Sarah Steiner and Elisabeth Wallace

Designing Personalized Research Guides

An Outreach Strategy for New Teaching Faculty

Across academic libraries, subject specialists routinely partner with new faculty to help them launch or strengthen their research agendas. That commitment guides our work at Western Carolina University (WCU) in North Carolina. Our new faculty members face pressure to publish quickly, and those who transition from careers in industry or healthcare often arrive with limited experience in scholarly communication. To support early scholarship and to build stronger, more collaborative relationships, the authors introduced individualized research guides.

The guides work in tandem with in-person consultations and disciplinary clearinghouse guides, and they go a step further by focusing on the specific research interests of each faculty member. Built from a reusable template for consistency and efficiency, each guide highlights essential research tools, identifies potential publication venues, and offers customized search strategies that speak directly to the faculty member's emerging projects. They are quick to assemble, fill a gap that new faculty may not know how to articulate, and position librarians as partners in the research process.

This article describes how the authors interview faculty to understand their research and publication needs and then outlines practical approaches for templating and organizing guide content. A Creative Commons-licensed template is included to help others adopt the model with ease.

Background

Although this approach can be used in any discipline, subject librarians in the College of Business and the College of Health and Human Sciences at WCU noticed a recurring pattern among new faculty and their administrators. Many faculty reported feeling uncertain and anxious about how to begin the scholarly work required for annual reappointment and tenure, and their department heads shared their concerns.

Librarians at WCU adopted individually tailored LibGuides as a practical and adaptable solution. Verbal and usage-based feedback from faculty recipients and their department heads has been overwhelmingly positive. LibGuides are simple to create, rely on a platform many faculty are familiar with, and provide a single location for resources. Faculty can bookmark the guide for ongoing use. Contact information and/or appointment booking systems for librarians and other campus specialists can be included in the guide to encourage continued collaboration.

Sarah Steiner is business librarian at Western Carolina University, email: sksteiner@wcu.edu. Elisabeth Wallace is health and human sciences librarian at Western Carolina University, email: ewallace@wcu.edu.

© 2026 Sarah Steiner and Elisabeth Wallace

When built from a template, the guides are fully customizable and typically require no more time to create or update than a standard email-based follow-up to a research consultation. A dedicated section may also house frequently referenced items, such as librarian contact details, tenure and promotion guidelines, a Cabell's journal search link, and a discipline-specific custom database search widget. For faculty managing multiple research projects, separate tabs can be employed to delineate resources for each topic. To minimize duplication of links while highlighting broader offerings, links to more extensive disciplinary research guides can be included. This streamlined approach ensures seamless access to extensive resources while keeping the personalized guide focused on the individual's needs.

The use of targeted guides for teaching faculty is not yet broadly covered in the literature on research guides or LibGuides. Stephen Fadel[1] explores creation of a research guide to support business faculty as a group, while Anna Bagshaw and Phil Yorke-Barber[2] consider using research guides to support library employee development, but we were unable to find literature on cases where customized, template-based research guides were used to support the research needs of individual teaching faculty.

Interview to Determine Guide Contents

As we launched this project with new faculty, speaking to college or department administrators was an optimal first step to ensure that discipline-specific guidelines are accurately reflected. For instance, faculty teaching in the College of Business at WCU are required to publish in journals either listed on the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) list or identified as nonpredatory in Cabell's. Journals not appearing on either list are excluded from consideration, and faculty have, at times, unknowingly invested effort in publishing in venues they did not realize were deemed predatory. Department heads and deans can provide this critical information. Follow-up interviews with administrators can help confirm whether the guidance remains current and assess whether librarian involvement has contributed to improved publishing outcomes. This outreach strategy offers a practical way to demonstrate the library's value and foster meaningful dialogue with institutional leadership as well as with new faculty. Relevant excerpts from departmental promotion and tenure documents can also be linked within the guide for easy reference.

