

# The Introverted Instructor: Tackling Library Instruction When It's Out of Your Comfort Zone

*Ginelle Baskin*

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Readers will be able to

- understand the challenges faced by introverted instructors in library settings;
- implement strategies to overcome nervousness associated with library instruction and build confidence as a library instructor; and
- acquire practical preparation techniques for library instruction.

## Introduction

When you are an introvert like I am, library instruction duties can be challenging. Okay, they can be more than just challenging. They can be downright terrifying. Sometimes just the thought of standing up in front of a bunch of people can make me squeamish. In fact, when I first started as a library instructor, I would actually feel physically ill before

teaching a class. My palms would sweat, my heart would race, my voice would shake, and my stomach would be doing somersaults. It was more than a case of the jitters for me. Being a library instructor was completely out of my comfort zone. However, with time and practice, it has gotten easier, and now, I dare say, I enjoy being a library instructor. Rather than dreading library instruction duties, I actually look forward to them. So, how did I make this transition from being a nervous wreck before a class to being calm, cool, and collected? And how does my introverted personality affect my overall approach to teaching? Let me share with you some of the challenges that I faced as an introverted instructor and explore what has helped me become more comfortable in the library instructor role. I'll talk about what training helped and what training didn't, and I'll offer practical tips and strategies for how you can prepare for teaching a library class yourself.

## **My Personality and Teaching Background**

Let me start by sharing a little bit about myself and my teaching background. As for my personality, I have always considered myself to be an introvert. An introvert is a colloquial term often used for “people who are quiet, reserved, thoughtful, and self-reliant and who tend to prefer solitary work and leisure activities,” and it is also normal for introverts “to mull things over before formulating a reaction, and their energy is replenished by time spent alone.”<sup>1</sup> In general, I'd say this is a fairly accurate description of my personality. As for social interaction, it's not that I don't like being around people, because I do. In fact, interacting with patrons and helping them is one of the things I love the most about being a librarian. It's just that my first tendency in a social situation is to sit back, observe, and keep to myself. When I began thinking about possible careers, being a teacher was not at the top of my list. In fact, when I decided to pursue a career as a librarian, it never even occurred to me that teaching might be part of my job duties. I loved learning and loved being a student, but I never saw myself fitting into a “teacher” role. Too much interaction, too much public speaking, too much out of my comfort zone.

Nevertheless, despite my best efforts to run away from teaching, I found myself in two librarian positions with teaching duties. My first teaching experience came as a school librarian at a rural elementary school that served approximately 500 students in grades PreK through the fifth grade. I was responsible for managing the library while also teaching seven library classes each day. This was a trial-by-fire experience for me, especially since I was hired prior to completing my student teaching requirements. I quickly learned just how challenging and time-consuming it was to create weekly lesson plans from scratch and to customize them to six different grade levels. I also learned that being a teacher was exhausting! Physically, mentally, and emotionally. I struggled with classroom management, and the daily expectations of the job were overwhelming. I frequently experienced bouts of laryngitis because my voice was so worn out from talking all day, and I often felt unappreciated by and isolated from the other teachers in the school.

My second teaching experience came as a user services librarian at a large academic library. My main duties consisted of reference, instruction, and liaison work. The library classes I taught were primarily one-shot sessions taught to freshmen and sophomores. Due

to the pandemic, most of the classes in my first year were taught remotely via Zoom. In my second and third years, most of my classes were back to being in-person. In general, I found the academic library setting to be a much better fit for me. During the busiest times of the semester, I would teach two to three library classes a week, which was much more manageable than what I had experienced as a school librarian. However, I still found myself grappling at times with how to approach library instruction as an introvert and how to overcome my uneasiness in the instructor role.

## Challenges of Being an Introverted Instructor

As an introverted instructor, I faced three main challenges: nervousness, fear of making a mistake, and feeling like an impostor. The first and most obvious challenge was nervousness. This is something I still deal with occasionally, especially if it's been a while since teaching my last class. However, I've learned that the more I teach, the less nervous I am. It often just takes getting over that initial hump to feel comfortable in the instructor role again. Another thing that helped me immensely is realizing that the students are not judging me nearly as much as I think they are. Consider the perspective of Scott Berkun, a public speaker, who thinks that most people listening to presentations are simply hoping you will end soon and aren't really thinking about you at all.<sup>2</sup> Knowing this helps me focus more on the content of my class rather than worrying about what students might be thinking about me.

