Communications in Information Literacy

Volume 13 | Issue 1 Article 4

2019

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Chisholm, A., & Spencer, B. (2019). Through the Looking Glass: Viewing First-Year Composition Through the Lens of Information Literacy. *Communications in Information Literacy, 13* (1), 43-60. https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.1.4

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Through the Looking Glass: Viewing First-Year Composition Through the Lens of Information Literacy

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of how librarians can situate themselves as pedagogical partners by bringing their unique information literacy perspective and expertise to the programmatic assessment process. This report resulted from the Thun Library and the Penn State Berks Composition Program's collaboration to assess the institution's first-year composition (FYC) course. From previous programmatic assessments of their students' work, the faculty knew that students struggled with source use in their rhetoric but found it difficult to pinpoint students' exact source issues. By adapting a rubric theoretically-grounded in the ACRL *Framework* to deconstruct the concept of source use into four categories, librarians developed a rubric that illuminated source engagement problems on a more granular level than the programmatic assessments conducted without librarian involvement, leading to specific suggestions for addressing issues with student source engagement.

Keywords: information literacy, first-year composition, assessment, rubrics, collaboration, source engagement

Research Articles **edited by Christopher V. Hollister & April Schweikhard**

Chisholm, A. & Spencer, B. (2019). Through the looking glass: Viewing first-year composition through the lens of information literacy. *Communications in Information Literacy, 13*(1), 43-60.

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Introduction

Academic librarians often seek partnerships with first-year composition (FYC) faculty. These collaborations arise from many circumstances, including the convenience and scalability of catching students in their first year of college and reaching the maximum number of those students. Deeper motivations, such as the shared nature of research and writing as complex, iterative processes, also lead to these partnerships; the library one-shot and FYC courses are often misidentified in academia as cure-alls for necessary student skillsets. Disciplinary faculty frequently place an immense amount of pressure on FYC faculty to teach rhetoric and composition in a single semester in order to remedy any writing issues students may have brought with them to college. The library one-shot is habitually treated in the same manner; one 50-minute session their first year is sufficient to prepare students for college-level research (Artman, Frisicaro-Pawlowski, & Monge, 2010). This shared misperception and inaccurate portrayal was identified by Norgaard (2003) in his influential article, "Writing Information Literacy," which urged stronger partnerships and dialogues between composition faculty and librarians.

On the surface, relationships often form from the shared oversimplification of these areas of expertise and the pressure to pack everything into inadequate timeframes. On a deeper level, the partnership of writing and information literacy (IL) comes from the fact that they are inextricably linked skills. While challenging and not always implemented effectively, discourse among FYC faculty and librarians leads to richer pedagogy and student learning. As Norgaard (2003) states, "draw[ing] on rhetoric and composition both to enrich information literacy and to position such initiatives more effectively, we have found that a dialogue between the fields might yield a more situated literacy and a more process-oriented literacy" (p. 128).

The following year-long assessment project developed from an attempt to strengthen the dialogue between librarians and FYC faculty at Penn State Berks. Librarians hoped to expand not just their already robust involvement in this high impact, widespread course, but also to increase their contribution to student learning through more authentic approaches.

Background

Located near Reading, Pennsylvania, Penn State Berks is one of 24 commonwealth campuses in the Pennsylvania State University (PSU) system. With around 2,800 students, Penn State Berks features a tight-knit, collegial academic community centered on student

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DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.1.4

learning. The Penn State Berks Composition Program provides FYC instruction through 25-35 sections of English 15 offered each academic year, and the instructors have a long tradition of partnering with librarians by requesting one- or two-shot library instruction sessions for their courses.

In Spring 2011 and 2013, the Penn State Berks composition program assessed FYC students' writing proficiency according to five core categories adapted from Pagano, Bernhardt, Reynolds, Williams, and McCurrie (2008). These assessments revealed that one of the lowest skill areas was students' use of source material. In response to these findings, faculty decided to concentrate on this category for their 2016 assessment project. Despite professional development efforts and focused instruction in students' use of source material, faculty did not see an improvement in skill in the Spring 2016 assessment.

During a post-assessment discussion, the FYC faculty realized that no one could define precisely what was meant by *source use*. The group identified several potential criteria and definitions without any real agreement as to the meaning. Hoping to provide a fresh perspective, the librarians in attendance saw an opportunity to discuss their understanding of source use from the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2015) and suggested a partnership, which would bring their subject expertise in IL to the assessment process.

