources for Information Literacy*: <http://nosferatu.cas.usf.edu/lis/il/>.

*Information Literacy Instruction—a Selection of Tools for Instructors*: [http://mapageweb.umontreal.ca/bernh/AAFD.97/AAFD\\_index\\_en.html](http://mapageweb.umontreal.ca/bernh/AAFD.97/AAFD_index_en.html).

*The Information Literacy Place*: <http://dis.shef.ac.uk/literacy/>.

*Library Instruction Links*: [www.libraryinstruction.com/links.html](http://www.libraryinstruction.com/links.html).

### ***Examples of Credit Courses***

*Library Courses for Credit—SUNY and Beyond*:

<http://library.lib.binghamton.edu/sunyla/credit.html> [includes link to my syllabi under “Canada”].

### ***Standards***

ATS Standards (see section 5.2): [www.ats.edu/accredit/ac5.htm](http://www.ats.edu/accredit/ac5.htm).

ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education: [www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards\\_and\\_Guidelines/Information\\_Literacy\\_Competency\\_Standards\\_for\\_Higher\\_Education.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards_and_Guidelines/Information_Literacy_Competency_Standards_for_Higher_Education.htm).

ACRL Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries: [www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards\\_and\\_Guidelines/Guidelines\\_for\\_Instruction\\_Programs\\_in\\_Academic\\_Libraries.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards_and_Guidelines/Guidelines_for_Instruction_Programs_in_Academic_Libraries.htm).

### ***Bill Badke’s Sites***

Online textbook: *Research Strategies: Finding your Way through the Information Fog*: [www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/textbook.htm](http://www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/textbook.htm) (see “Syllabi” link for live course syllabi).

Two online courses: [www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/research.htm](http://www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/research.htm).

William B. Badke, *Beyond the Answer Sheet: Academic Success for International Students*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press/iUniverse.com, 2003. [print only].



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