Another challenge I faced as an introverted instructor was being afraid of making a mistake. Berkun points out: "If you'd like to be good at something, the first thing to go out the window is the notion of perfection. Every time I get up to the front of the room, I know I will make mistakes."<sup>3</sup> For myself, I've learned that striving for perfection often leads to unnecessary anxiety. For instance, early on in my career, I would worry about trivial things like my appearance or if my Southern accent made me sound less intelligent. I eventually learned to relax and not stress about these things. I learned that mistakes are inevitable and that there is no such thing as a "perfect library instructor" or a "perfect library class." I still strive to do a good job and to improve, of course, but I've learned not to sweat the small stuff, like when a database crashes, or, gasp, when a student falls asleep in one of my classes. I've also learned that it is okay to say, "I'm not sure about that. Let me find out and get back to you." Besides taking the pressure off myself to be perfect, this attitude also models for students that we are all a community of learners. By admitting when I don't know something, I am demonstrating that I am willing to learn right along beside them.

Another challenge I've dealt with as a library instructor is my struggle with imposter syndrome. Although I'm not certain this necessarily has anything to do with being an introvert, it is something that can definitely affect your self-confidence as a teacher. Found in faculty and students alike, imposter syndrome is "a subjective experience of phoniness in people who believe that they are not intelligent, capable, or creative despite evidence of high achievement, and who are highly motivated to achieve but live in perpetual fear of being 'found out' or exposed as frauds."<sup>4</sup> These feelings of self-doubt can be crippling, and I've fought against them as both a teacher and a librarian. I've found myself playing the comparison game, assuming that other librarians must be smarter or more qualified than

I am. For me, the best way to overcome these negative thoughts is to shift my focus to my own successes. I remind myself of what I do well and think back on praise I've received from faculty, students, and other librarians. This helps validate my value and expertise and pumps me up to have a good class.

## My Training

As for my training, I took one formal instruction course as part of my initial graduate program in information science, and I honestly don't remember much about it now. From what I recall, the class was mostly grounded in theory. I remember taking away more from my other classes, which focused on practical skills like how to search databases or were focused on a specific type of library. Maybe that's just because that's what I was interested in. When I later returned to graduate school to become certified for school librarianship, I took a few education courses. Again, these courses covered aspects of instruction, but I still don't feel like I received much practical, hands-on training. It felt more like an overview of topics related to instruction. Therefore, most of my "real" training came on the job.

The two main things that helped me the most as a new library instructor were observing other library instructors and having hands-on experience. Observing other librarians in the classroom helped me in so many ways. It helped me to see how other librarians organized class content, how they interacted with students and faculty, how they incorporated activities into the class, and what kinds of search examples they used. When I first started my job as a user services librarian, I was fortunate that my boss arranged for me to observe several different librarians in our department teach a variety of different classes. This was great because I was able to see how each one put their own unique spin on it. For example, one librarian began the class by explaining why it's better to start your research on the library web page rather than starting with Google, and another librarian started by telling a personal story. Some instructors liked to provide handouts, while others relied heavily on using the classroom whiteboard. I learned that you don't have to teach a class exactly the same way a co-worker does it, and it's okay to put your personality into it. It was also helpful to get an idea of how long I should talk and what questions students might ask. So, when you are starting, I highly recommend that you take a few weeks to observe other library instructors at your institution if you can.

## How I Prepare for a Class

So, how do I prepare for teaching a library class? Here are a few tips and strategies that work for me. I hope they will be beneficial to you.

### Make an Outline

I make an outline for each class I teach. This helps me to plan and organize the content I want to cover. These were very detailed outlines when I started (see appendix A) but are less detailed now (see appendix B). Do not write out what you plan to say word-for-word.

## EXCERPT 1 FROM APPENDIX A: VERY DETAILED OUTLINE EXAMPLE

### English 1020 Outline (Zoom)

#### Introduction

- A. Introduce myself
- B. Goal: I am going to show you how to utilize library resources to gather sources that are credible and useful.
- C. Start at library homepage. Why???

  - a. Why not start at Google/Wikipedia? They are great for getting background info, exploring topics, getting keywords. NOT something you want to cite as a source in a college paper.
  - b. Library pays for a subscription for you to access these databases, so you need to access them through our website. On or off campus.