Unlike previous approaches in which source use was only one of five areas of writing proficiency assessed, the librarians designed a new rubric that focused solely on source use and its many characteristics. This effort sought to develop a more nuanced assessment of source use that illuminated levels of application and specific knowledge gaps for students. Librarians also chose to refer to the previously selected term *source use* as *source engagement* to better embody students having a solid understanding of an information source and its rhetorical context in addition to mere utilization. The present study investigated the four newly defined categories of source engagement.

Literature Review

Librarians and FYC faculty have approached the interplay of composition and IL in numerous ways. Partnerships between the two groups have included projects related to assignment design (Anders & Hemstrom, 2016; Brady, Singh-Corcoran, Dadisman, & Diamond, 2009; Deitering & Jameson, 2008; DeJoy, Miller, & Holcomb, 2016; Jacobs &

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Jacobs, 2009), curriculum development (Brady et al., 2009; Deitering & Jameson, 2008; Jacobs & Jacobs, 2009; Lancaster, Callendar, & Heinz, 2016; Wallis, Nugent, & Ostergaard, 2016), grading of assignments (Brady et al., 2009; Deitering & Jameson, 2008; Jacobs & Jacobs, 2009), and co-curricular program involvement (Kastner & Richardson, 2016). However, Oakleaf, Millet, and Kraus (2011) pointed out that the professional literature offers considerably more articles about collaborative instruction than it does about collaborative assessment.

In recognition of this gap, ACRL launched its Assessment in Action campaign in 2015 to foster more partnerships between libraries and other campus units (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017). Several projects were carried out in collaboration with FYC faculty, but most of these projects centered on assessing the impact of IL instruction through one-shot or programmatic models rather than evaluating student learning independent of library intervention. Through the current assessment project, investigators aimed to enter the discussion surrounding pedagogy and student learning outside of conventional IL instruction models in order to showcase non-traditional ways in which librarians can contribute to curricular design.

Several of the partnerships represented in the literature employed common assessment methods to measure student learning through both qualitative and quantitative data. The University of Maryland executed a large-scale restructuring of their FYC instruction program, which included switching to a scalable qualitative assessment model (Gammons & Inge, 2017). FYC faculty and librarians at the University of Georgia conducted an assessment project using citation analysis (Barratt, Nielsen, Desmet, & Balthazor, 2009). Shields (2014) worked with FYC faculty at High Point University to embed online IL modules into the FYC curriculum, which were then assessed through pre- and post-semester process narratives.

Rubrics are another commonly used assessment method, validated in studies by both FYC faculty and librarians (Erlinger, 2018; Gola, Ke, Creelman, & Vaillancourt, 2014; Jastram, Leebaw, & Tompkins, 2014; Turley & Gallagher, 2008). The first cohort of ACRL's Assessment in Action grants included two rubric-based assessment projects focused on collaborative assessment with FYC programs; both projects evaluated how effective library instruction sessions were in improving student learning in FYC classes. Allen (2015) utilized secondary analysis of previously collected instruction data and the FYC faculty's grading rubric, which contained IL criteria. Miller's (2015) Assessment in Action team

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DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.1.4

developed a rubric to assess three aspects of IL including "evaluation of information, communication of evidence, and attribution" (p. 65). These assessments analyzed the efficacy of library instruction on student success in FYC classes; in contrast, the present study assesses student writing skills in the FYC program at Penn State Berks through the lens of IL.

Grettano and Witek (2016) provided an example of a deeply integrated collaboration in FYC and IL assessment. When the FYC program at the University of Scranton underwent an overhaul, the Director of First-Year Writing invited librarians to participate in many aspects of this revamp, specifically in the programmatic rubric assessment of students' final papers. Librarians were key stakeholders in this process, which "led to conversations about outcomes and skills as well as language from both IL and [first-year writing], making meaning between the programs in order to share more directly the responsibility of teaching students these skills" (p. 239). Though closely aligned with Grettano and Witek's goals, the current study aims to define, deconstruct, and investigate a single, locally identified writing issue (i.e., source engagement) from an IL perspective rather than assess multiple student learning outcomes.

