The Research Struggles of First-Year College Students

Choosing a topic, creating an argument:

Students struggle to choose their own research topic and browse for ideas. They take a stance before researching and get frustrated when sources don't fit their argument. They often choose a different topic or rely on less credible sources.

- Provide opportunities for students to choose their own research topics.
- Introduce students to the "Browse Issues" feature in the Opposing Viewpoints database and websites like ProCon.org or The New York Times Prompts for Argumentative Writing.
- Guide students through the exploration phase of research. Not knowing is okay.
- Differentiate between writing a report (specific answers) and a research paper (asking questions, synthesizing information, considering multiple perspectives).
- Hands-On Activities: Creating 21st Century Superheroes or Take a Stand

Awareness of information sources.

Students are reluctant to go beyond Google and are overwhelmed by information choices and quantities.

- Help students understand that not everything can be found on Google. Provide examples.
- Create opportunities for research using databases and books.
- Explain the difference between popular and scholarly information.
- Practice using advanced Google search techniques and Google Scholar to narrow web results.
- Hands-on activities: The Google Bucket or Database Teach-In or Scholarly versus Popular

Turning a topic into a search.

Students find it difficult to find the right words when searching for information online. They don’t understand that searching a database is not like searching Google.

- Take time to brainstorm search terms, synonyms, and different ways of describing or saying the same thing.
- Practice searching for articles using databases. Explore search features and limiters.
- Search a topic multiple times using different words on the Web and using multiple databases. Discover which words and which sources retrieve the best results. Use successful search results to find more more search terms (what words does the article use to describe the topic?).
- Hands-on activities: Synonym Scattering or Furry Crab or Database Searching Research Activity

Understanding research as a process.

Students aren’t aware of the need to search again and again, refining their searches as they discover new questions and synthesize new information.

- Demonstrate the phases of the research process. Emphasize that research takes time and energy.
- Use concept mapping to show how research can take you in different directions.
- Hands-on activities: Summarizing Controversial Perspectives

Ability to evaluate and understand information.

Students are over-confident in their ability to evaluate information and determine whether or not a source is credible.

- Use the Critical Thinking Questions about Information Literacy in this guide as a source for discussion and exploration.
- Discuss key concepts and critical thinking questions related to news literacy and data literacy.
Hands-on activities: Evaluating the Interwebz with Think/Square/Share or Evaluating the Interwebz with Designated Skeptics or Scholarly versus Popular or Blue Feed, Red Feed

Knowing where to go for help.

Students believe that they are expected to "know" already, or that they have to figure everything out on their own.

Provide students with information on where they can go to get research help at school, by visiting WCC's Bailey Library, or from their local public library. Let them know that librarians will help them at any stage of the research process.

Sources:
