

# Information Literacy

Edwina Jordan • Illinois Central College

An introduction to Information Literacy is paramount for student success in the college environment. To foster success for students, I have created a "Welcome to the College Library" question/response sheet. Early in the semester when the students are introduced to the college library, I discuss this activity with a librarian on campus and set up an appointment for the class to meet in a conference room in the library. At that time the questions are handed out to the students. A librarian reviews some of the basics of success in using electronic database materials in the library. To keep the students engaged in the activity, the questions are short answers. Some of the questions from the "Welcome" handout are:

- What does the term "on reserve" mean?
- Are your composition textbooks "on reserve" in the library?
- List 5 links on the college library page.
- What is the most frustrating library experience you have had?

- What are the steps to finding information on a topic? What would you do?
- Is Wikipedia a reliable source for an academic paper? Yes or No? Explain.

To follow-up with this assignment, I use some of the responses to the questions for short paragraphs. For example, during the course of the semester, I ask the students to write on these three project topics: a process paragraph – explaining how they research a topic; a description paragraph – describing how they write a paper using materials from the library; and an argument essay – challenging them to read, focus, and highlight the major points of one article from a library database that supports their point of view.

A confident, alert student emerges from the session. This is a necessary part of college survival and retention, because a student must be aware of the role of the college library in the world of information literacy.



# Midwest Messenger

Two-Year College English Association (TYCA Midwest)

## Greetings from the Chair

Karla Brown • Hawkeye Community College

Welcome back to TYCA-Midwest and to a new academic year. I hope you all had a restful and enriching break and will return to the classroom invigorated and ready to face the challenges of teaching re-energized and re-committed!

The fall semester is a good opportunity to ask ourselves why we teach and what we most hope to see happen for students we serve in our classrooms. A resource I would recommend is a relatively new publication entitled *What Is "College-Level" Writing?*, edited by Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg. The book includes voices from the student, college faculty, high school faculty, and administrative perspectives in addressing the question. None of the essays offers a clear answer to exactly what college-level writing should be, although some suggestions are made; however, reading and discussing the book with colleagues can help a writing department interrogate answers for themselves on a local level in an attempt to smooth students' transition and progress into and through the college composition sequence.

Another wonderful opportunity to "refill your bucket" this fall will be to join us in the wonderful windy city of Chicago for our TYCA-Midwest conference. Held in the Chicago City Centre and Sports Hotel in the heart of downtown, the conference affords us all a chance to interact with colleagues beyond our own institutions and share ideas, expertise, and common concerns. If you are new to TYCA-Midwest, you should know that our conference is warm and friendly, and sessions are less formal and more interactive than is usually true at national conferences. I have attended TYCA-Midwest conferences for more years than I can count and have never returned without practical ideas to apply in my classroom and renewed enthusiasm for my profession.

I am entering my last year of serving on the TYCA-Midwest Executive Board after having served since 2000 when I was appointed to finish out a vacated term. The experience has been so fulfilling for me professionally, and I thank each of you for the assistance and support you have given me. It has been my pleasure to serve, and I encourage you to step forward and get more involved personally in TYCA-Midwest by not only attending and presenting at our regional conferences but also by running for a position on our Executive Board. While my term on the board is winding down, I look forward to working with you in other ways in the future. See you in Chicago!

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# Bridging the Gap Between Researched Information and Critical Thinking

Rossitza Ivanova • Madison Area Technical College

When we teach research writing at the two-year college level, we seek to help students develop a variety of useful (and somewhat “mechanical”) research skills, including the following: ability to search for quality information in different kinds of sources, ability to assess sources’ rhetorical context, ability to understand and represent sources’ ideas, ability to take research notes, and ability to cite and document information correctly. My experience suggests that such skills, while they may be challenging for students to acquire, are also quite teachable and relatively well-demonstrated in students’ research work.