In perhaps the closest collaborative assessment project to the present study, Carlozzi (2018) examined written synthesis and source use. He and the Director of First-Year English at his institution created a simplified rubric using a single category focused on source use and synthesis. This instrument was adapted from the rubric used by the English department for its annual FYC assessment. Overall, they found that students were able to find and locate relevant sources but did not make an effort to integrate outside research into their writing; students were marginally better at synthesizing their class readings. While this research is similar in its focus on source use, it does not break the concept down into separate and distinct categories; the current study's approach allows for more nuanced analysis of students' engagement with source materials. Additionally, Carlozzi modeled his rubric from one used by the English department at his institution; in the present study, investigators adapted a rubric theoretically-grounded in the *Framework* to enable assessment of a common writing issue through the lens of IL.

Methods

This study was funded through the 2017-18 Berks Assessment Grant from the Penn State Berks Office of Planning, Research, and Assessment to evaluate student learning and

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improve student learning outcomes. Following the methodology of the FYC faculty's previous assessment, this study utilized a rubric (see Appendix). Looking at students' research papers with a rubric provides the ability to see what practices students actually follow in their real-world research. As Knight (2006) noted, student writing artifacts can serve as a "useful gauge of their achievement of information literacy based learning outcomes" (p. 43).

After receiving clearance from the Institutional Review Board in Fall 2017, librarians collected a common student assignment from three sections of English 15, taught by two different professors. The papers were homogenous in that they were all causal analysis papers, were three to five pages long, used three to five sources, and were collected in the last month of the semester. Sixty-three student papers were collected; three papers were randomly selected for rubric norming and 60 were assessed.

When approached about participating in programmatic assessment efforts, the FYC faculty were eager to gain the IL expertise of the investigators and allowed the librarians to fully manage and execute the process; they embraced the opportunity to garner an entirely fresh perspective by removing themselves as readers. In order to bring composition and rhetoric expertise to the team, the investigators invited two library assistants, who each hold a B.A. in Professional Writing from Penn State Berks and had been head writing tutors in the campus writing center, to participate as readers. These library assistants were uniquely qualified due to the combination of their training in assessment and evaluation of student writing, along with their connection to the library. Each paper was evaluated by one faculty-librarian reader (the authors) and one library assistant. The librarians coded the papers and removed all identifying information prior to evaluation. Papers were randomly selected for each reader pair.

To design the assessment tool, the authors explored rubrics theoretically grounded in the *Framework* and chose McMullin's (2016) *Sample Rubric for a Research Paper or Literature Review or Annotated Bibliography* due to its flexibility and build-your-own-rubric style. Initially, the investigators selected and refined categories based on early discussions about source use definitions with FYC faculty; throughout the process, faculty continued to supply feedback and consultation for rubric drafts.

The final Source Engagement Rubric (see Appendix) includes the following categories:

1. *Sources reflect research topic*,

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2. *Match information products with information needs*,
3. *Incorporate information*, and
4. *Ethical use of information.*

Each category is mapped to the *Framework* and scored on a 4-point scale: *exemplary* (4), *proficient* (3), *developing* (2), and *minimal* (1). Prior to scoring, a norming session was held with all four readers. During the session, readers discussed and clarified criteria for each level of the rubric; the investigators compiled supplementary notes from the meeting and made them available to all team members. Readers were asked to allot a maximum of 15 minutes per paper, score in two-hour maximum blocks, and strive for consistent scoring conditions (i.e., time of day, location, print or electronic medium) to improve reliability.

Results

The source engagement assessment showed an overall mean score of 2.18 for all papers. This score firmly places students' skills on average in the *developing* level of the rubric. Table 1 shows the breakdown of mean scores by rubric category. For the *Sources reflect research topic* category the mean score was 2.75, which places it between the *proficient* and *developing* levels of the rubric, rounding up to a *proficient* rating; this was the highest category assessed. The *Match information products with information needs* category had a mean score of 2.22, which rounds down to the *developing* level of the rubric. The *Incorporate information* category had a mean score of 2.02, which puts it definitively in the *developing* level of the rubric. The *Ethical use of information* category had a mean score of 1.73, which puts it between the *developing* and *minimal* levels of the rubric, barely rounding up to the *developing* rating; this was by far the lowest category assessed.

