

TRENDS IN  
**ARCHIVES**  
PRACTICE

# TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

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## **INTRODUCTION**

# A Lens on Information Literacy

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As libraries and archives increasingly turn to the provision of services in addition to collecting and curating collections, the importance and prominence of instructional services are increasing. No longer is the tour group or visiting class an occasional occurrence. Nor is it reasonable to assume that users come to their information tasks already skilled and ready to use the materials in our collections. Instead, archives, libraries, and other cultural heritage organizations have the enviable challenge of finding resources (e.g., staff, space, technology, etc.) in order to meet the growing demand for teaching and learning programs.

These modules exemplify the great work that is being done by staff in all of our organizations in meeting the teaching and learning needs of our communities. The creativity, variety, and pragmatism demonstrated by the authors tell the story of understanding what instructors want their students to learn and supporting students in that learning. By sharing their successes—and their struggles—the authors have addressed gaps in the archival literature and the information literacy literature and strengthened these intersecting domains of practice.

## Information Literacy

Information literacy is a fundamentally simple concept. It is the characteristic of individuals who are “able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.”<sup>1</sup> Behind this simple concept lies a complex reality. Individuals develop these abilities in different ways, through different experiences, and with different challenges along the way. Even those with basic abilities continue to develop them over time and achieve different levels of information fluency in different domains of knowledge.

Libraries of all types have taken on the challenge of creating teaching and learning programs as well as other services in support of their users developing information literacy. As appropriate to context, different terminology may be used to invoke different aspects or conceptualizations of information literacy instruction (e.g., digital literacy, media literacy, metaliteracy, research literacy, archival literacy, visual literacy, transliteracy, etc.), but at their core they all have the individual who is or is becoming information literate, typically understood within the context of a community of practice or domain of expertise and assuming basic literacy as a foundation.

## Primary Source Literacy

The emphasis in archives, special collections, museums, and other cultural heritage organizations on primary source literacy presents particular challenges to information literacy work in these settings. Primary source literacy demands greater attention to developing an understanding of documents per se while introducing concepts of organization and access that are not encountered in typical library search and discovery tools.

In developing primary source literacy, a learner simultaneously engages at least four vectors of consideration:

- **Description:** What is this document? What kind of document is it? Who created it? When was it created? Was it personal

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<sup>1</sup> American Library Association, *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989), 1, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential>, captured at <https://perma.cc/Y3WE-W6MC>.

or public/shared in some way? Are there any attributes (e.g., notarized, postal marks, tears, etc.) that are present? Can I read it?<sup>2</sup>

- Relationship: For what purpose was this document created? What is the context from which it emerged? To which other documents is it related? Is the context in which I am encountering it the context in which the creator intended? What is unknown about this document?
- Meaning: What sense can I make of this document? Of what does it provide evidence? What interpretative frameworks help to understand this document? What meaning have others attributed to this document? Is the meaning contested?
- Use: How will I use this document in my work? Does it provide supporting evidence for my claims? Does it provide contrary evidence that I need to engage? What is the appropriate way to cite the document?

These vectors are made more complex as learners encounter not just a single document but multiple documents or even multiple collections of documents.

## Primary Source Literacy Instruction

The primary source literacy instructor faces a complex and complicated task. Primary source literacy is a multifaceted set of skills and knowledge. But, responsible educators not only attend to the topic of their instruction, they also develop their instruction in light of the preparation, capacities, and motivations of the learners. As archive, library, and museum educators often teach in the context of other instructors' classes, there is a need to attend to the intentions and goals of these other educators.

These three modules present a wealth of resources for meeting the challenges of primary source literacy instruction. They can be read start-to-finish to build a foundation for practice. Or, they can be dipped into as needed by the busy educator who needs practical ideas or inspiration for that next instruction session.

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<sup>2</sup> This question relates not only to the language of the document but also to the text encoding itself, as even relatively modern cursive writing is no longer easily read by many learners.

Across the modules the reader will find familiar themes from the information literacy literature writ large. The authors have articulated the importance of engaging stakeholders during instruction design, using active learning pedagogies, designing meaningful learning assessments, and drawing on professional standards and guidelines. Uniquely, however, the modules discuss these common themes in the context of archives, specifically, and cultural heritage organizations, more generally. In doing so, these modules bring awareness to contemporary instructional practice in archives and special collections, and begin to fill a gap in the intersection of the archival and information literacy literatures.

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