One research skill that, in my view, presents one of the most significant difficulties for English instructors to teach and for college writers to cultivate is the adoption and development of an active research stance: one that encourages students to build up “voices” of their own and to use research information to formulate and express their own thoughts and ideas on an issue. Commonly, student research papers tend to be subsumed by the voices (and occasionally the cacophony) of the sources used. Students’ research writing thus often turns into mere summaries and paraphrases of source information, peppered with some basic attempts at information synthesis. The “formula” for such research papers may look like this: “Source A claims this, which is similar to source’s B argument, which differs from sources C and D, etc, etc.” My concern with this pattern of research work has been that students seem to understand the task of research writing as a task focused primarily on finding information and quotations on a topic and putting that information together in a somewhat organized, meaningful order. It seems to me that students often come to research writing with the wrong notion

that research is about, above all, finding what other people have said about a topic. The research paper, consequently, is the student’s “that’s what I found” statement. The problem with this understanding of research is that it encourages intellectual passivity: there is no sense that students control the research process, that research is driven by intellectual curiosity, and that students have something valuable to say, and contribute, to the researched issue. The authors of a textbook I often use in my English classes – *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing* – call this kind of research papers “data dumps” and “train[s] of boxcar quotations” (601), and these are very adequate metaphors.

One may argue that “data dump” research writing is not totally useless. It does teach and may test some necessary research skills, such the following: how to find sources, how to read sources and select relevant information, how to summarize, paraphrase, and present source information, or how to document sources correctly. While these are undoubtedly important skills, they alone cannot assist students’ growth as research writers.

First and foremost, I think, we want to teach our students that research is driven not merely by the need to gather and regurgitate information but by the need to use existing knowledge and information to create new knowledge or new understanding on an issue. Research, we want to stress, is driven by the writer’s or researcher’s realization that there may be gaps, or misunderstandings, or too many complexities and unanswered questions in a given area. Consequently, the research becomes a process whereby the researcher tries to fill in gaps,

clarify misunderstandings, sort out some complexities, and/or seek answers to pressing and complex questions.

Accordingly, the first strategy in teaching an active understanding of research is not merely to assign a topic for research, but rather to encourage students to explore what may be significant gaps or complex questions within that topic: gaps and questions that may be worthwhile addressing through research. I am confident that this is a common strategy that many research writing teachers use currently: we ask students to begin research by formulating research questions rather than by simply picking up a research topic. Yet, we also know that teaching the skill of formulating good research questions and helping students develop intellectual curiosity about a topic remain challenging tasks. Thus, the rest of my article seeks to share one approach I have used to stimulate students’ ability to seek and identify complexities within a given topic, and to formulate adequate research questions that are also driven by students own interests and thought process.

The first step in the strategy I have used is to assign – what I call – “thought-starter texts.” These are texts that engage with some complex social issues, has the potential to arouse students’ curiosity and could prompt them to raise some complex, challenging questions of their own: questions that they will use research to explore and try to respond to. The “thought-starter texts” that I have used are **visual** and my idea has been that a visual text may be particularly suitable for this task for two major reasons: Firstly, images are immediate and, if they are well-constructed and meaningful, they can stimulate some intellectual engagement right away. Secondly, I thought that a visual text demands that students adopt a somewhat active interaction with a

*continued on pages 6 and 7*

- the role of mainstream advertising and fashion industry in women’s self-image
- female fashion and health
- fashion for women and female empowerment
- fashion for women and female “disempowerment”

If an instructor chooses to assign the above exercise, he/she may use the chance to point out that the topics listed are still rather broad. In themselves they do not provide a clear direction for research: they just outline a “territory” for research. Thus, to focus and direct their research, students need to formulate specific and interesting questions within the above topics. So the major goal for the class remains focused on the challenging task of formulating research questions.

To prompt students to think about contested and significant issues within the topics suggested by the ad, I ask students to spend time in their groups, free writing, brainstorming and discussing ways in which they may disagree with the spoof ad. I ask them to actively seek gaps and weaknesses in the spoof ad’s “messages.” Even though they may support the spoof ad’s ideas, I ask them to actively look for faults in the ad’s message and imagine reasons why they, or other viewers (who may dislike or disagree with the spoof ad), could criticize the ad. In short, the students’ task it to play the “devil’s advocate.” Students are often slow or reluctant to take up the challenge, but eventually they get into the task, and their discussions produce generate at a least a few interesting, adequate and significant disagreements. For instance, students have come up with ideas such as these:

- Women are not necessarily “victims” of fashion industry and advertising. Women are often able to pick and choose from the various fashion ideas promoted today and they could use these ideas to develop a self-satisfying, positive, and healthy self-image.

