What exactly is “information literacy”? 

Information literacy has been defined as “the set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ACRL, 2000, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency). At Bloomsburg University, information literacy is one of ten General Education student learning outcomes. The General Education Council recommends assessing information literacy by using the VALUE rubrics for Information Literacy, Reading, Written Communication, and Ethical Reasoning.

Information literacy in practice requires:

- competence in using information technology
- understanding how information is created, published, organized, and accessed
- being able to frame questions using subject-appropriate terms
- applying appropriate criteria to evaluate and select relevant and authoritative sources for a research need
- using information to create new knowledge, crediting others’ intellectual property in discipline-appropriate reference styles

How “information literate” are BU students?

The short answer is -- about as information literate as students at many other institutions are, which is to say, not very. An information literacy assessment given by BU librarians from 2006 – 2011 consistently found that senior students’ ability to use information effectively and ethically was in the “developmental” range, with average scores between 52% - 56% (see the Andruss Library Outcomes Assessment and Information Literacy page for more information). 47% of BU senior students could not correctly identify a citation for a book chapter; 40% were unable to identify the best strategies for beginning or modifying a search; 35% did not correctly identify violations of intellectual property, copyright, and fair use of copyrighted materials; and 34% were unable to identify the sequence of a literature review.

The BU findings are consistent with those from other universities. Project Information Literacy, a large-scale research study of undergraduate information-seeking strategies and research practices, has found that students experience difficulty with research when defining a topic, narrowing it, and filtering irrelevant results. PIL follow-up interviews suggest that “students lacked the research acumen for framing an inquiry in the digital age where information abounds and intellectual discovery was paradoxically overwhelming for them.” (http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fall2010_Survey_FullReport1.pdf)

What can faculty do to help develop students’ information literacy skills?

- Assess students’ current level of information literacy prior to an assignment. Although students may be heavy consumers of technology and use the Internet for personal research, most likely they are not proficient at academic research. Ask students to demonstrate their ability, rather than self-report it. For example, can they recognize and locate a ‘scholarly article’? Can they explain how books treat a topic differently than articles and when a book might be preferred? This page by Dr. Jon Mueller has links to assessment questions that can be adapted for your students.

- Consider alternative assignments to the traditional term paper to develop students’ familiarity with disciplinary discourse. The Library’s Information Literacy site lists some here, and others may be found in discipline-specific journals, some of which are listed here. When searching for assignments, use alternative keywords such as ‘critical thinking’, ‘research skills’, ‘digital literacy’, or ‘information seeking.’

- Collaborate with a librarian. Librarians can work with you to suggest, develop, and/or adapt assignments to include appropriate information literacy outcomes. They also can provide information literacy instruction to your students either in class or outside of class and can develop instructional materials, including online tutorials and subject guides, for your classes. Your department’s liaison librarian is listed here.

- Encourage your students to contact a librarian for help with their research, and show them this page with ways to get help. Add your liaison librarian’s contact information to your syllabus, and add your librarian to your BOLT course as a ‘content builder’ so they can work with you to add tutorials, subject guides, and so on for students.

- Track information literacy student learning outcomes in your courses and your department’s curriculum. Ideally, students should be able to demonstrate information literacy competency in a senior year capstone project. For information literacy rubrics and curriculum maps visit this page. Contact your liaison librarian, who will be happy to work with you and your department.

- Learn more about information literacy. The Project Information Literacy examines early adults’ “information-seeking behaviors, competencies, and the challenges they face when conducting research in the digital age” and publishes their findings here: http://projectinfolit.org/. The Instruction Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) maintains a wiki titled “Information Literacy in the Disciplines,” with links to standards and curricula developed by accrediting agencies, professional associations, and institutions of higher education for information literacy.

- Provide students with multiple opportunities to practice information research strategies in order to develop deep learning pathways and proficiency. Rome wasn’t built in a day and neither is students’ information literacy.
What are the challenges to teaching (and learning) information literacy?

Many faculty believe that students have already mastered information research skills in high school or that they will develop these abilities on their own in college (McGuinness, 2006). Reality does not bear this out. The increased emphasis in schools on high-stakes testing has reduced the amount of time students spend working in a school media center/library with school librarians to develop information-use skills. Additionally, some schools have no library or librarian at all (PA School Library Research Project, http://paschoollibraryproject.org).

As a result, many high school students have not developed adequate information research skills by the time they start college. Furthermore, most students do not develop information competency in college unless their courses require it. Most students 'satisfice' their information needs using Google, Wikipedia, and one or two library databases they used in high school.

Many faculty feel the pressure of too much course content and too little time to incorporate information literacy outcomes in their courses (McGuinness, 2006). However, rather than viewing information literacy as 'one more thing to cover,' faculty can include information literacy processes in assignments designed to teach students about the conventions and norms of disciplinary discourse, especially writing. No doubt, revising courses to include information literacy outcomes takes time, but if it results in better student learning and writing it is well worth it.

Information literacy is not learned through a single instruction session, library orientation or tour; it is learned over time through repeated practice in a variety of contexts. Information literacy is part of lifelong learning, enabling individuals not only to find answers to their "daily living" questions but also to continue to develop professionally in their fields after graduation and be able to use evidence for decision-making.

Here’s another definition of information literacy from the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report: Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand.

Further reading


RefShare folder "Information Literacy for Faculty" containing these and other links to additional articles (To read an abstract, ‘Change View’ to ‘Full View’. To obtain full-text, click on ‘Article Linker’ or ‘Links’ field)