Laura A. Sheets

A change of art

Learning research strategies in a new subject area through a LibGuide redesign

In the spring of 2020, the art librarian left my institution for another position. As a member of the Humanities team, I volunteered to take on the instruction responsibilities of Art and Design in addition to my other instructional duties. The previous art librarian had a master's degree in art history and a strong relationship with the School of Art. My departing colleague and I had a brief conversation regarding art history research strategies. While I was nervous and mostly on my own (because none of my colleagues had a deep knowledge of art research practices), I knew that my generalist background would guide me.

Pedagogy vs. pathfinder

For every librarian you meet, you'll probably encounter an equal number of opinions about LibGuides, the software libraries use to create webpages. Personally, I don't have a problem with the platform itself. It's convenient, accessible (meaning both readable by assistive technology and easy to use for individuals with little web design experience), and the company behind LibGuides (SpringShare) is responsive to its customers' ideas, has a robust training program, and excellent customer service.

The issues lie with how LibGuides are created. Librarians create them like librarians, with pages for types of sources like journals or periodicals and long lists of links to databases, websites, or books without context (i.e., the "pathfinder" style). Research experts understand why one might search for a journal over a trade publication, or what they would do with an index to folk literature. But without clear instruction, research novices don't.

After completing a graduate certificate in instructional design and technology, I noticed poor design in many LibGuides. During their presentation "When All You Have Is a Hammer, Everything Looks Like a LibGuide" at the 2022 LOEX Annual Conference in Ypsilanti, Michigan,[1] Urszula Lechtenburg and Helene Gold asked specific questions about what was lacking in the pathfinder style of LibGuides: Where's the pedagogy? Where's the student in all of this? What are the best practices? I left the session feeling inspired to update at least a few of my LibGuides to be more focused on the process of research, rather than the cataloging of the internet.

The discussion of the pedagogical versus mechanics model in library instruction (and the teaching of writing) is not new. In 1987, Carmen B. Schemersahl, a writing instructor at Mount Saint Mary's College, wrote "Teaching Library Research: Process, Not Product,"[2] which advocated for shifting the focus of first-year composition courses to the research

Laura A. Sheets is assistant professor/reference and instruction librarian at Bowling Green State University, email: sheetsl@bgsu.edu.

process as opposed to the product of the research paper. Barbara Fister was also concerned with teaching mechanics in library instruction in her 1993 article "Teaching the Rhetorical Dimensions of Research," emphasizing that the skill of "retriev[ing] information does not necessarily make for good research."[3]

For instruction librarians, the sea change from the mechanics-based teaching model to the pedagogical model played out during the adoption of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education by ACRL in 2015 (almost 30 years after Schemersahl's article). The Framework replaced the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, a mechanics-based checklist of skills students needed to be considered "information literate."

Despite the shift to the Framework, the "teach them where to click" model in library instruction persists. However, the blame cannot be placed fully on instruction librarians. Many teaching faculty request this from librarians, thinking the knowledge their students lack is where to find the information, not what to do with it once they find it. Since librarians are invited into classrooms, librarians lack the agency to advocate for change. Perhaps we are afraid that if we push back, our instruction requests may dwindle. Unfortunately, the mechanics model has creeped into our asynchronous materials as well (e.g.., LibGuides). In the classroom, librarians can sprinkle pedagogy in with database demonstrations. But when students are using point-of-need resources (like LibGuides), the instruction must be explicit for them to walk away with new knowledge.