- The spoof ad almost suggests that women don’t have free will or can’t make independent and rational decisions about their own bodies. We are not convinced that women follow fashion body styles so readily and without doubt: many women know where to draw the line.
- Are only white women affected by “white” fashion models/ideas? (This refers to the fact that the body on the spoof ad is unmistakably that of a white woman.) The ad maybe ignores how women of other races may be affected by mainstream advertising.
- Are women the only “victims” of fashion? Doesn’t the fashion industry create “obsessions for men”, too? (This observation is related to another spoof ad on the same site, which features an “Obsession for Men” theme. The “male” spoof ad is funny and definitely not as harsh and bleak as the female one.)

I encourage and help students to think about how they may turn these observations into (initial) research questions. Possible research questions that ensue from the above discussion include the following:

- What is the influence of the fashion and advertising industry on contemporary women: does it work to empower or to disempower women?
- How and why has the image of the “skinny” woman become a dominant symbol of female beauty? What are the problems and contradictions of this beauty ideal?
- How has the image of female beauty in the US changed in the last century and what are the cultural reasons for these changes?
- Do fashion and advertising standards really influence women’s self-image that much? If “yes,” why should women

(unlike men) be so vulnerable to that influence?

- “Does advertising affect women’s self-image more than it affects men’s? Why is that so?”
- Are there elements of racism and sexism in contemporary fashion advertising?

Overall, the strategy has been successful in that it has managed to engage students in a subject, has prompted them to be active thinkers from the moment they engage with a source, and has helped them develop the skill of starting research with a particular significant research question in mind. I should also add in conclusion that the Adbusters website, which is central to the research strategy I have discussed, could also be used for other college writing projects. These include but are not limited to the following: image analysis, comparison and contrast, analysis/response paper, gender studies papers, and so on.

Work Cited  
Rummage, John D., John C. Bean and June Johnson. *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing*, 4th Ed. (Brief Edition). Pearson/Longman, 2005.

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source from the very beginning: because the visual source communicates meaning without words, students are placed in a situation where they have to grasp the meaning or the main argument of the visual text and “translate” it into their words. In this way, and very early on in the research project, the instructor can communicate the idea that “gathering information” from sources is never a passive process but requires active thinking and engagement from the research writer.

The visual texts I used come from a gallery of spoof ads, created and maintained by Adbusters, whose main publications include the *Adbusters* magazine and the Adbusters website at <http://www.adbusters.org/home/>.

For the first class period dedicated to the research project, I use a computer lab so that students can access the Adbusters website and their gallery of spoof ads. I give students the web address and pass around a few *Adbusters* magazines. Students spend about 15 minutes exploring the website, working on the task of trying to understand and assess its rhetorical contexts and cultural-social agendas. I advise them to use the “About Us” link on the website, to check the different links on the site, to go quickly through the spoof ad gallery, and to check the national campaigns that the website sponsors (for instance, “TVTurn off” and “Buy Nothing Day”). Students can also use the magazines I have brought to develop or supplement their exploration of the site’s agenda. The students’ ultimate task is to tell me what they think of the source, by responding to questions such as these: what is the purpose of the website? what is the intended audience? what are some of the values that the website promotes? what are some of its biases? Once again, this brief exercise encourages students’ active involvement with a source and, typically, I get “correct” assessments of the Adbusters site: it promotes liberal ideas, seeks to challenge accepted cultural and

political norms, adopts activist stance, focuses on parodying advertisements and drastically reversing their meaning, and criticizes the consumerism of our culture. Some students also correctly point out that the website may be biased and counter-productive:

it is intended primarily for an audience that already shares the ideas expressed, it is too radical and idealistic, and is perhaps unable to “win” a conservative audience. Because the website is both thought-provoking and controversial it has the potential to spark discussions and disagreements among class members, which is one of the purposes of this exercise. I do want students to be involved and to seek controversies and/or gaps within a text rather than to just summarize its “message” and ideas. Typically, they engage with the source, regardless of whether they subscribe to the website’s ideas or are critical of them.

Next, students spend time discussing the “Spoof Ads” gallery. I give them about 15-20 minutes to work in groups of four or five, studying the ads and select just **one** that appeals to them (that is, an ad that raises issues that students can relate to and feel they may have something to say about). After the small group discussion and the selection of ads, each group presents their ad to the class. I invite one representative of each group to come to my computer (which has a projector attached), show the ad and explain why the group selected it. The groups selected a variety of spoof ads.

