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# Adapting to How Students Learn

## Rethinking Information Literacy Instruction in the Age of Short-Form Content

I started my career in academic librarianship in August 2023, and from the start, I was immersed in teaching. In addition to conducting library instruction, I was assigned to teach a credit-bearing course on critical thinking in academic research. Since then, I have taught the course five times across modalities. While I expected to learn a great deal about pedagogy and information literacy, one of the most noticeable lessons has been about students themselves and how dramatically their relationships with information has changed.

There is no question that COVID-19 altered higher education. The years between 2020 and 2023 were defined by a necessary mindset of "do what you can." Flexibility was necessary, and academic standards began to shift to accommodate the disruption of the pandemic. As we move further from the height of the pandemic, however, we are beginning to see its long-term effects on today's college students.

Many current first-year college students were in middle school when their education was interrupted. This meant an accelerated disengagement from structured learning environments. Increasingly, I encounter students who view college merely as a requirement for a job. When higher education is perceived only as a means to obtain employment, it raises important questions for librarians: How invested are students in learning, and how does that affect our approach to teaching information literacy?

At the same time, students' information environments have changed drastically. The rise of TikTok and other short-form platforms have reshaped how an entire generation consumes and processes information. Long-form videos have been replaced with short clips that are often watched at accelerated speeds. This rapid content consumption undeniably reduces students' ability for deep processing; however, it also strengthens a different skill: the ability to communicate ideas quickly and efficiently. When you are constrained to a short time limit, you must make every second count.[1]

This shift matters for librarians because information literacy instruction depends on students' ability and willingness to engage. If an entire generation processes information more rapidly than before, how should we adapt our instruction for maximum impact? If students have shorter attention spans and exist in a constant state of mental stimulation, what does that mean for how we design instruction?

One answer, I believe, is embracing short-form content.

When I first started teaching credit-bearing online, I thought quality lecture videos needed to be lengthy, modeled after traditional class sessions. My initial lecture videos were forty-five minutes or longer. I quickly learned that students did not equate video length with quality. Instead, many saw the duration and immediately decided not to watch. Can I blame them?

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In subsequent semesters, I abandoned the idea that lectures needed to be lengthy to be effective. I shifted my focus to clarity and relevance, breaking the weekly content into smaller segments and using real-world examples to reinforce key concepts. Some weeks, my lecture videos were as short as eight minutes. The result was immediate and measurable. Where I once saw only a handful of views, my videos began receiving twenty-five to thirty-five views per week. Given my average class size was thirty-eight students, this felt like a significant success.

What surprised me most was that shorter videos did not reduce engagement with more complex material. During weeks that required deeper explanation, such as database searching, videos naturally ran longer, sometimes even forty minutes; however, the views did not decline. The difference was intentionality: students were more willing to engage with longer content when it felt necessary and purposeful.

This experience has reshaped how I think about information literacy instruction. Short-form content does not mean superficial instruction. Rather it challenges librarians to be more deliberate. What is essential? What can be demonstrated quickly? What benefits from being revisited in smaller pieces?

The implications extend beyond asynchronous instruction. In face-to-face classrooms, we may need to rethink pacing and structure. Should lessons be more microsegmented? Should we move more quickly to application rather than extended explanation? How does retention change when content is delivered in shorter, high-impact bursts?

These are not fully answered questions, and they should not be; however, ignoring shifts in how students process information risks widening the gap between instruction and engagement. Librarians have long excelled at meeting students where they are, whether through new technologies, instructional models, or outreach strategies. Adapting to short-form content is simply the next iteration of that work.

By embracing short-form content, librarians can model purposeful communication, respect students' cognitive bandwidth, and create learning experiences that resonate. The challenge before us is not whether students will change but rather whether we will.

## Note

1. Jonas E. Halberg, *TikTok Therapy: How 15 Seconds Shapes Gen Z's Mind* (eBookit.com, 2025).