What guided me

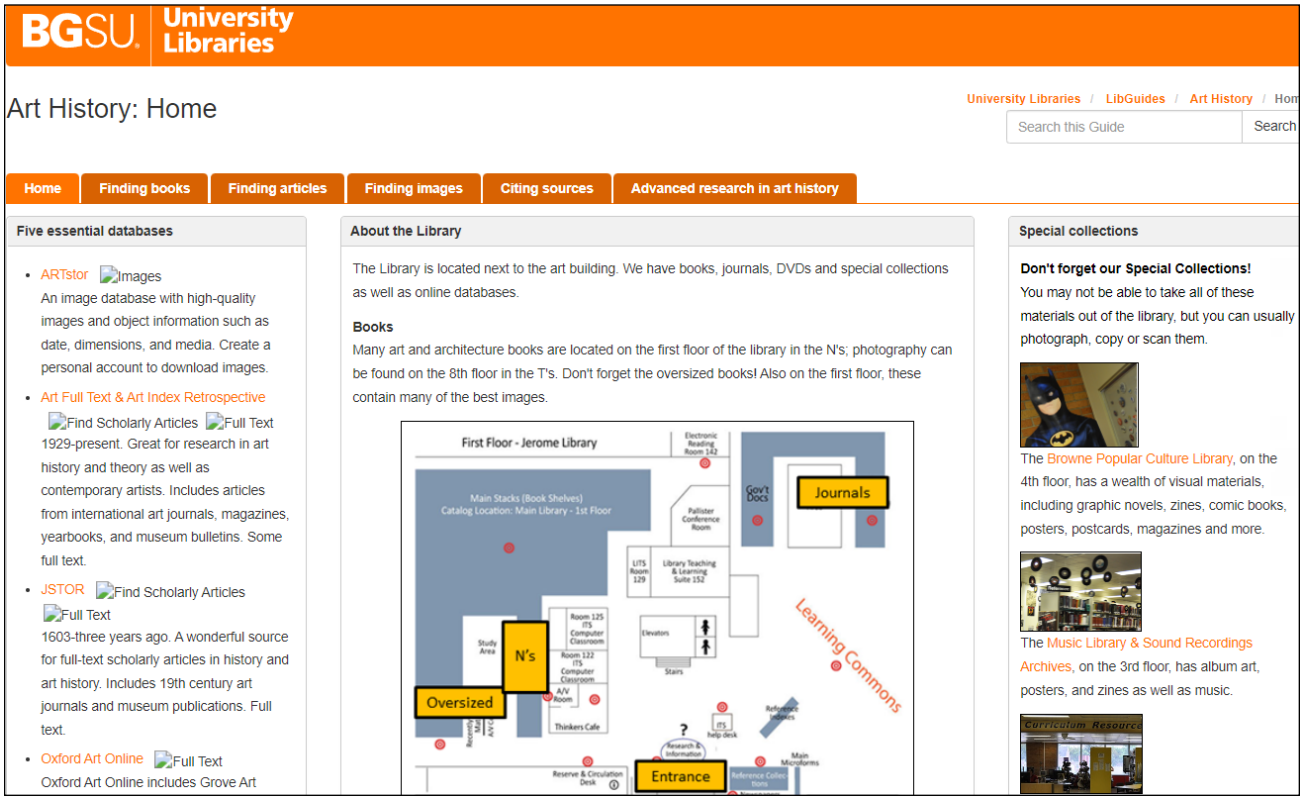
Because I was new to the discipline, the Art History LibGuide was a good place to start. I could learn more about research practices in my new subject area and revise a guide to be user-centered and pedagogical in nature. I searched for foundational and introductory sources since the audience for this guide was undergraduate Art and Design majors and minors and non-Art and Design students taking art history courses as part of their core liberal arts curriculum. My initial search was for existing LibGuides on art history. Although I found suggestions on books to read and websites to peruse, I didn't find examples of Art History LibGuides focused on the research process. Three sites initially guided the LibGuide revision:

- Purdue OWL's "Writing Essays in Art History"[4]
- The Writing Center at The University of North Carolina (UNC)-Chapel Hill's "Art History" Handout[5]
- How to Do a Visual Analysis by Curtis Newbold (Associate Professor of Communication at Westminster College)[6]

The art history handout from UNC-Chapel Hill led me to the four titles below, which greatly informed my foundational knowledge about research and theory in art history. Did I read the entirety of all four books? Absolutely not! I selected chapters to read, such as "Getting Ideas: Asking Questions to Get Answers" and "Art Historical Research" in Barnet and "Formalism and Style" and "Iconography" in Adams.

- Barnet, Sylvan. 2015. *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*, 11th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Adams, Laurie. 1996. *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. New York: IconEditions.
- Adams, Laurie. 2003. *Looking at Art*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Emerling, Jae. 2005. *Theory for Art History*. New York: Routledge.



Screenshot of the Art History LibGuide before updating.

