

University Studies Syllabus Audit
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As part of a larger assessment of information literacy instruction at Utah State University (USU), the USU Library Instruction Program conducted an audit of syllabi for approved University Studies (general education) courses. Our goal was to see where information literacy (IL) was being taught throughout the general education curriculum. The development of information literacy skills, defined as “an understanding of the nature, organization, and methods of access and evaluation of both electronic and traditional resources in the subject area,” is a requirement for integrated breadth courses (http://www.usu.edu/provost/academic_initiatives/breadth.cfm). Information literacy is also implicit in the requirements for depth courses, including critical thinking and writing skills. Depth courses should also build on the skills introduced in depth courses. Therefore, we looked at all available syllabi for both breadth and depth courses. While syllabi are only one view into the curriculum, they are a relatively accessible and concrete source of information. The audit provides a broad picture of information literacy opportunities, both taken and missed, at USU.

I. Method

We collected syllabi for the general education courses approved as of 2004. We were able to find some syllabi on department websites; others were provided from the General Education Subcommittee records.¹ We analyzed a total of 192 syllabi. Fifty syllabi were for the same course but taught by different instructors. 162 classes were represented, out of a total 238 courses approved for general education designation. The syllabi represented all of the general education areas, with the exception of Breadth Creative Arts (BCA). We received only 2 syllabi for BCA and decided not to include them because they might not represent course offerings in that area. The total number of syllabi comprise between 62% and 88% of the courses offered in each area. The higher number of Depth Social Science (DSS) syllabi, for example, is likely a result of more courses offered in this area (69 DSS versus only 7 BAI courses offered).

Areas	# syllabi	area's share of total syllabi analyzed	% of courses offered in each area
BAI: Breadth American Institutions	8	4.2%	86%
BHU: Breadth Humanities	19	9.9%	67%
BLS: Breadth Life Science	15	7.8%	73%
BPS: Breadth Physical Science	16	8.3%	88%
BSS: Breadth Social Science	20	10.4%	62%
DHA: Depth Humanities and Arts	35	18.2%	63%
DSC: Depth Science	21	10.9%	66%
DSS: Depth Social Science	58	30.2%	77%
Totals	192	100%	

Table 1: Syllabi included in analysis

¹ We would like to thank Norm Jones, Chair of the General Education Subcommittee, and Christina Palmer, of the Provost's Office, for providing us copies of syllabi. We would also like to thank Library Peer Mentors Holly Swenson, Jenny Pecora, and Dennis Ogilvie for tracking down syllabi and data entry.

We created an Access database to record information about each syllabus. We asked the following questions:

- Did the syllabus include a clear statement of learning goals? If so, was information literacy an explicit part of those goals?
- Were information literacy assignments included? IL assignments were defined as anything that required students to find, evaluate, or use information sources in some final product, such as a paper, presentation, etc.
- How many information literacy assignments were required?
- Did the assignments have clear grading criteria, and were IL skills measured by those criteria?
- Did information literacy assignments require that students find outside sources of information (rather than evaluating and synthesizing information provided by the instructor)? Did instructors require certain types or numbers of sources?
- Did information literacy assignments occur in stages (such as an annotated bibliography required before a final paper was due)?
- Which ACRL Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education were covered in the assignments? (<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm>)
- Did the syllabus explicitly mention the library as a useful resource for students to complete their assignments?

We also counted the number of general education courses for which we taught library instruction classes between 2003 and 2005, regardless of whether or not we had a syllabus for these classes.

II. Findings

Most of the syllabi included clear learning outcomes or objectives for the course (132, or 69%). Of the syllabi with learning goals, 52 (39%) included information literacy goals as part of their larger course objectives. Fewer than half of total 192 syllabi, however, had any information literacy assignments (89 or 46%). All of the general education areas were represented with IL assignments. The sciences were slightly underrepresented compared to their share of the syllabi. Only 2-3% of the IL assignments were in breadth life or physical science classes, even though each represented around 8% of total number of syllabi. The Depth Social Science classes were slightly overrepresented. Large class sizes, especially in the breadth areas, likely accounts for the lack of IL assignments in some cases. Research papers, the most common IL assignment, are difficult to grade in large classes. See Table 2.