Table 1 - Mean Scores by Rubric Category

	Sources reflect research topic	Match information products with information needs	Incorporate information	Ethical use of information	Overall
Mean score	2.75	2.22	2.02	1.73	2.18

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Inter-Rater Reliability

Table 2 summarizes the inter-rater reliability of the initial scores for the four rubric categories. Reader pairs met to discuss papers with scoring discrepancies and determined the final score together.

Table 2 - Inter-Rater Reliability on Initial Scores by Rubric Category

Scoring discrepancy (by number of rubric levels)	Sources reflect research topic		Match information products with information needs		Incorporate information		Ethical use of information	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
0	26	43	24	40	32	53	35	58
±1	27	45	31	52	26	43	21	35
±2	7	12	5	8	1	2	3	5
±3	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	2
Total	60	100	60	100	60	100	60	100

Discussion

From this study, investigators determined that there is room for growth in all four categories of source engagement. The most egregious issues arose within the *Ethical use of information* category. Based upon these readings, students do not have a thorough understanding of citations and, on a larger scale, the concept of attribution. Regarding the mechanics of MLA, issues related to in-text citations were pervasive. Students often used titles to introduce concepts in lieu of authors, omitted page numbers, and rarely cited any paraphrased or summarized information. Generally, only direct quotations appeared to receive in-text citations. Almost every student seemed to operate under the misconception that any information put into their own words did not require source attribution. Students left large swaths of text uncited, which the readers could clearly tell were not their ideas nor common knowledge; Howard, Serviss, and Rodrigue's (2010) study also identified this issue. In addition, the quality of paraphrasing was often in question; readers suspected that a plagiarism checker would easily find that paraphrases were not entirely in the students' own words.

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Students appeared to hold another misunderstanding about the reference list. In many of the papers, the works cited and the in-text citations did not match; citations were missing from both sections in several cases. The purpose of references and in-text citations is to serve as a road map for the reader to be able to follow evidence and research, to build credibility, and to actively participate in the scholarly conversation about the chosen topic. Most students did not understand or apply this concept successfully.

In the *Match information products with information needs* category the two main issues students seemed to have were (a) an overreliance on scholarly sources, most likely due to assignment requirements, and (b) the utilization of only direct quotations from scholarly articles, which readers speculate is due to a lack of understanding the content or simply not reading the literature. Lei, Bartlett, Gorney, and Herschbach's (2010) literature review on reading compliance supports this interpretation; they listed "a lack of reading comprehension skills, lack of self-confidence, disinterest in the course material, and an underestimation of reading importance" (p. 219) as major factors in why students do not read often. The Penn State Berks sample contained numerous instances of students who misused or misinterpreted information and data from the peer-reviewed articles cited. From these observations, librarians can discern that students clearly need instruction on strategies to tackle these difficult texts, as MacMillan and Rosenblatt (2015) also promoted in their ACRL 2015 conference paper.

Selecting the best type of source to accurately support and convey a specific idea or argument is a major component of the *Match information products with information needs* category. Does the source help establish credibility for an argument, build emotional appeal, or inject convincing facts? Was the most appropriate type of source selected to accomplish that goal? For example, encyclopedias or books work best for background information, while government or nonpartisan polling entities are reliable sources of data and statistics. Each source type serves different rhetorical contexts. Readers found that students did a decent job with this matching, but it may have been done in order to fulfill the assignment's source requirements rather than through rhetorical intent. Librarians often encounter assignments that require students to use scholarly sources rather than appropriate sources, a problem that MacMillan and Rosenblatt (2015) also identified. To successfully identify and seamlessly integrate sources into their writing, the investigators believe that instructors should encourage students to carefully consider what types of sources best fulfill specific rhetorical needs.

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Citation of indirect sources, which MacMillan and Rosenblatt (2015) also discussed, was another issue that arose under this category. While the investigators view it as an advanced skill, they found it noteworthy that students did not seem to understand why it would be better to find the original source rather than cite a secondary one. For example, if a newspaper article discusses specific polling data, the best course of action would be to locate and cite the exact poll, rather than crediting the newspaper article.

