

Information Life Cycle

This lesson asks students to evaluate information they use for their college writing assignments, such as newspapers, scholarly journal articles, etc., through the lenses of format and rigor by introducing them to the information life cycle.

CONCEPT IN CONTEXT

The connection between format and quality of information is not apparent to novice researchers. Students just beginning to do research are learning about the importance of evaluating the information they discover, but their understanding of the information life cycle is probably limited. Here, the librarian fosters student awareness of the different information formats and how the process behind their creation determines their shape, content, and quality, or *rigor*, the term used in this lesson. Students examine articles from a variety of sources and think about the time it takes to create the information in each. This obvious examination of time spent on production requires students to think critically about the information they encounter: why it was created, for whom, and what effect the time element has on the depth, accuracy, and overall impact of its content. Can we compare the rigor of an article in a journal to that of a newspaper article? Are there degrees of rigor within each format? This activity engages students with the content in a way that compels them to consider the format of information each time they consider using it in their work.

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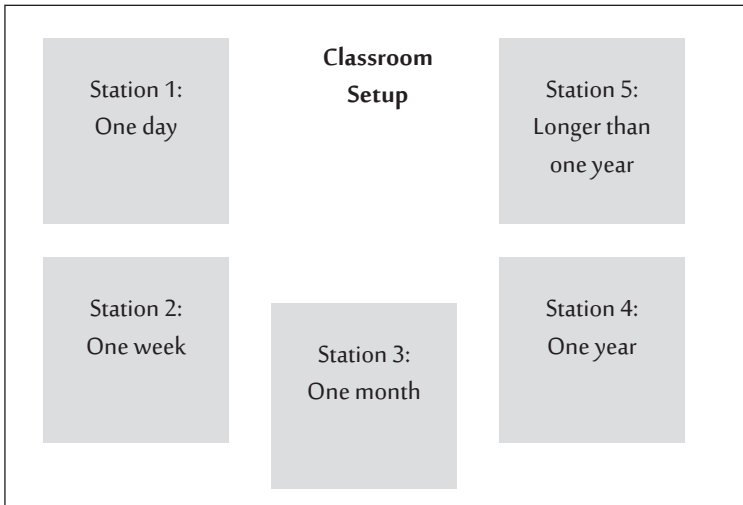
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Level: Basic/general education

Estimated Time: 50–60 minutes

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Five stations are set up throughout the classroom prior to the start of the class. These can be whiteboards or large pieces of paper taped to the wall.



- Preselected current news story or topic relevant to the class being taught
- Preselected information sources representing five sources of information in different formats about the news story or topic (as described in the Input/Modeling section below); preferably there will be at least two options for each format, e.g., two different sources that could be placed at station 1 and so on
- Worksheet (*see Appendix or www.ala.org/acrl/files/handouts.pdf*)
- Post-it notes
- Internet access
- Time frames matching the stations are written or projected on boards for student reference (e.g., one day, one week, one month, one year, longer than a year)

LEARNING GOAL

Students will learn that information is produced and disseminated in different formats and that the accuracy and thoroughness (rigor) of information is often related to the length of time it takes to produce the information, its final form, and the way it is shared with others.

ANTICIPATORY SET

After introductions, the librarian instructs students to self-select in pairs or small groups, and each group is assigned a source relating to the pre-selected news story or topic (e.g., a newspaper, a magazine, a scholarly journal, a book). The librarian can either provide paper copies or direct students where to find the source online.

Students are given time to review the source and fill out the worksheet. They then are asked to make their best estimate as to when the source was published in relationship to the event it describes, with reference to the time frames written on the board. The librarian instructs them to write the title and/or citation of their source on a Post-it note and then post it on the station they believe represents the appropriate answer.

(In the case of time limitations, assign each group question #1, along with only two or three of the additional questions, making sure all questions are covered by at least one group.)

LESSON OBJECTIVE STATED

The librarian brings the class back together and tells students, “You each have had the opportunity to examine one source of information about [topic]. Today we are going to look at different types of information sources that all concern the same topic and examine how the format of these sources changes over time. You will be asked to assess and explain the qualities of the source assigned to you.”

INPUT/MODELING

Starting at Station 1 (one day), the librarian then leads a class discussion about the sources posted at the various stations, asking students who reviewed these sources to elaborate on the answers on their worksheet. During this discussion, the librarian introduces the concept of rigor as an important characteristic of information products.

Librarian Script: “What is rigor? It is the quality of thoroughness, accuracy, and strictness of a source. This can include the author’s credentials, how the author got the information he/she is writing about, and who reviewed the source prior to its publication.”

For example, Station 1 could consist of online news, newspaper articles, and possibly blog posts. The librarian asks students to define the general characteristics, style, and form of these formats.

Students may not know all of the relevant characteristics, so the librarian will have to lead the conversation. Prompts for the librarian can include:

Online news/newspaper articles:

- written by a reporter or journalist
- written for a general audience
- not peer-reviewed
- can consist of facts and opinions about a topic

Blog posts:

- can be written by novice or expert
- aimed toward a general audience, but could be focused

Station 2 (one week) could have longer newspaper articles, weekly magazine articles, etc.

Station 3 (one month) could have monthly magazine articles; longer online articles.

Station 4 (one year) could have a journal article.

Here the librarian can ask students to consider scholarly journal articles by asking the following: “You are often asked to find and use them as references in your research papers. What are the characteristics of that information product? Is there any difference between on-line and print journals?”

Journal article:

- written by an expert in the field
- peer-reviewed
- written for a scholarly audience
- often contain results of original research

Station 5 (longer than one year) could include books and encyclopedia entries.

GUIDED PRACTICE

Students search a library database or the Internet to find two sources of comparable rigor and format on the same topic. The librarian and class instructor circulate throughout the room assisting students as needed.

(Optional: Students enter the citations of the sources they find in a Google form created for this purpose by the librarian. The librarian can review students' responses after class for assessment purposes.)

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

Outside of the library session, students independently locate two sources of comparable format and rigor. Students then apply ideas from the library session and justify their choices in a short writing assignment. Librarians and class instructors can evaluate the writing assignments together in order to assess learning outcomes from these activities.