

BLAZING TRAILS THROUGH AN UNTAMED WILDERNESS: IMPROVING YOUR LIBRARY'S SELF-GUIDED HELP

**RUTH D. TERRY, D'ARCY HUTCHINGS, JENNIFER MCKAY,
ANNA BJARTMARSOTTIR AND DARIA O. CARLE**

INTRODUCTION

Libraries provide self-guided help on their websites through FAQs, guides, and tutorials. This content, often created to meet immediate needs and located on multiple webpages, can become an untamed wilderness over time. A group of librarians at the University of Alaska Anchorage took a holistic approach to reflect on, re-envision, and renew our library's online self-guided help in order to provide students with a more navigable path to research success. This group includes an instructional design librarian and four subject specialist librarians who have responsibility for a significant amount of library instruction, LibGuides, and other tutorials. When we realized the scope of the changes and the extent of the content we needed to edit and create, the project felt overwhelming, but by sharing our experience, we hope to empower others to blaze a trail to improve their own self-guided help. This paper will describe our project and process, lessons learned, and resulting impacts.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Consortium Library serves as the main campus library for the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) and Alaska Pacific University (APU). In Fall 2017, student headcount was 17,267 at UAA and 509 at APU. UAA is a public, open-enrollment university, while APU is a private, not-for-profit, selective admission university (UAA Office of Institutional Research, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Because there is no statewide community college system in Alaska, UAA awards everything from certificates to doctoral degrees. Almost 60% of UAA students attend part time, and about half of students are age 25 or older; fewer than 5% are graduate students (UAA Office of Institutional Research, 2018). In academic year 2018, eLearning courses accounted for about 30% of credit hours at UAA, up from about 20% five years prior; the majority (71%) of eLearning credit hours are 100- and 200-level courses (UAA Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Engagement, and Academic Support, 2018).

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

When we started this project, much of our library's self-guided help was outdated, hard to find, and difficult to use. LibGuides had been organized into three categories, each with a separate link on our homepage: How-to, Topic, and Course Guides. Tutorials in formats other than LibGuides were linked in a way that students did not recognize as a link; if they managed to find this link, much of the content was outdated because it had been created using software that didn't allow for easy updating. This content had been designed to teach students to navigate particular resources, but it failed to explain the overall research process or address the most commonly asked questions relating to research at our institution, such as citing sources. Existing content addressed some of these common questions, but students had trouble finding this content because it was scattered in multiple locations. In addition, much of the content attempted to serve the needs of all possible users, but in doing so, it did not serve anyone well. Given the makeup of our student body, we decided to focus our efforts on improving self-guided help for novice library users in 100- and 200-level courses.

HOW WE FIXED THE PROBLEM: OUR PROCESS

Inventorying and Sorting

We reviewed all tutorials and guides on our website and created an inventory of what might be relevant to our project. This inventory allowed us to analyze our content at a glance and helped to explore ways to restructure it. We identified gaps and prioritized items as ready, good enough, needs editing, out of scope, etc. At this point we decided that everything we needed to change—whether editing currently existing or creating new—would be in a LibGuide format.