- D. How to access Course Research Guide (put URL in chat)
- E. Cover 3 main library tools (databases) In each database, I'll show you ways to keep your sources organized.
- F. Evaluating sources tab: Questions to ask, scholarly vs. popular (scholarly is gold standard)
- G. "Choosing a topic" tab:
  - Resources to consult when looking for ideas
  - I'd love for you to share your topics with me as we go along because I can use those in our search examples. (share link in chat and show how to post)

## EXCERPT 2 FROM APPENDIX B: LESS DETAILED OUTLINE EXAMPLE

### English 1020 Outline

#### Introduction

- A. Mentimeter poll
- B. *Goal:* Demonstrate 3 tools for finding sources for your assignments with time for hands-on practice
- C. *Topics covered:*
  - How to explore topics & search in library databases
  - Evaluating sources
  - Search strategies/choosing keywords

#### Start at Library Website

1. Research Guides>ENGL 1020 Guide
2. Evaluating Sources Tab
  - Brief explanation of scholarly vs. popular sources

You will be tempted to read from your script instead of looking at your audience. Instead, bring it with you as a backup in case you need it.

## Know Your Content

Familiarize yourself with the assignment your students will be working on and spend a good amount of time navigating the databases and web pages you will be showing. I've found that most faculty are happy to share assignments with me, and I generally reach out to them via email about a week before a class to touch base, ask for the assignment if I don't already have it, and see if they have any questions for me. I prepare search examples specific to each assignment, and I practice walking through them to see how they turn out. Also, try to anticipate what questions you might receive.

## Practice, Practice, Practice

While I know this is not groundbreaking advice, I can't emphasize enough how important it is. For me, personally, I feel much more at ease when I come into a class knowing that I have practiced and that I am prepared. It calms my nerves and builds my confidence. I also recommend practicing in the actual space, if possible, to get comfortable and familiarize yourself with the technology, especially if it's your first time in that classroom. It can also be beneficial to routinely have a colleague observe one of your classes and give feedback. Although this is something I have only done once and it can be tricky to schedule during busy times of the semester, I wish I did this more often because I think it's a good practice.

## Be Prepared for the Unexpected

No matter how prepared you are, there will be times when things do not go according to plan. So, be flexible and ready to change course if necessary. One thing I've learned from experience is to have handouts ready to go in case of technology issues. Also, be prepared to change your mode of delivery at the drop of a hat. There have been several times I've had to unexpectedly teach a class on Zoom when it was supposed to be in person. Another possibility I've experienced myself is a professor asking you to show a database that you had not planned to cover. Once I was asked to teach a freshman library orientation in a building across campus with only an hour's notice. We normally have our freshmen classes complete a scavenger hunt in the library on iPads, so I had to quickly come up with a different game plan. You'll learn to pivot and make adjustments on the fly. Although these circumstances are not always ideal, prepare yourself mentally for them the best you can.

## Be Authentic

Each of us has our own unique teaching personality, and that's perfectly fine. Don't try to mimic someone else. If your personality is naturally quiet and subdued like I am, don't feel like you must reinvent yourself to be boisterous and outgoing in the classroom. If you do that, you'll probably come across as fake. Rather, put forth the effort to be friendly

and engaging, but remain true to yourself. Students will connect with you more when you are authentic.

## Develop a Teaching Mindset

I do this by taking advantage of professional development opportunities, both at my university and online. This helps me to grow as a teacher and to stay fresh and current. At my university, for example, I completed a faculty fellows program where I wrote a teaching philosophy statement and where I was observed by a colleague. Other things that have helped me develop a teaching mindset are attending library instruction workshops and participating in faculty book groups.

## Conclusion

Even if you do all the things I suggest in this chapter, there is no guarantee that any of it can truly prepare you for being a library instructor. In my opinion, what truly helps the most is hands-on experience. To use the analogy of riding a bike, no matter how much I may try to explain to you how to do it, eventually, you just need to hop on the bike and give it a try for yourself. Yes, you'll probably fall a few times. Yes, you'll make mistakes, but you'll learn from those mistakes and you'll make adjustments. It is in these firsthand teaching experiences where true growth and learning will occur.

# APPENDIX A:

## Very Detailed Outline Example

### English 1020 Outline (Zoom)

#### Introduction

- A. Introduce myself
- B. Goal: I am going to show you how to utilize library resources to gather sources that are credible and useful.
- C. Start at library homepage. Why???

  - a. Why not start at Google/Wikipedia? They are great for getting background info, exploring topics, getting keywords. NOT something you want to cite as a source in a college paper.
  - b. Library pays for a subscription for you to access these databases, so you need to access them through our website. On or off campus.