The new guide

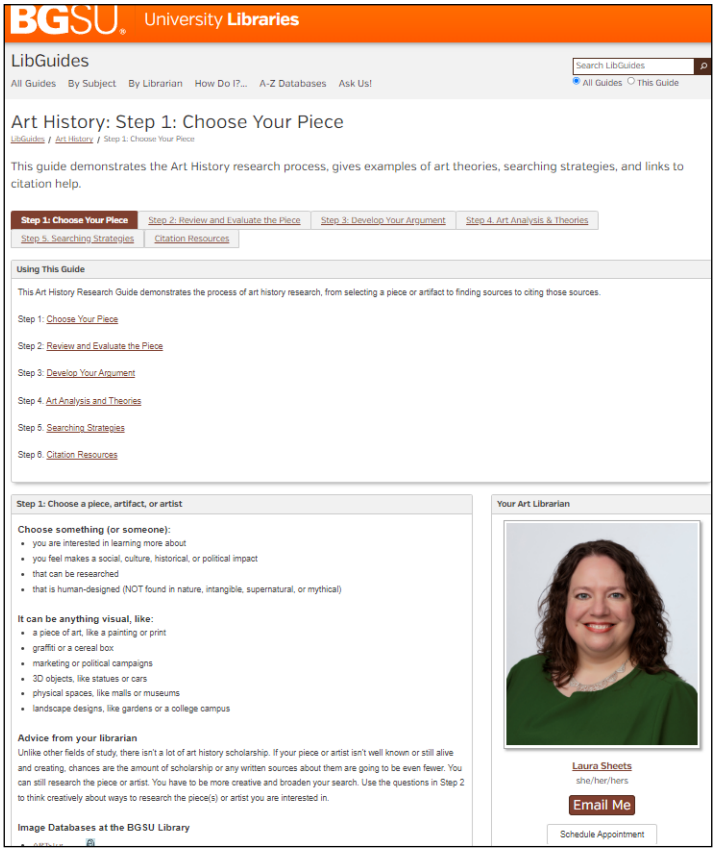
As I began to work with the faculty in the School of Art, teach with their research assignments, and meet with students for research consultations, I saw where students struggled with the research process in the discipline of art history.

The pitfalls of research in art history can be the exact opposite of research pitfalls in other disciplines and courses. Let's look at two popular research topics for a first-year composition course as examples: the legalization of marijuana or how anxiety affects college students. Those topics are extremely broad and would be difficult to research. Librarians (and writing instructors) would advise the students to narrow these topics to make them fit the scope for a short paper. Depending on the artist and piece you are researching, the exact opposite might be true for art research. As humanities departments shrink at institutions of higher education, so does the number of humanities faculty, and the body of scholarship. If the piece a student is researching was created decades or centuries ago and it is well-known (e.g., the Mona Lisa, American Gothic, etc.), finding scholarship may not be a problem. However, if the piece is obscure, if the medium is not "accepted" as high art (think jewelry, textiles, or mixed media), or if your artist is not well-known or still alive and creating, it can be very hard to find scholarship about them or their art.

Therefore students researching obscure pieces and artists will need to broaden their searches to include other contexts, theories, or perspectives about their chosen piece. For example, researching the time period in which the piece was created, the artist's culture

and background, or a specific theory in which to analyze the piece are some of the ways to research an art piece when there are limited scholarly sources available. But most students I've met (with in my short time as an art librarian) do not understand this approach. When they see "a minimum of six scholarly sources required" on an assignment prompt, they assume those sources must be about the piece they've chosen to write about. Students search the discovery layer (or Google or Google Scholar), find two or three sources at best, and schedule a research appointment with me because they are panicking about finding enough resources to be able write this paper. Once I explained how to broaden their scope (and that this is accepted practice for this type of research), the students immediately relaxed, engaged in the research process, and became excited about their chosen piece or artist again.

This research process, combined with the foundational art analysis and theory from my initial research, became the foundation for my revised pedagogical art history research guide. The guide was embedded in all art history courses in Canvas (the campus learning management system) using the LibGuide LTI (learning tool interoperability) Tool. I plan to incorporate the guide in relevant classroom instruction during the upcoming academic year.



Screenshot of the new Art History LibGuide.

Best practices incorporated

Lechtenburg and Gold's presentation included several best practices for pedagogical LibGuides and led me to additional literature. The best practices I incorporated into my guide from these sources were the following:

- Embed guides at the students' point of need (LMS, instruction).
- Use a one- or two-column layout.

- Include a maximum of six tabs/pages.
- Reduce the number of sources listed.
- Label sources as "Best bets" (or similar language).
- Use bulleted lists to break up large blocks of text.
- Use navigational signals to create clear paths for students (e.g., Step 1., Start Here, etc.).
- Be consistent with labeling and minimize the use of library jargon.

