

Building and Assessing Information Literacy Skills With an Inquiry Notebook

What is an Inquiry Notebook?

An Inquiry Notebook is a place where students record, in detail, the activity and thinking surrounding their research. This includes what questions they ask, where they go to find their information, how they search for their information (keywords etc.), and their notes, reflections, questions, and evaluation of the information they find. The notebook also is a place for students to record complete citations to the works they examine.

The Inquiry Notebook can take the form of a handwritten spiral binder, a computer generated three ring notebook, or an online posting or blog.

Whatever form the final notebook takes, it is important that students keep accurate notes AT THE TIME OF RESEARCH to ensure that the level of detail needed to monitor and assess their progress is available. Providing an example of what an “A” notebook entry looks like can help students understand what is expected.

Benefits Of An Inquiry Notebook

Inquiry based projects focus on large themes and concepts and often involve research that asks students to seek information from multiple sources and points of view. Students are then asked to evaluate, analyze, reflect and synthesize the information from the sources they have found and to communicate their findings to an audience. Typically most freshmen have no idea how to do research of this complexity in a college environment. Consequently, when they begin their inquiry they are confused and research is often conducted in a haphazard or random fashion. Keeping an inquiry notebook helps students to avoid “random research” by forcing them, through journaling, to initiate, follow, evaluate, and reflect on a research path and process. Through the journaling students will discover that research is filled with side roads, tangents, and dead ends, but they will also learn that with perseverance, flexibility, creative thinking, and the willingness to ask for help, there is a positive end result. Journaling a research path also helps students to develop good research habits and stay organized by requiring them to keep track of what databases they search, what they type in, how they modify their searches, and what they find. This eliminates having to recheck sources and repeat research.

Inquiry notebooks can also help students avoid inadvertent plagiarism. Keeping careful notes on their research makes it easy to link quotations and ideas to the original sources and to use information ethically.

Although the Inquiry Notebook functions well as an organizational and self-assessment tool for the student without any instructor involvement, it can also be used as a valuable tool to help you to assess your students’ research process, and, if necessary, to redirect and guide their research and reflection in a different direction. Depending on how you set up the Inquiry Notebook in your class, you could monitor student progress by reviewing and commenting online, or by asking students to bring their notebooks to every class and collecting some or all of them at unspecified intervals. If you meet with students during the research process the notebook is a perfect launching pad to initiate discussion and feedback.

And finally, good research is imperative for good research writing. Comments from instructors who have used notebooks or research logs indicate that a student’s ability to pose questions of their sources, to wonder about context, to connect ideas together, and to summarize and quote passages of text worth commenting on all show improvement.

Please see the attached document of what an Inquiry Notebook assignment might look like in the context of your class and contact me if you have any questions.

Example of What An Inquiry Notebook Assignment Might Look Like

Relationship To Course Content Objectives

One of the goals of this class is to help you become life-long learners through promoting the development of the skills and critical thinking required to locate, access, evaluate, and use information effectively. Throughout this assignment you will keep a log in a notebook of everything you do related to your research for your essay. This notebook is a record of your thinking and activity related to your research. It is also a place to record your developing understanding about your topic, to jot down ideas and questions, to record your progress—or lack of it—and to identify areas where you need help. It is also a place for you to talk back to me and tell me how you're doing.

Your Interest in & Understanding of the Topic

Once you've chosen a topic of inquiry, you will narrow that to *one specific question or aspect* of the topic and make a plan for how to answer it through both library and first-hand research. A good topic is one that will sustain your interest. It is also one about which you can locate sources of information in scholarly journals housed in our university library, and about which you can conduct your own first-hand research.

Begin by going to the Meriam library and asking one of the *professional reference librarians* on the second floor to help you identify and search relevant indexes that deal with your topic of inquiry. You can also consult the Research Assignment Guide linked to WebCT for this course. After you begin your research you may find that your topic shifts or changes based on the information you find. This is fine and is a part of what research is all about.

Purpose

You will keep an inquiry notebook for two reasons:

1. ***For you*** —
 - the inquiry notebook helps you to become a good researcher (sometimes referred to as being information literate) by helping you reflect upon the research process itself, where to go, what words to search by, what works, what doesn't, and when to ask for help.
 - the inquiry notebook is an excellent way to save time and to keep track of where your mind and body have been already in the inquiry process, to keep from rechecking sources you've already checked, for instance; and it's a great way to record ideas you might otherwise forget or find your way back to an article you decide to use at the last minute.
 - the inquiry notebook will help you to *reflect on what you're finding*. Keeping detailed notes will make you think back over your work (so you should always do the entry at the end of a session or day when you've been working on the project), "gather it up," and consider it as you write. From this, you will find yourself making more connections,

learning more, and advancing your project more quickly and efficiently than you would without the log. The notebook, in other words, serves as structured place for you to think back over what you've done and jot down future plans.

- by encouraging you to keep careful records of where you have been and what you have found, including citations for the sources you have consulted, an inquiry notebook gives you the information you need to use information ethically and minimizes your chances of inadvertently plagiarizing sources you use in your writing

2. *For me* —

- the inquiry notebook lets me see your progress, help steer you toward useful sources and away from trouble, in other words guide your research process as needed.
- the inquiry notebook helps me understand your thinking and approaches to research, which helps me improve my teaching of your course.

Audience

You and I are the audience for the log. Write to yourself about what you have done and what you intend to do next. Write to me to tell me of your progress and to identify ways I may help you.

Conventions & Genre or Form

The inquiry notebook is somewhat informal, but very *detailed*. Keeping the notebook is simple: in a computer word-processing document (transcribed from handwritten notes, if you wish), record the date, the nature of any activity, and the amount of time spent on it. On days when you don't work on the project, don't make an entry. The entries should be *specific* (like a journal) and record your thinking and activities in enough detail to help you recall your work weeks later. This includes information such as the name of the database(s) you searched, the search words you used, the people you talked to, etc.

Sources of Information

Although you may not find or choose to use something from the resources listed below, you are required to search for all of them and to reflect on what you did or did not find and why. For example, you are asked to find books related to your topic. Explain where you went to search for books, what keywords you used, and give complete bibliographic citations for books you might find useful. If you didn't find any books, explain why you think there were no useful books.

- Book
- Scholarly Journal Article
- Popular Articles
- Newspaper
- Primary Sources (could be in the form of any of the above but must be noted as to what makes it a primary source, and how you approached your search for a primary source)

Jot down *all the bibliographic information for any printed source* you consult or that you think looks like a possible source; then later, you'll have the necessary information to retrieve the item and compose an MLA-style citation for your annotated bibliography and Works Cited page. If you're not sure what information you will need consult the MLA stylebook. Write a few sentences reminding yourself *what the piece is about* and *why you think it might be useful* for your project. Also record the names and contact information for people you consult regarding your project.

Assessment

I'll collect your log regularly throughout the semester. *Bring it to class every day, prepared to turn in at any time.* Please keep a cumulative log throughout the semester, handing in the whole notebook to me each time it is due. Please use a dedicated folder for the inquiry notebook only. Your notebook will count as a significant portion of your grade in the course, and my judgment of its quality will be based on how thoroughly it describes your inquiry process, including thoughts and activities, throughout the term.