

INFOcus: Use of Information

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Big6 - 4.0: Use of Information

4.1 Engage (e.g., read, hear, view, touch)

4.2 Extract relevant information

HELP ME, MISS LIBRARY LADY!

“OK. So, I found ten books, thirteen journal articles, and eleventy-billion web pages on my topic. So what do I do? I have all this information that my professor says I need for my research paper, which by the way, is due in two days, and “wow” that’s a lot of stuff!”

As a reference librarian in an academic library, I hear similar laments each semester. Sometimes, I hear this statement multiple times a day, depending on how close it is to mid-term or the end of the semester. It’s possible to remedy this overwhelmed feeling with a simple solution - Use of Information (Big6 - 4.0).

Use of Information involves interacting with information when you read, view, touch, and then extract relevant information for the task at hand. For the student who is working on a one-page summary or fourteen-page research paper, using the information that he or she collects is a key step in the overall process.

Adrift in a Sea of Information

The sheer volume of information available to today’s researcher is absolutely incredible. Not only does the academic library contain books, it provides access to print journals, microfilm and microfiche, and electronic databases available on the Internet. Interlibrary loan provides access to physical materials not in the library’s collection. Essentially, the academic library collection has no walls or boundaries. Even though students have nearly unlimited research opportunities, I find the Use of Information stage causes the most stress for my students.

Before we talk about engaging and extracting relevant information, it is important to understand the nature of information in our world today. “Information overload” has become such a common complaint it is cliché, but it describes a very real problem. A recent study revealed that about five exabytes of new information had been produced in one year alone (Regents of California University, 2003). What is an exabyte, you ask? Get out your calculator - five exabytes of information is equal to 37,000 libraries, with each the size of the Library of Congress collection. The Library of Congress has 17 million books in its collection. Clearly, we all need help from Use of Information.

Don’t Worry, Help is on the Way

Engaging information resources can lead to discovery, knowledge, understanding, excitement and enjoyment. Reading a book - for pleasure or education - allows us to learn new ideas and experience wisdom. Unfortunately, not all the information found during Location and Access (Big6 - 3.0) will be relevant. It is necessary to process what is found to determine its usefulness for the project.

If I have a student who is unsure how to find the information she needs in the books she’s found, I encourage her to browse the book’s index. Reading an index is one beneficial method of engaging information because she’ll see all the book’s topics at a glance. One caveat - I find that sometimes

when students realize they have to read or touch a book, they become frantic. But this step is necessary for effective research - unfortunately, all the information will not automatically transfer from book to brain!

Learning styles can provide direction when a student engages information. Visual learners learn best through seeing information, while hearing a lecture or presentation appeals to auditory learners (USD, 2006). The tactile or kinesthetic learner wants to touch or feel the book or journal article to gain understanding. Sometimes students may exhibit multiple learning styles or a preference for one style one day, another style the next day. The student who is a visual learner will read pertinent chapters or sections of a book or journal article to gain knowledge, while the auditory learner may read the article aloud to comprehend meaning. Not all students actively understand and employ learning styles; sometimes it is a natural action on the part of the learner. Yet, as a librarian and educator, I am conscious of learning styles and have in the past, suggested different methods for students to engage their reading material.

The same is true for using scholarly journal articles to find information. Students must read or at least skim the article to determine its usefulness. When using journal articles, I urge my students to pay close attention to the abstract. A good abstract provides a succinct overview of the article, including methodology, approach and results. But, at the same time, I urge students to read more than the abstract, because it does not provide all content found in the article itself.

Also vitally important is the evaluation of web pages. I developed a tutorial that is located on our library [web page](#). Many classes on campus teach students evaluate web pages, however in addition, I teach students to compare two web pages that cover the same topic to develop evaluative skills and to put their knowledge to use in a practical manner. Our students need to learn that the first result in Google, or any search engine, is not always the best result.

Nurse, Get Ready for the Extraction!

After the process of engaging (reading) all the materials found for a research project, paper, or oral presentation, it is necessary to extract the most relevant and useful information. This is when the syllabus or parameters of the assignment can be a guiding light. If the assignment provides specific detail on the topic, direct your students to the keywords in the assignment and have them locate the same or similar words in the research materials. Skimming the material is a useful way to get a sense of the content of a book or journal article. Through the process of skimming a chapter or an article, a student can get a sense of the subject matter and determine its usefulness to the assignment or project.

It takes practice to find the most relevant information. Extracting pertinent information requires concentration, order and discipline (Rudolph, 2000). When reading a book, it is useful to take notes - carefully record relevant page numbers - use note cards or collect notes in a notebook. This practice provides the student with the ability to concentrate on needed information, and return to it when necessary. Important to the note taking process is documentation. It is vital for students to use the proper documentation style when making notes, to prevent the possibility of plagiarism. I developed example [note cards](#) that students can print and use for books, journal articles, and web pages. The examples were developed for a class on study skills that I teach to freshmen students at our university, but the templates are universally relevant and useful.

Two more Use of Information strategies that are simple but incredibly useful are outlining and time management. Developing an outline of the final product can provide direction for the research process (Rudolph, 2000) and is a good way to include all the requirements of the assignment. The outline needs to include topic headings and the information relevant to each section of the paper. Time management is a tool that can provide the student with the necessary hours in the day to work on the assignment. It

is important for students to allow themselves time and space to extract information and make it useful.

Additionally, consider that when the researcher engages in Use of Information, she is actively engaging in Evaluation (Big6 - 6.0), as well. Relevancy can also be decided by determining if the material in the book or journal article supports the argument or thesis statement of the research paper or presentation (Macquaire University, 2006). Information that supports the general idea or problem statement of a paper is information that is useful, relevant, and deserves important consideration.

Student Success

Successful use of information is a skill that is developed over the course of a lifetime of writing papers and delivering presentations. The student who finds relevant information and learns the steps to determine its usefulness exhibits learning outside the classroom. Beyond graduation, the workforce and everyday life is filled with the need to use and understand information. The employee who can effectively engage information and use it in a manner fitting the workplace situation can be a valued employee that benefits the organization. The adult who uses information to make effective daily decisions has the ability to develop pride in the decision making process.

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