Students scored highest on the *Sources reflect research topic* category. However, while students could locate topically relevant sources, those sources were not consistently used to build arguments in meaningful ways. As Carlozzi (2018) also found, students seemed to tack on sources to their composition rather than mobilize source material to advance their rhetoric. Students appeared to write their papers without first consulting sources to build their thesis in an authentic way; instead, they seemed to fill in the blank with the first relevant source discovered. This finding indicates that students need less instruction on search techniques, the typical IL request from FYC faculty, and more instruction on the iterative process of searching and close reading strategies.

The final category assessed was *Incorporating information*, which scored slightly below the overall mean rubric score. Many of the behaviors observed within this category overlap with other findings. For example, in the *Ethical use of information* category, the authors already established that students struggle with paraphrasing and summarizing. The assessment further revealed that students relied heavily on direct quotations and, even then, had difficulty selecting appropriate quotes; the chosen quotes were often misinterpreted, as evidenced in the unpacking and synthesis. This observation is supported by Howard et al. (2010), who suggested that "these students are not writing from sources; they are writing from sentences selected from sources" (p. 187).

Students' view that research is linear and unconnected to topic development is another ostensible issue recognized in this category. Readers observed little evidence of effectively synthesized knowledge from source material, and students did not appear to understand or read many of their selected sources. When students do not view source engagement as integral to writing or scholarship, their composition skills can remain underdeveloped.

This study, completed in the early summer of 2018, met its goal of defining source engagement and identifying challenges and areas of opportunity for librarians and FYC faculty. Many of the conclusions fit within the LIS professional literature and

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DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.1.4

recommendations of ACRL. The authors presented these findings and recommendations to FYC faculty prior to the start of the Fall 2018 semester.

The major post-assessment change implemented in partnership with FYC faculty was shifting the focus of library instruction from basic database demonstrations to metacognitive activities that reflect the iterative nature of research. Prior to this study, the focus was on searching for relevant sources; this assessment made it clear that while there was room for improvement in this area, it was not the greatest need. Students struggle far more with authentic engagement with sources. Thus, librarians worked collaboratively with FYC faculty to cultivate deeper learning by implementing in-class sessions focused on skills, such as close reading of abstracts, dissection of scholarly articles, guided evaluative exercises, and argument building activities. In the future, librarians hope to expand involvement to include assignment and curricular design, embedded online learning modules, and other activities that help break free from the single 50-minute library instruction model, which has clearly fallen short of addressing the IL needs of FYC students.

Furthermore, the authors believe that the challenges identified in this assessment should be addressed by multiple stakeholders. Strengthening partnerships and collaborations between the FYC faculty, librarians, and the writing center would benefit Penn State Berks students and the campus community. Clarifying expertise and services could go a long way in streamlining the referral system and addressing student needs capably and efficiently. After librarians and faculty implement further recommendations and changes in FYC courses, investigators plan on conducting a follow-up assessment of source engagement to determine if student skills have improved.

Limitations

This assessment project included only a small sample of student artifacts from three class sections and two different FYC professors, thus limiting the generalizability of the study's findings. However, in order to keep conditions consistent and improve reliability, the investigators decided to use only similar assignments with identical source requirements. This constraint contributed to the small sample size. Another restriction was staffing and time. With only two faculty-librarians and two library staff readers, investigators could not reasonably read all first-year student papers at Penn State Berks, which would have totaled over 600. For scalability purposes, investigators selected three class sections with the same research requirements. While no statistically significant findings can be derived from the

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sample, the observations can still enhance both FYC faculty and librarian pedagogy. A larger sample size could improve future investigations.

An additional limitation was the lack of available faculty readers. Without FYC faculty, investigators had to creatively seek alternative, qualified readers. However, what was initially viewed as problematic became advantageous due to the library assistants' unique qualifications. While these readers' distinctive perspectives were highly valued, the inclusion of FYC faculty could benefit future assessments.

