Abstract

Librarians use subject guides to introduce students to library materials. Surveys, usability tests, and usage statistics demonstrate that students do not relate well to subject guides. We suggest that library resources organized or delivered at a course level are more in line with how undergraduate students approach library research.
Students, Librarians, and Subject Guides: Improving a Poor Rate of Return

Brenda Reeb and Susan Gibbons

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This article examines the apparent disconnect between how library subject guides fit into the undergraduate student's and the librarian's mental models of information organization within academic disciplines. We find evidence of this problem in surveys, usability tests, and usage statistics: the data indicates that students do not relate well to subject guides. Yet, librarians continue to produce and rely on them as tools for introducing students to library materials. Recognizing this disconnect can provide the foundation for changes that better align guides with student needs when conducting their library research.

History of Subject Guides

Library subject guides, sometimes called pathfinders or research guides, are usually annotated bibliographies of reference materials, Websites, databases, and journals within a specific discipline. Most often the guides list basic sources rather than serve as comprehensive bibliographies, although some are, in fact, very inclusive. Dating back to at least the 1970s, subject guides were conceived of as print starting points for research in a discipline or on a topic and as curriculum tools for bibliographic instruction. The guides helped library users find materials or helped those unfamiliar with a discipline understand the key sources.

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