Future steps and recommendations

I plan to include additional best practices in the future, including intentional collaboration with the Art History faculty, gathering feedback from students about the usefulness of the LibGuide, and gathering statistics from the LTI Tool.

Collaborating with the Art History faculty on the maintenance and revisions of the LibGuide will intentionally connect the guide to the curriculum, making it more relevant to the students' courses and research assignments. One cannot create a user-centered resource without gathering feedback from the users themselves. For the initial revision, I was able to collect feedback from an Art History student who worked at the library, but feedback needs to be collected on a larger scale. I intend to include a survey link on the guide for feedback and ask for formative feedback from students in class and research appointments. As a LibGuides administrator, I can track statistics of the LibGuide LTI Tool to see which classes have high use of the guide. Encouraging faculty to direct students to the LibGuide in Canvas is now a part of my departmental outreach.

As I redesigned the Art History LibGuide, I learned research strategies in a new subject area, made connections with the Art History faculty and students, and created a list of best practices for pedagogical LibGuides. I highly recommend the pedagogical and user centered LibGuides sources I used during this process and the approach of learning a new subject area by creating or revising a subject or course LibGuide.

Suggested readings

Barker, Amy E. G., and Ashley T. Hoffman. "Student-Centered Design: Creating LibGuides Students Can Actually Use." *College & Research Libraries* 82, no. 1 (2021): 75–91.

Barker, Eleanor, and Veronica Phillips. "Learning How to Teach Unfamiliar Subjects: Developing Training on Writing for Publication and Presentation of Research for Health Libraries." *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 37, no. 2 (2020): 163–67.

Bergstrom-Lynch, Yolanda. "LibGuides by Design: Using Instructional Design Principles and User-Centered Studies to Develop Best Practices." *Public Services Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2019): 205–23.

Fister, Barbara. "Teaching the Rhetorical Dimensions of Research." *Research Strategies* 11, no. 4 (1993): 211.

German, Elizabeth. "LibGuides for Instruction: A Service Design Point of View from an Academic Library." *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 162–67.

Hintz, Kimberley, Paula Farrar, Shirin Eshghi, Barbara Sobol, Jo-Anne Naslund, Teresa Lee, Tara Stephens, and Aleha McCauley. "Letting Students Take the Lead: A User-Centred Approach to Evaluating Subject Guides." *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 5, no. 4 (2010): 39–52.

Johnson, Anna Marie. "Connections, Conversations, and Visibility: How the Work of Academic Reference and Liaison Librarians is Evolving." *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2018): 91–102.
Lee, Yoo Young, and M. Sara Lowe. "Building Positive Learning Experiences through Pedagogical Research Guide Design." *Journal of Web Librarianship* 12, no. 4 (2018): 205–31.
Luca, Edward Joseph. "Reflections on an Embedded Librarianship Approach: The Challenge of Developing Disciplinary Expertise in a New Subject Area." *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 68, no. 1 (2019): 78–85.
Pothier, Wendy Girven, Heather Howard, and Paul Campbell. "Pathways to Becoming an Academic Subject Specialist: Insights from Three Librarians." *Partnership* 14, no. 1 (2019): 1–9.
Staley, Shannon M. "Academic Subject Guides: A Case Study of use at San Jose' State University." *College & Research Libraries* 68, no. 2 (2007): 119–39.
Stone, Sean M., M. Sara Lowe, and Bronwen K. Maxson. "Does Course Guide Design Impact Student Learning?" *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 25, no. 3 (2018): 280–96.

Notes

1. Urszula Lechtenberg and Helene Gold, "When All You Have Is a Hammer, Everything Looks Like a LibGuide: Strengths, Limitations, and Opportunities of the Teaching Tool" (presentation, Annual LOEX Conference, Ypsilanti, MI, May 6, 2022).
2. Carmen B. Schemersahl, "Teaching Library Research: Process, Not Product," *Journal of Teaching Writing* 6, no. 2 (1987): 231–37
3. Barbara Fister, "Teaching the Rhetorical Dimensions of Research," *Research Strategies* 11, no. 4 (1993): 211.
4. "Writing Essays in Art History," Purdue OWL, Purdue University, accessed August 23, 2022, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_art_history/art_history_essays.html.
5. "Art History," The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, accessed August 23, 2022, https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/art-history/.
6. Curtis Newbold, "How to Do a Visual Analysis," The Visual Communication Guy, January 12, 2015, https://thevisualcommunicationguy.com/2015/01/12/how-to-do-a-visual-analysis-a-five-step-process/.