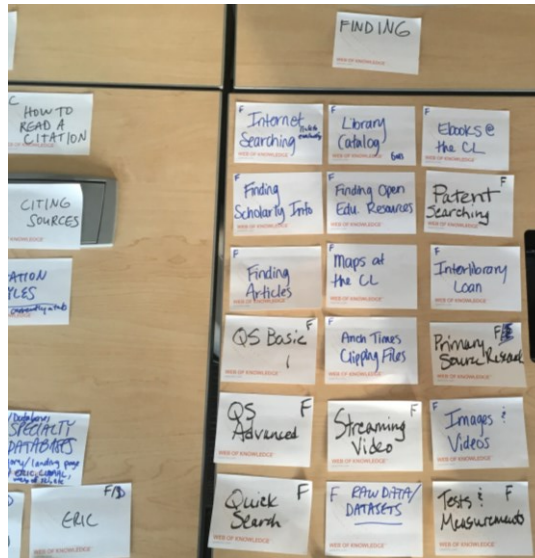
Figure 1: Inventory Spreadsheet

1	New Category	Name	Ready?	Abbrev title	New Title	Notes
2	Archives	Resources for Primary Source Research	n			name change?
3	Evaluating & Citing	Citation Styles	n			being incorporated into citing sources by Jen
4	Evaluating & Citing	Citing Sources	y	Citing Sources	Citing Sources	Revised, complete but add other styles
5	Evaluating & Citing	Critical Thinking	n			
6	Evaluating & Citing	Evaluating Sources	y	Evaluating Sources	Evaluating Sources	Revised/link to "internet searching"
7	Finding	Raw Data/Datasets	n			
8	Evaluating & Citing	Magazine or a Journal: what is the difference?	y	Scholarly vs Popular	Scholarly or Popular	revised/renamed
9	Finding	Finding Articles	n	-		RETIRED - overlap? futher review
10	Evaluating & Citing	RefWorks Citation Management	y	RefWorks for Citations		
11	Evaluating & Citing	NEW GUIDE			Peer Review	Created
12	NA	Anchorage Times Clipping Files	n			just link to it from newspaper guide

Creating a Landing Page

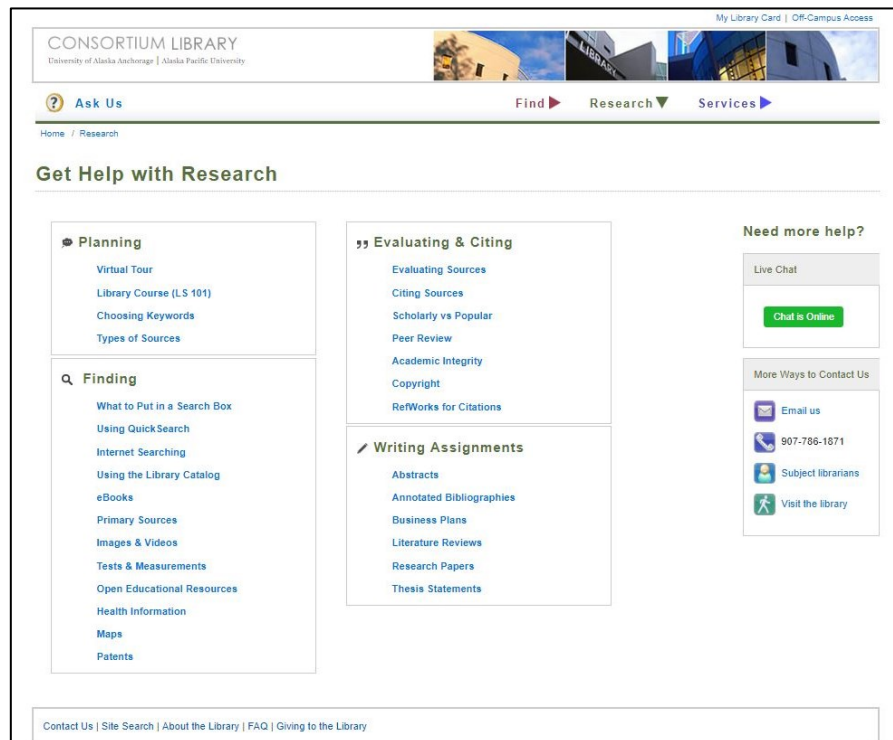
We explored new ways of presenting our content and decided on a single landing page with the content most useful for our target audience. Items would appear here regardless of format—whether LibGuide, video tutorial, Guide on the Side, etc. We looked at multiple library websites to gather ideas but didn't find an arrangement that suited our needs; ultimately, we organized our content into four categories: Planning, Evaluating/Citing, Finding, and Writing Assignments. We used a whiteboard to create mockups of how our landing page might look. To determine where to put what, we wrote all titles on sticky notes, even if the content wasn't complete. This helped us to visualize and arrange.