For the sake of brevity, and since I just want to present an example rather than a fully-developed class plan, I will focus on discussing our work with just one group’s images; their topic was “Obsession for Women.” The ad shows the bare back of a

painfully skinny woman, who is leaning over a nearby toilet to vomit. The style and font of the text “obsession for women,” remind the viewer of Giorgio Armani’s perfume ads for women. Both the image and the caption suggest that women’s fashion ads in general promote a sickly and an oppressive image of female beauty: one so obsessed with thinness that it may both glorify and encourage anorexia.

In fact, students’ home assignment following the class is to develop a brief description and an analysis similar to the one above (students’ analyses are more detailed as I ask them to write about one page on this task.) Students have to interpret the main argument/s that the ad is making by responding to questions such as these: What is the selected ad trying to do? What are the key ideas and arguments that the selected ad is making? What are the specific conclusions that the ad provides regarding the concepts and products that that are being mocked and “spoofed”? I also invite students to find and consider a “real” ad that the spoof ad is arguing against. This assists their understanding of the arguments that the spoof ad is making.

Next class begins with brainstorming for an interesting and significant question – or a series of 2 to 3 related questions – that the ads trigger. The question/s may have a very direct relationship to the ad or be a spin-off from it. We spend most of the class discussing what it means to come up with an interesting, significant and complex research question.

As a warm-up exercise, the instructor may ask students to identify a few topic areas or key words associated with their chosen ad. For instance, the spoof ad “Obsession for Women” could generate the following list of topics or key words:

- social-cultural ideals of female beauty (in the US)

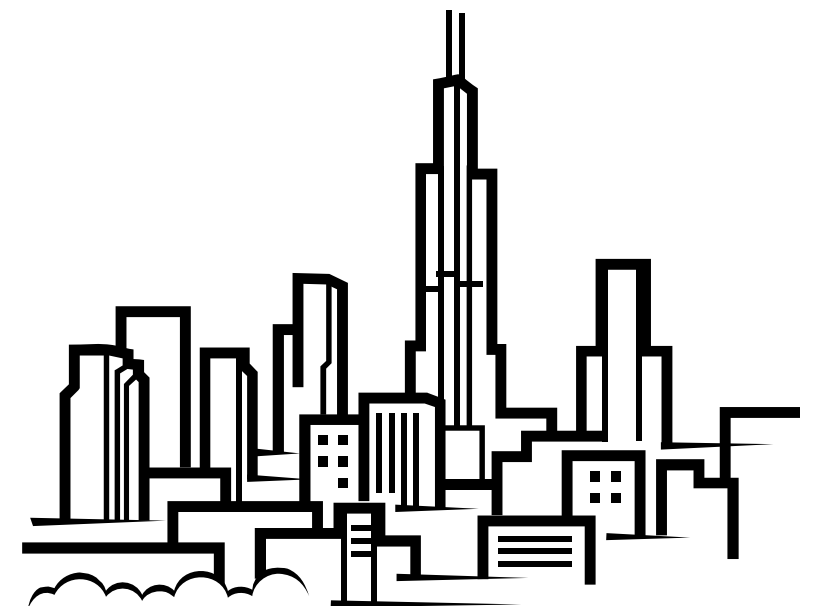
## open ROADS, open SKIES, open MINDS: giving VOICE to the JOURNEY

Jane Wagoner • Wright College  
2007 TYCA Midwest Program Chair

The 2007 TYCA Midwest annual conference will be held in Chicago, Illinois at The Chicago City Centre Hotel and Sports Club from October 4-6.

For the first time, this conference will be hosted by the City Colleges of Chicago—Richard J. Daley College, Kennedy-King College, Malcolm X College, Olive Harvey College, Harry S. Truman College, Harold Washington College, and Wright College. The proposals are in and the planning committee is working diligently to insure a successful conference. All we need now is YOU! Come join us in Chicago for an exciting conference that provides stimulating sessions, a great location (near the Magnificent Mile and Navy Pier), and opportunities to learn and network with colleagues who share the challenges and rewards of teaching in today’s classrooms—both face-to-face and virtual.

Registration forms and additional information regarding the conference are available at the TYCA Midwest web site (<http://www.tycamw.org>). While the conference hotel block of rooms has been sold out, there are some suggestions for hotels at our TYCA Midwest web site. If you have any questions regarding the conference, please contact Jane Wagoner, 2007 Program Chair, at [jwagoner@ccc.edu](mailto:jwagoner@ccc.edu). The City Colleges of Chicago is pleased to host this outstanding conference and we welcome your participation in what promises to be an exciting weekend in Chicago.



