



Volume 64 | Issue 2

Article 5

12-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Elizabeth Young (2021) "Customizing Information Literacy Sessions: The Key to Success," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 64: Iss. 2, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.2287>

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Customizing Information Literacy Sessions: The Key to Success



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As my teaching has developed, I have discovered the importance of customizing each information literacy session, for one size fits all is not the solution. I have noticed a correlation between customization and engagement. While this approach may be more labor intensive and require flexibility, I believe it is well worth the investment, for it can lead to greater retention of concepts and sources.

Customization begins with communication. Before scheduling an information literacy session, I encourage faculty to consider the timing of such a meeting; point-of-need is crucial. Scheduling library sessions after students have received a research assignment and are beginning to develop topics is ideal; this approach allows students to immediately apply what they have learned. Once a date for the session has been selected, I work closely with faculty regarding goals for the instruction session. Additionally, I solicit student topics and request copies of the syllabus and relevant assignments. I then weave as much of this information into the library session as possible.

Reviewing syllabi and corresponding assignments provides a wealth of knowledge and aids with the customization process. The syllabus often includes a description of assignments and the grade percentage assigned to each. At the start of a library session, I highlight which assignments relate to the information literacy concepts and resources I will be discussing with students, referring to this information as incentives for why they may want to pay attention. I then refer back to these assignments during the class. Scanning the list of course readings and lecture topics found in the syllabus can generate ideas for customizing the instruction session itself, as well as developing a corresponding research guide. I strive to include relevant links to both subscription and reliable free resources and incorporate these resources into examples. Sometimes I will include links to required texts, especially when ebooks and permalinks for articles are available.

Whenever possible, I try a scaffolded approach to information literacy, building upon concepts and resources that students were exposed to in previous library sessions. However, this can be challenging when seminaries do not have cohorts, which is the case at Moravian. To address this issue and keep students from tuning out, in each session I highlight at least one unique source or concept.

Additionally, for upper level courses, which generally have fewer students, I begin by asking students what questions they have and what they find frustrating with the research process. This customized approach calls for flexibility, active listening, and a willingness to “think on your feet.” Students clearly benefit from this approach that focuses more on discussion than lecturing. When they receive personalized instruction, they hopefully retain this information longer. They may even leave with a greater appreciation for the resources and services the library offers.

Working with faculty and students to create personalized instruction is invaluable. Even though this approach may seem like common sense, keeping open channels of communication before, during, and after library instruction is important and can aid with assessment and improvement initiatives. Highlighting relevant resources and services is crucial, as is building upon previous knowledge. Certainly, there are many ways to customize information literacy sessions; I have merely skimmed the surface. Regardless of the specifics, customizing information literacy sessions demonstrates to faculty and students alike that librarians care about their research needs and skills and are valuable partners in education. †