Area	# with IL assignments	% in area with IL assignments	area's share of total syllabi analyzed
BAI	3	3.4%	4.2%
BHU	6	6.7%	9.9%
BLS	3	3.4%	7.8%
BPS	2	2.2%	8.3%
BSS	9	10.1%	10.4%
DHA	20	22.5%	18.2%
DSC	8	9.0%	10.9%
DSS	38	42.7%	30.2%
Total	89		

Table 2: Information Literacy assignments required

The most common assignments (47) were research papers, which required students to research a topic related to the class. Papers responding to or summarizing weekly readings were also popular (24). Six classes required an annotated bibliography, and six classes included a presentation assignment. Other assignments included book reviews, literature reviews, posters, editorials, memos, or other kinds of discipline-specific research, such as museum artifact research or company or product research. The average number of IL assignments per class was 2.2.

Slightly more than half of all the IL assignments (49 or 55%) required some type of outside sources, meaning that the instructor required students to seek information beyond the class texts or reserve readings. In some cases, instructors recommended that research with outside sources might help, but it was not a requirement. Most of the assignments that did not use outside sources were critical readings of texts provided by the instructor. We classified these as IL assignments because they require critical reading and synthesis of information. Both breadth and depth science courses, if they had IL assignments, required outside sources 75%-100% of the time. Depth humanities courses, however, seemed less likely to require outside sources. Outside sources were required in only 30% of the IL assignments in this area. These courses tended to assign critical readings of required texts.

Area	# assignments requiring outside sources	Total # of IL assignments	% of assignments requiring outside sources (by area)
BAI	0	3	0%
BHU	4	6	66.7%
BLS	3	3	100.0%
BPS	2	2	100.0%
BSS	6	9	66.7%
DHA	6	20	30.0%
DSC	6	8	75.0%
DSS	22	38	57.9%
Totals	49	89	

Table 3: Information Literacy assignments requiring outside sources

Only 20 syllabi with IL assignments mentioned the library in any capacity. Other syllabi mentioned the library as sources of Course Reserve readings, but did not have any IL assignments. Of the 49 assignments that required outside research of some type, only 14 mentioned the library. Most often, the library is noted as the best place to find the kinds of scholarly sources required for the assignment. Five syllabi include library skills as a specific competency to be achieved by the end of the course. One suggested that the subject librarian was a useful resource for completing the research assignment.

Few of the IL assignments (18 of 89) were assigned in stages. Usually, this meant preparing a topic proposal, outline, or annotated bibliography before the final paper was due. This often requires students to reflect on their sources and do their research in advance of writing the final draft. Annotated bibliographies also deter plagiarism, as they require that students reflect on and summarize the sources they find. Twenty IL assignments required a certain number of outside sources. The average number of sources required was 4.5. Nearly the same number of assignments (22) either required certain types of sources, such as scholarly articles, or forbid or

limited the use of web resources. Thirteen assignments required a certain number and made specifications as to the types of sources students could use.

31 of the 89 assignments included clear criteria for grading, and information literacy requirements (such as credible sources and consistent citation style) were included in 19 (61%) of these. Most of the courses with IL grading criteria (16) were either DSS or DHU courses.

The 89 information literacy assignments addressed, as a whole, the entire range of the ACRL Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education. Most (61 or 69%) covered Standard Three, or the evaluation of information for credibility and usefulness. 56 addressed Standard Two, selecting search tools and searching effectively. See Table 4 for a summary.

ACRL Standards	#	%
1: Define information needs	43	48%
2: Choose tools and search effectively	56	63%
3: Evaluate	61	69%
4: Use information effectively for a purpose	47	53%
5: Ethical, social, legal, and economic issues	43	48%
Note: Most assignments cover more than one standard, so the total is more than 89 or 100%		

Table 4: ACRL Standards addressed in IL assignments

Very few general education courses include a formal library instruction component. Only 14 of the courses analyzed brought classes to the library for instruction, between 2003 and 2005. Of all the approved general education courses, an additional six participated in library instruction, but we did not have copies of syllabi for analysis. Most of the classes were in the depth humanities and social science areas (12, or 60%). If looking at the entire range of general education courses, between 2003 and 2005, instruction by a librarian occurred in only 20 courses, a meager 8.4%. See Table 5 for a list of courses that included library instruction.