**October 4-6**

— FOR MORE INFORMATION —

### **TYCA Midwest**

<http://www.tycamw.org>

### **City Colleges of Chicago**

<http://www.ccc.edu>

### **Magnificent Mile**

<http://www.themagnificentmile.com>

### **Navy Pier**

[http://www.navypier.com/  
intro\\_animation.html](http://www.navypier.com/intro_animation.html)

## Fall 2007 TYCA Midwest Executive Committee Nominations

### Ruth Fairchild

#### TYCA Midwest Secretary

Ruth Fairchild has been an instructor at Ridgewater College in Willmar, Minnesota, since 1994. Her teaching career began at a high school in Minnesota but also has taken her to a variety of schools and colleges and to Alaska and Vermont. In addition to teaching many sections of composition, Ruth also teaches introductory speech communication courses. When she teaches literature, she prefers courses that focus on memoir or regional writers. Since Ruth's other job is as mother of two school-age children, she spends her extra time in the bleachers cheering for them. You might have seen her—she's the one reading essays between plays. Ruth has served as on the TYCA Midwest Executive Board as the Secretary since fall of 2005.

### Carol Luvert

#### TYCA Midwest Membership Chair

Carol Luvert has been an instructor of communications at Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo, Iowa, since August 2000. From 2001-2003, she served as the secretary for Hawkeye Professional Educators Association (HPEA) and as a member on the Teaching and Learning (TLC) committee. From 2002-2003, she served on the Curriculum Coordinating Committee and as chair of that committee for the 2003-2004 school year. In February of 2003, her second year of teaching at Hawkeye, she was awarded the Faculty of the Year at HCC by her colleagues. She has chaired the search committee for several positions both administrative and faculty. In past years she was a member of the President's Advisory Team (PAT) and a member of the HPEA Executive Board. In addition, Carol has presented at several regional conferences the results of the Communication's Department portfolio study, which is an assessment of the composition courses at the college. Since 2005 she has been the liaison for the communications courses taught in the local high schools. This position involves meeting with instructors in the high schools and coordinating the assessment efforts to make sure that all communications courses, especially composition, taught in the high school are considered collegiate in content. In addition to her teaching experience at HCC, she taught from 1992-2000 at Hamilton College in Cedar Falls and was a substitute teacher for the Waterloo School District from 1989-1992. She has an AAS degree in Horticulture from Hawkeye and obtained both her BA and MA in English from the University of Northern Iowa.

### Nancy McMahon

#### TYCA Midwest Adjunct Representative

Nancy McMahon teaches English courses and in the Writing Center at various locations for Madison Area Technical College, Madison, Wisconsin. As part-time faculty, she teaches 50% or less each semester but actually serves many more hours for her students, the MATC Part-Time Teachers' Union, and MATC. College committees range from the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), Learning Systems Quality Improvement Process (LSQIP), Certification, and MATC Reads, to English Department committees concerning curriculum and assessment, and many other committees present and past. A member of AAUP, NCTE, CCCC, and TYCA for many years, she has presented/co-presented sessions at the CCCC (Professional Equity Project Grant recipient 2002 and 2005), and TYCA (co-winner of Adjunct Proposal Award 1998 and 2005). Publications: TYCA Midwest Messenger article winter 2006, CCCC Forum articles 2002, 2006, and Adjunct Advocate Magazine articles 1998 and 1999. A long-time advocate for contingent faculty, Nancy established inclusion for two-year college part-time faculty in the Wisconsin State Retirement System through a successful case in 1996, the same year AFT Local 6100, MATC Part-Time Teachers' Union, was organized. Since then, she has served on their Executive Board as ranking steward since 1996, on many union committees, and is currently vice president and a member of the contract negotiations team. The compensation and recognition of work load of writing teachers has long been an issue at MATC, so current Local 6100 contract negotiations are once again attempting to address some of the inequities faced by faculty serving high maintenance and under-prepared students. Nancy earned BS and MST degrees from the University of Wisconsin Platteville and has completed graduate work at UW Madison and the George Washington University, Washington, D.C. She taught at Mineral Point and Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin and El Paso, Texas High Schools before teaching at MATC.

\*The TYCA Midwest Fall 2009 Conference will be hosted by MATC in downtown Madison. As a docent for the Madison Trust for Historic Preservation walking tours, Nancy hopes to use the resources of MTHP to create a walking tour of present and historic locations of schools, homes, and workplaces of noted writers and journalists from the area and other points of interest.

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