Conclusion

This source engagement assessment project has opened a world of opportunities to improve FYC student learning at Penn State Berks through an evidence-based approach. The experience demonstrates that assessment that blends the knowledge of the library and composition fields yields more meaningful results than an assessment conducted from only one perspective. The two fields both address source engagement but from different vantage points; the complex process of research cannot be neatly separated into library and rhetorical functions. As Norgaard (2003) stated,

> Although librarians may rub shoulders with faculty in rhetoric and composition on an ongoing basis, the traditional client model for the relationship can prove rather limiting. Looking beyond that client model, we might discover ourselves as intellectual partners, with writing informing information literacy and information literacy informing work in rhetoric and composition. (p. 125)

Creating a multi-faceted rubric theoretically grounded in the *Framework* provided a unique lens through which composition faculty, as well as librarians, could view the weak areas of FYC students' writing skills. By deconstructing the definition of source use, the new, focused rubric enabled stakeholders to study students' engagement with sources at a more granular level. Investigators could identify precise weaknesses and implement specific solutions in response. Future research can continue to chart ways that librarians can leverage the *Framework* to make contributions to FYC and other disciplinary programs' assessment efforts.

Rhetoric and composition professors are natural partners and allies in student learning. Keeping an open mind and looking for serendipitous opportunities to partner with such

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DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.1.4

faculty is key. The presence of librarians at the composition meeting where previous FYC programmatic assessments were discussed was all it took for this fruitful collaboration to begin at Penn State Berks. The intent when undertaking this project was, of course, to assess and improve student learning; however, at an elevated level, it sought to open a dialogue about IL and to position librarians as pedagogical partners who have expertise to bring to curricular discussions. In that way, the authors have succeeded in strengthening partnerships and shifting perceptions of how librarians can contribute to student learning on campus.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Rachel Hayes and Erika Germann, two of our library assistants, who provided their composition and rhetoric training and expertise to serve as readers for this assessment project. We would also like to thank Professors Jennifer Dareneau and Tara Beecham for their partnership and collaboration, along with providing student artifacts for evaluation. Our insightful colleague, Sarah Hartman-Caverly, helped design and implement many of our improved activities and lessons, for which we feel extremely privileged. Finally, much gratitude to Jayne Park-Martinez, Coordinator of Research, Planning, and Assessment, for her guidance and advice throughout this process.

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DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.1.4

Appendix - Source Engagement Rubric

	Exemplary	Proficient	Developing	Minimal
	4	3	2	1
Sources reflect research topic (F)	All sources are very appropriate to the topic and contribute to the thesis, argument, or discussion in a meaningful way.	All sources are appropriate to the topic, and some/most contribute to the thesis, argument, or discussion in a meaningful way.	A majority of sources are appropriate to the topic, but many do not contribute to the thesis, argument, or discussion in a meaningful way.	Many sources show only a limited connection to the topic or sources are repetitive. Most do not contribute to the thesis, argument, or discussion in a meaningful way.
Match information products with information needs (B, F)	All sources have a format/creation process that fits the rhetorical context which shows an underlying understanding of their information need.	Most sources have a format/creation process that fits the rhetorical context which shows an underlying understanding of their information need.	Only some sources have a format/creation process that fits the rhetorical context which shows an underlying understanding of their information need.	Most sources do not have a format/creation process that fits the rhetorical context which shows an underlying understanding of their information need.
Incorporate information (D, E)	Student made exceptional use of information sources, including using summary well and selecting the best quotations to support arguments. Student	Student made good use of information sources, including using summary well and selecting good quotations to support arguments. Student organized information	Student's use of information sources was mixed. Student did not always use summary well and did not always select appropriate quotations. Student	Student's use of information was poor. Student had difficulty using summary and selecting quotations to support

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	organized information in a way that provided excellent support for the thesis arguments.	in a way that provided support for the thesis/argument.	had some problems with organizing information to support the thesis/argument.	arguments. Student had major problems with organizing information to support the thesis/argument.
Ethical use of information (C, E)	Student always provides proper attribution for sources and makes very few/no errors in citations/bibliography, even when dealing with problematic/less common source types.	Student always provides proper attribution for sources and makes only occasional errors in citations/bibliography.	Student provides proper attribution for sources, but makes frequent errors in citations/bibliography.	Student does not always provide proper attribution for sources. Student either does not follow the required citation style or makes numerous errors.

Information Literacy Frames	
A	Authority is Constructed & Contextual
B	Information Creation as Process
C	Information Has Value
D	Research as Inquiry
E	Scholarship as Conversation
F	Searching as Strategic Exploration

Based on the Association of College & Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.* Adapted from *Sample Rubric for a Research Paper or Literature Review or Annotated Bibliography*, by Rachel M. McMullin, West Chester University

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol13/iss1/4
DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.1.4