

Research Competency Guidelines for Literatures in English

Association of College and Research Libraries
Literatures in English Section

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Foreword

"Research Competency Guidelines for Literatures in English" was first developed for use within the Literatures in English Section (LES) of ACRL. Although based on framework of the "ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" (2000), these guidelines address the need for a more specific and source-oriented approach within the discipline of English literatures, including a concrete list of research skills. The original list was compiled by Anne Jordan-Baker (Elmhurst College). The guidelines were further developed by the ACRL Literatures in English Section Ad hoc Committee on Literary Research Competencies.*

On December 10, 2001, the draft guidelines were posted to LES-L, the electronic discussion group, for comments. A revision based on those comments was discussed at the 2002 ALA Midwinter Meeting. The guidelines were also published in the fall 2002 issue of "Biblio-Notes", the LES newsletter, and readers were encouraged to submit comments. A draft based on all information and comments to date was posted to the LES-L group for further review on April 12, 2002. A final draft was presented at the 2002 ALA Annual Conference and was approved by the LES Executive Committee. An updated version of the 2002 draft was distributed to the LES-L members and the Information Literacy Advisory Committee as well as posted on the ACRL Web site. At the 2005 ALA Midwinter Meeting, a hearing was held and the document was further revised to reflect the advice received.

The "Research Competency Guidelines for Literatures in English" draft has been under review and revision during the years in which ACRL was developing policies and procedures for subject-specific information literacy standards. Because of the independent development of these guidelines and ACRL policies, the format and framework of guidelines do not follow the current patterns of information literacy standards. The guidelines draft document has served primarily to facilitate the collaboration of teaching faculty with subject librarians to create effective teaching structures for literary research. An ACRL roundtable discussion at the 11th National Conference is just one example of many in which the subject librarians have shared their success in using the guidelines to improve communication with the faculty they serve.

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* ACRL Literatures in English Section Ad hoc Committee on Literary Research Competencies (1999-2001)

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Purpose of the Guidelines

- To aid students of literatures in English in the development of thorough and productive research skills
- To encourage the development of a common language for librarians, faculty, and students involved with research related to literatures in English
- To encourage librarian and faculty collaboration in the teaching of research methods to students of literatures in English
- To aid librarians and faculty in the development of instructional sessions and programs
- To assist in the development of a shared understanding of student competencies and needs
- To aid librarians and faculty in the development of research methods courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels

Because teaching methods, course content, and undergraduate requirements vary by institution, librarians and faculty may apply these guidelines in different ways to meet the needs of their students. For guidelines on helping students develop general research skills, librarians and faculty may refer to the "ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" at www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm.

Introduction

Most research in literary studies begins with the text, whether it is a paperback novel, the electronic text of a poem on an author's Web site, or an illuminated manuscript in a library's collection. Educators encourage students to gain a deeper understanding of a text by exploring the context of the writing and the interpretations of others, and by developing and supporting their own interpretations. Limited only by their imaginations, students face almost endless opportunities for interpretation of a text.

Research plays an indispensable role in the textual discovery process for students. Good research skills help the literary explorer learn more about the author and the author's world, examine scholarly interpretations of the text, and create new studies and interpretations to add to a body of knowledge. Sometimes the goals of textual discovery and interpretation can get lost in the minutiae of database searching and conforming to specific citation styles. However, it is important for librarians and other educators to remember these goals when helping students develop the research skills necessary for literary exploration.

Outcomes for Undergraduate English or American Literature Majors

I. Understand the structure of information within the field of literary research:

I.1 Differentiate between primary and secondary sources

I.1.i. Learn to discover and use primary source materials in print and in digital repositories, e.g., ECCO and EEBO

I.2 Understand that literary scholarship is produced and disseminated in a variety of formats, including monographs, journal articles, conference proceedings, dissertations, reference sources, and Web sites

I.3 Learn the significant features (e.g., series title, volume number, imprint) of different kinds of documents (e.g., journal articles, monographs, essays from edited collections)

I.4 Differentiate between reviews of literary works and literary criticism

I.5 Understand the concept and significance of peer-reviewed sources of information

I.6 Understand that literary texts exist in a variety of editions, some of which are more authoritative or useful than others

I.7 Understand the authorship, production, dissemination, or availability of literary production. This includes understanding the meanings and distinctions of the concepts of editions, facsimiles, and authoritative editions

II. Identify and use key literary research tools to locate relevant information:

II.1 Effectively use library catalogs to identify relevant holdings at local institutions and print and online catalogs and bibliographic tools to identify holdings at other libraries

II.2 Distinguish among the different types of reference works (e.g., catalogs, bibliographies, indexes, concordances, etc.) and understand the kind of information offered by each

II.3 Identify, locate, evaluate, and use reference sources and other appropriate information sources about authors, critics, and theorists

II.4 Use subjective and objective sources such as book reviews, citation indexes, and surveys of research to determine the relative importance of an author and/or the relevance of the specific work

II.5 Use reference and other appropriate information resources to provide background information and contextual information about social, intellectual, and literary culture

II.6 Understand the range of physical and virtual locations and repositories and how to navigate them successfully

II.7 Understand the uses of all available catalogs and services

III. Plan effective search strategies and modify search strategies as needed:

III.1 Identify the best indexes and databases

III.2 Use appropriate commands (such as Boolean operators) for database searches

III.3 Identify broader, narrower, and related terms or concepts when initial searches retrieve few or no results

III.4 Identify and use subject terms from the MLA International Bibliography and other specialized indexes and bibliographies

III.5 Identify and use Library of Congress subject headings for literature and authors

IV. Recognize and make appropriate use of library services in the research process:

IV.1 Identify and use librarians and reference services in the research process

IV.2 Use interlibrary loan and document delivery to acquire materials not available at one's own library

IV.3 Use digital resource service centers to read and create literary and critical documents in a variety of digital forms

V. Understand that some information sources are more authoritative than others and demonstrate critical thinking in the research process:

V.1 Know about Internet resources (e.g., electronic discussion lists, Web sites) and how to evaluate them for relevancy and credibility

V.2 Differentiate between resources provided free on the Internet and subscription electronic resources

V.3 Develop and use appropriate criteria for evaluating print resources

V.4 Learn to use critical bibliographies as a tool in evaluating materials

VI. Understand the technical and ethical issues involved in writing research essays:

VI.1 Document sources ethically

VI.2 Employ the MLA or other appropriate documentation style

VI.3 Understand the relationship between received knowledge and the production of new knowledge in the discipline of literary studies

VI.4 Analyze and ethically incorporate the work of others to create new knowledge

VII. Locate information about the literary profession itself:

VII.1 Access information about graduate programs and specialized programs in film study, creative writing, and other related fields, and about workshops and summer study opportunities

VII.2 Access information about financial assistance and scholarships available for literary study and related fields

VII.3 Access information on careers in literary studies and use of these skills in other professions

VII.4 Access information on professional associations

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