Figure 2: Arranging Content Using Sticky Notes



When our landing page was ready to go live, we included all content categorized as either ready or good enough. We didn't wait for everything to be perfect so we could continue to make progress. Because this landing page was going to be included on the homepage, we brought the library website committee into the conversation about what to name it; ultimately, the page was titled Get Help with Research, with a link simply labeled Get Help on the homepage. Initially, the Get Help page was not a LibGuide, requiring our web librarian to make changes. We have since made the page a LibGuide that we can update, with no work required from anyone outside our group. View our live page at <https://libguides.consortiumlibrary.org/gethelp>.

Figure 3: The First Iteration of Our Landing Page



Creating the Get Help page eliminated three LibGuide category links on our homepage, replacing them with a single link clearly indicative of what students will find: help. Students who don't contact us for help and have received no formal instruction

now have a better chance of finding this than before. The new landing page also included tutorials previously located only in the hard-to-identify Research link.

Figure 4: Research Box on Consortium Library’s Homepage, Before and After



Creating and Editing Content

While creating the landing page, we were also working to improve essential content and develop missing elements. Our group implemented general web design best practices, such as using clear and concise language, intentionally leaving white space, and making content ADA accessible. Over time, we also learned and implemented what worked best for our project and audience and ensured each guide focused on a single concept, breaking apart overwhelming, comprehensive guides. Content was carefully chunked into separate boxes to allow maximum reusability. We created individual guides to discuss what something is versus how to find it, linking the guides to connect users to both. We also decided to separate guides for basic and advanced users. In order to maintain control and ensure proper branding, we created our own content to reduce external links. Creative Commons licenses were applied to our content to enable easy reuse. We created a unique and searchable tag to help colleagues identify content that our group worked on. We have assured our colleagues that this content is stable and won't significantly change without prior notice.

IMPACTS OF THE WORK

The greatest impact of the Get Help page is its improved findability, but this isn't the only impact.

Instruction and Reference

Because the Get Help page is a quick and easy place to direct students for basic research help, we now use the Get Help page as the starting point for instruction in most introductory level classes rather than create a specific course guide. Teaching students to find and use this page, as opposed to a course guide subject to more frequent change, enables them to be more self-sufficient in the future. In addition, we regularly refer to the Get Help page at the reference desk, and the page is especially useful for phone and virtual interactions due to the inherent challenges of communicating over these mediums.

Improved Efficiency

Before this project, librarians at our institution were faced with having to create the same type of content over and over because there was no stable central repository with help content to be reused. Now, there are not only entire guides they can link to, but there are smaller boxes of content they can incorporate into their own guides. There was a great deal of work on the front end of this project, but ultimately, it has paid dividends. Students consistently see the same information, and we avoid duplicating our efforts.

WORK DYNAMICS

How We Meet (Or Not) and Get the Work Done

With rare exceptions, we only work on this project during our actual meeting times. This allows us to have collective memory, makes the work feel less onerous, and means we make consistent progress because we're not waiting on one person to do something. We meet as long as 3 of 5 group members can attend. Software permissions are set to allow everyone in the group to edit everything, enabling us to accomplish our work no matter who is present. We meet intensively, packing several 2-3 hour meetings

into a period of a week or two. We don't meet for weeks at a time when our schedules are busy, so we keep detailed notes to track progress, plans, decisions, and the rationale behind those decisions so we can pick up where we left off.

Who to Involve

To take on this type of project, we strongly recommend working as a group of 3-5 people. What we create as a group is so much better than what we create individually, and the fact that this is a group project has helped us get buy-in from our colleagues. As for forming your group, think strategically about who to include (if you have choices). To be successful, your group members must be flexible and invested in the project, and you need some combination of people who can write succinctly, work with the software you're going to use, edit for grammar, and speak to your target audience's needs. Include people who are willing to compromise, who don't take criticism of their content personally, and who are willing to accept less-than-perfect in the name of progress. Because our group works on content that is used by colleagues, we have invited them to meetings and working sessions to describe our work and how they can benefit from it.

CONCLUSION

This project has made our self-guided help findable, up-to-date, and easier to use. Now that the central landing page exists, students have a more navigable path to research success. Our work will be ongoing as we continue to improve, create, and update our library's self-guided help.

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