- D. How to access Course Research Guide (put URL in chat)
- E. Cover 3 main library tools (databases) In each database, I'll show you ways to keep your sources organized.
- F. Evaluating sources tab: Questions to ask, scholarly vs. popular (scholarly is gold standard)
- G. "Choosing a topic" tab:
  - Resources to consult when looking for ideas
  - I'd love for you to share your topics with me as we go along because I can use those in our search examples. (share link in chat and show how to post)

#### First Tool—Opposing Viewpoints

Great place to explore topics, find multiple and diverse points of view on today's issues

1. How to browse topic—**Standardized Testing**
2. Point out Overview
3. Explain different source types. Pay attention to your assignment requirements here.
4. Look at Viewpoint articles
5. Open article → Tools at top: how to email, download, cite. Very important to cite your sources. Keep a running list of sources on a Word Doc or in citation manager like RefWorks. Citation styles—usually MLA for English classes
6. Look at a few examples of other source types
7. Can also search by keyword—(ask students to suggest topic via chat or use "air pollution and...")
8. Topic finder—discover subtopics—(ask for suggested topic via chat or use air pollution → mental health)
9. Questions so far????

## Second Tool—JEWL Search (James E. Walker Library)

Great starting point when you know your topic. A JEWL search tells you what books we have, simultaneously searches about 150 article databases. Variety of source types (books, articles, videos, etc.)

### Model a search.

1. Break your research topic/question into keywords
2. Enter **engineering and women and challenges**
3. Look over results then explain limiters
  - Limiters on Left → Source types (check assignment requirements) Look at few different source types.
4. Limit to scholarly. (Show examples)
5. Narrow by date, full text

### Be flexible with your search terms

1. **AND**—Narrows your search to include records containing all of the words. Ex: nursing and men and challenges
2. However, if you want to **BROADEN** and get more results, then use **OR** to connect terms. Ex: men or males or man or male
3. Try different terms: nursing or nursing career and gender diversity
4. Research is a process! It evolves as you go. Your topic may change as you go.

### Evaluate sources for relevance and appropriateness

5. Read the **abstract** before the article. Questions to ask: who is the audience? What is the scope? an overview or highly specific?
6. View Full Text of an Article—How to print, email, cite

### Sidenote: Library catalog is best place to search for books.

7. Keyword search for climate change.
8. Accessing print/ebooks

Questions?

## Third Tool—Statista

Use Statista to find graphs, charts, data to back up your writing.

1. Sample search on **climate change**
2. Point out types of statistics and reports available
3. View statistic from results list
4. Tools and download options
5. Source information
6. How to view full reports
7. Questions?

### Conclusion

- A. Briefly go over other Tabs on LibGuide
- B. Ask Us feature & Get Help at top

Final Questions??

# APPENDIX B

## Less Detailed Outline Example

### English 1020 Outline

#### Introduction

- A. Mentimeter poll
- B. *Goal:* Demonstrate 3 tools for finding sources for your assignments with time for hands-on practice
- C. *Topics covered:*
  - How to explore topics & search in library databases
  - Evaluating sources
  - Search strategies/choosing keywords

#### Start at Library Website

1. Research Guides>ENGL 1020 Guide
2. Evaluating Sources Tab
  - Brief explanation of scholarly vs. popular sources

#### First Tool—Opposing Viewpoints

Great place to explore topics

1. How to browse topics—**plastic waste**
2. Tools (how to email, download, cite)
3. Can also search by keyword—human trafficking and...
4. Topic finder—great place to discover subtopics—Search for Gaming

**Student Task #1: Look up a topic in the topic finder and explore what's available.**

#### Second Tool—JEWEL Search

Great starting point when you know your topic.

##### Model a search.

1. Broad topic like **artificial intelligence**, narrow results by adding more keywords (benefits, higher education)
2. Use database limiters (source type, full text, scholarly, date).
3. Evaluate the source (look at the abstract)
4. How to view full text, email, cite, etc

**Student Task #2: Enter your search terms, limit to full text, and 2019-2024.**

Give 2<sup>nd</sup> Mentimeter poll to demonstrate the importance of keywords.

#### 3rd Tool—Statista

Find graphs, charts, data to back up your writing.

1. Sample search on **book banning**

2. Point out types of stats and reports
3. View statistic from results list
4. Tools and download options
5. Source information

**Student Task #3: Search for your topic in Statista and find a statistic.**

### Wrap-Up

- A. How to Get Research Help
- B. Questions?

## Notes

1. “Introversion,” in *The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 3rd ed., ed. Jacqueline L. Longe (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2016), 608.
2. Scott Berkun, *Confessions of a Public Speaker* (Beijing; Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly, 2010), 4.
3. Berkun, *Confessions of a Public Speaker*, 4.
4. Andrew M. Colman, “Imposter Phenomenon,” in *A Dictionary of Psychology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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- Berkun, Scott. *Confessions of a Public Speaker*. Beijing; Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly, 2010.
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