Area	Course Number	Course Title
BAI	HIST 2700	US History to 1877
BCA	LAEP 1030*	Introduction to Landscape Architecture
BHU	HIST 1030	The Modern World
BHU	USU 1320	Integrated Breadth Humanities
BLS	AWER 1200*	Biodiversity
BSS	FCHD 1500	Development Across the Lifespan
DHA	GERM 3000*	Introduction to German Studies
DHA	GERM 3610	Survey of German Literature, Part 2
DHA	HIST 3130	Greek History
DHA	HIST 3150	Roman History
DHA	HIST 3220	Medieval European Civilization

DHA	HIST 4550*	History of Women and Gender in America
DSC	ITE 3440	Science, Technology and Modern Society
DSC	SOILS 3100*	Soils and Civilization
DSS	ANTH 3300	Archaeology in North America
DSS	FCSE 3060*	Human Behavior Related to Dress
DSS	JCOM 3300	Corporate Communication
DSS	POLS 3210	European Government & Politics
DSS	POLS 3810	Introduction to Public Policy: Processes and Analysis
DSS	SOC 3200	Population & Society
* no syllabus available for analysis		

Table 5: Classes participating in library instruction, 2003-2005

III. Discussion and Recommendations

The results of the University Studies syllabi audit suggest that little formal information literacy instruction is taking place across the general education curriculum. While a syllabus does not reflect the full range of instruction that occurs in a class, descriptions of assignments, learning goals, and content coverage provide a high-level view of the way that information literacy has, or has not, been integrated into a course. We also understand that librarians are not the only ones who teach information literacy skills. Certainly, looking at syllabi fails to completely capture whether instructors are teaching students about the nature of information and knowledge in a discipline, how to use search tools and evaluate information, or how to document sources.

Nevertheless, the audit suggests that, on the face of it, many University Studies courses are not fulfilling the mandate to teach information literacy skills. The audit confirms that most students receive formal, integrated information literacy instruction only in English 1010 and 2010. Approximately half of students test out of English 1010, so a large number of students receive information literacy instruction in a single class, English 2010. Library instruction in English 2010 can range from a single library tour to a more integrated series of several sessions, with librarian participation in assignment creation and feedback to students. Some USU students, depending on their major, receive additional library instruction in introductory upper division and disciplinary classes. This is especially true of business majors, for example. Nevertheless, USU students can graduate from USU with virtually no formal information literacy instruction, depending on their major and English 2010 section. The sciences are especially underrepresented in both the number of information literacy assignments and in offering formal library instruction. Science classes represented only 9 of 188 subject-specific library sessions taught in 2004-2005, for example.

The peripheral nature of the library that emerges from the audit is also discouraging. Fewer than half (46%) of the syllabi analyzed included an assignment that addressed information literacy components, such as defining an information need, finding information, evaluating information, or using that information in a legal and ethical way. Fewer than half of these IL assignments required students to seek information outside of the body of material presented in class or in required class readings.

In the library, we hear plenty of complaints from faculty about students relying only on Google for research and about their inability to evaluate information for credibility, accuracy, and

timeliness. If students are not required to develop information literacy skills with assignments that involve substantial research, they very likely won't. Research suggests that focusing only on a single course or series of courses, like English 1010 and 2010, is less effective than an integrated approach. Information literacy skills take a long time to learn and require practice for mastery. Freshmen in introductory courses require different assignments, approaches, and strategies than seniors in a capstone seminar. Instruction needs to occur at all levels, beginning with core classes like English 1010 and 2010 and other introductory courses. These classes can introduce students to basic research skills, such as asking good questions, identifying information resources beyond the Web, and getting help from a librarian. Breadth courses are particularly good opportunities to introduce students to the nature of inquiry and the organization of knowledge in the disciplines. Upper-division and depth classes can build on these basic skills by enabling students to practice in a more independent and sophisticated way.

Integrating information literacy instruction across the general education curriculum is a primary goal of the USU Library Instruction Program. We have already conducted a major needs assessment and curriculum development project with English 1010 and 2010. This syllabi analysis suggests that there is an urgent need to revisit the way that information literacy is approached in the USU general education curriculum, beyond English 1010 and 2010. We make the following recommendations:

1. Follow-up with the General Education Subcommittee and individual instructors to assess whether the audit failed to substantially capture where and how information literacy is being taught in the general education curriculum.
2. Re-visit the information literacy requirement for Breadth and Depth courses. Should the requirements be re-worked to address issues of class size, integration between Breadth and Depth courses, and the heavy expectations placed on English 1010 and 2010? What are the core skills that need to be taught at each level?
3. Work with faculty to develop information literacy assignments and instructional materials that are scalable and effective, building on existing model assignments. Provide model assignments and lesson outlines on the University Studies website.
4. Educate faculty about different ways to integrate information literacy and library instruction into both Breadth and Depth courses. A special emphasis should be placed on the sciences.

The library is currently working on a funding proposal for an initiative to develop and promote information literacy instructional offerings for the general education curriculum.