



Library Anxiety

Promoting an Effective & Inclusive Learning Environment for Students

What is Library Anxiety?

Library anxiety is a widespread phenomenon that has its roots in a lack of training and resources in the public education system. It impacts vulnerable students and inhibits them from learning to use library resources to find the information they need. Library anxiety was first identified and named in 1986. It consists of students being fearful, anxious and intimidated when they need to use the library for a research project, due to the size of the library, not knowing where things are located or how to begin, and being reluctant to ask for help because they assume they should already know (Kuhlthau, 1991; Mellon, 1986).

Library anxiety can impact student success because students may avoid the library and develop poor study habits, such as not attending or learning from library classes or being unable to perform library-related research tasks (Carlile, 2007). Another study finds that library anxiety reduces quality research output in cooperative and collaborative projects (Jiao et al., 2008). Library anxiety also impacts specific populations, including first year students (Jameson et al., 2019; Soria et al., 2015, 2017); first-generation, non-white and lower income students (Black, 2016; Jiao et al., 2004, 2006; Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 1997; Soria et al., 2015); and English as second language (ESL) student populations (Anwar et al., 2004; Carlile, 2007; Wildemuth, 2017).

One possible source of library anxiety is the lack of exposure to libraries in the public school system. Data on California school libraries indicates that 16% of schools don't have libraries at all; only 9% of schools have a credentialed teacher librarian part-time or more; and the ratio of students to librarians is 1:7000+. As indirect evidence of insufficiency, California public school libraries rely on fundraising for 50% of their budgets (California Department of Education, 2019). The bulk of UC Davis students, coming from California, are not exposed to libraries or librarians and are not familiar with the resources we offer.

The extent of library anxiety across undergraduates is alarming. Seventy-five percent express some degree of library anxiety (Abusin & Zainab, 2010; Mellon, 1986). Eighty percent of student responses about libraries were coded with language of fear and anxiety (Mellon 1986). Library anxiety is also correlated with feelings of shame (McAfee, 2018) and deficient library skills:

- 47.8% of undergraduates don't know where to begin their search
- 62.5% of undergraduates feel uncomfortable searching for information
- 67% were averse to doing any research (Blundell & Lambert, 2014)

Library anxiety can be exacerbated by assumptions faculty have about how undergraduate students approach information research (Leckie, 1996), misperceptions students have about the nature of research (Hincliffe et al., 2018) and how research-based writing assignments are designed (Head & Eisenberg, 2010).

Faculty Assumptions about Undergraduate Students and Information Research

Faculty and undergraduates rely on different information research strategies. Faculty experts have a deep understanding of the scholarship and discourse conventions within their discipline. They can leverage citation tracking strategies and professional networks to uncover information. Undergraduates, on the other hand, are novices just beginning their disciplinary exploration. Their exposure to a field may be limited to a single course so their understanding of the information landscape is limited. Their strategy is more about coping with the demands of an assignment rather than developing an approach to information seeking (Leckie, 1996).

Student Misperceptions of Information Research

Mellon (1986) explains, "when confronted with the need to gather information in the library for their first research paper many students become so anxious that they are unable to approach the problem logically or effectively". Students may also assume that other students understand how to use the library and their lack of knowledge is unique to them. This assumption can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and make students reluctant to ask questions for fear of appearing ignorant (Mellon, 1986).



A study by Hinchliffe, Rand & Collier (2018) identified common misconceptions that first year students have about information research and possible learning outcomes to address these misconceptions some of which are described below.

- They believe they are supposed to do research without assistance
- They perceive the library as only a place to get a book or to study
- They think Google is a sufficient search tool
- They believe that research is a linear, uni-directional process, and every question has a single answer

Design of Research Assignments

Students rely on written instructions to inform their approach to research assignments. However, while the instructions typically include parameters for acceptable topics and formatting guidelines, they often lack details about how to begin exploring a topic or develop a search strategy (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). You can alleviate library anxiety and support student learning by providing explicit guidance about how to navigate these common areas of confusion for students.

Areas of Student Confusion and Anxiety	Assignment Instructions
How to choose a topic and generate research questions (Fister, 1992; Kuhlthau, 1991).	Include a list of recommended readings to give students starting points for topics and questions.
Which types of information you expect students to find, evaluate and use (Head & Eisenberg, 2010).	Explain what you mean by <i>scholarly/academic</i> and <i>primary/secondary</i> – definitions can vary between disciplines!
Where to search for scholarly sources (Leckie, 1996; Hinchliffe et al., 2018).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - List core information search tools in your discipline by name. - Link to pertinent library Subject Guides. - Encourage students to talk to a librarian and provide contact details for the library’s research consult desk.
The big picture; a process for approaching research and writing (Leckie, 1996; Hinchliffe et al., 2018).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Divide your assignment into segments with pieces due by specific dates, e.g. - generate guiding research question(s). - search for sources and create an annotated bibliography. - submit research assignment.

Key Teaching Strategies to Address Library Anxiety

- **Acknowledge** library anxiety and **encourage** your students to get [help](#) from library staff (Anwar et al., 2004; Black, 2016). Bring your students to the library.
- **Incorporate** relevant library [subject](#) and [course](#) guides into your research assignment prompts and your Canvas course to help your students do information research more effectively. Our guides are designed to point students to the best library resources for a specific discipline, course or assignment. Research suggests that embedding library guides designed for a specific course increases the discoverability of library resources (Lee et al., 2017).
- **Consult** with a librarian to see how we can help your students develop their information search skills and learn about library resources.
 - Discuss your assignment goals with a librarian so we can recommend possible student learning outcomes and tailor instructional strategies to fit the specific needs of your class (Carlile, 2007; Goebel Brown et al., 2004; Karim & Ansari, 2013; Parks, 2019; Van Scoyoc, 2003; Wildemuth, 2017).



- [Request library instruction](#) that will help your students learn to use library resources. We can schedule an instruction or orientation session for your class particularly for first year students (Carlile, 2007; Erfanmanesh, 2011; Goebel Brown et al., 2004; Karim & Ansari, 2013; Parks, 2019; Van Scoyoc, 2003; Wildemuth, 2017).
- **Be explicit** with students about your expectations for research assignments. For example, what does the design of your research assignment communicate to students?
 - Consider the [design of your writing assignments](#); break a research paper assignment down into discrete steps with short assignments that must be completed by specified dates
 - Make the research process more [transparent](#) for students (Leckie, 1996), e.g. curate course/background sources to help students identify topics and generate potential research questions; have students document/share search strategies and submit annotated bibliographies.
 - Create collaborative research assignments so students can encourage each other while using library resources (Abusin & Zainab, 2010).

Additional Resources

Find the latest articles in these databases:

- [Psycinfo](#) (Psychology database)
- [Eric](#) (Education database)
- [LISTA](#) (Library database)
- [Education Source](#) (Education database)

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