The recipient of the guide themselves can be interviewed, as in any new faculty consultation, for information about their research needs. During the initial conversation, consider asking the following questions:

1. **What research threads are you currently working on or beginning to explore?**
   Understanding active or emerging projects can inform which resources and tools to prioritize.

2. **Which journals do you routinely read or consult?**
   This information can help identify relevant databases that index those journals and allow for direct linking within the guide.

3. **Which research databases are crucial for you?**
   This question may lead to knowledge that the new library has access to different resources than ones they have used in the past. Notes on the value and contents of the alternate suggestions can be included in the resource description.

4. **Have you given thought to where you might publish, or would you like help identifying venues?**
   The relevant resources (Cabell's, etc.) can be used to generate lists of possible publication venues, and the strongest contenders can be added to a box on the research guide with notes.

5. **What additional research tools do you use?**
   Examples might include Google NotebookLM, ResearchRabbit, Zotero, or other platforms that support literature discovery and organization.

Build the Guide

Although student audiences are the typical target, a robust body of literature on LibGuides design can be leveraged to make sound decisions about guide layout and accessibility.

We selected a one-page layout featuring a top and bottom box (full-page width) and mid-page sections with custom widths of 33%, 42%, and 25%. The one-page layout works well for users who do not require highly detailed content because it minimizes clicks and presents essential resources in a single view, mostly above the fold. Multiple authors[3,4,5] suggest that uncluttered design is, unsurprisingly, preferred, and Yolanda Bergstrom-Lynch[6] recommends reduction of jargon, so we minimize nonessential links and use clear language. The primary purpose of these targeted guides is to support an individual's research needs, not broad-scale inclusion of all possible tools.The first column includes literature review resources of special interest to the researcher: key databases, journals, and datasets. The second column includes publication venue evaluation tools. The third column includes broader support tools, including a link to contact the librarian, citation management and mining tools, and key institutional resources.

For users with more complex research needs, such as multiple topics or varying resource requirements, a multipage layout may be more appropriate. When implementing multiple pages, align the navigation style (left-navigation or tabbed) with your institution's overall design standards for consistency. Several studies have investigated the merits of side versus tabbed navigation for guides that include more than one page, but overall they find preferences are idiosyncratic and are optimally gauged at the local level.[7,8]

Regardless of layout, seek feedback from the faculty member and department head on both structure and resources. LibGuides content can be easily edited and rearranged, so user input can guide revisions. Emphasize that the guide exists for their use and your goal is to meet their specific needs.

Suggested Sections/Design Elements

- Welcome/Introduction
  A page-width welcome banner can make the guide feel personalized. We used an image to gauge visual interest and friendly language to remind the faculty member the guide is specifically for them (Figure 1).

Column 1

- Key Research Tools
  A custom search widget is a nice touch here, plus links to any critical databases. Links to broader disciplinary research guides can also be included here (Figure 2).

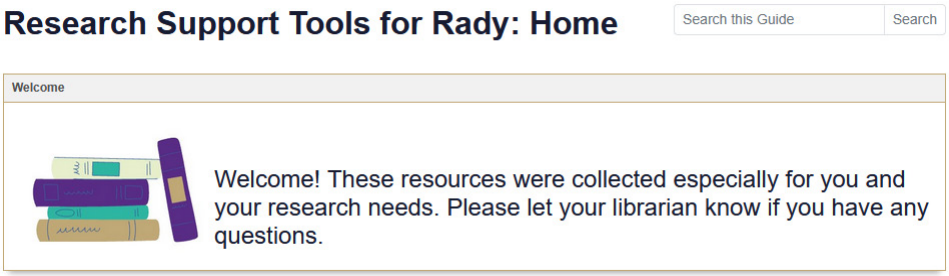


Figure 1: Page-width welcome banner.

- Core Journals: Direct Links
  Faculty may benefit from links to core journals in their fields, even if they will not be pursuing those journals for their early publication efforts.
- Datasets
  Relevant datasets or data location tools identified in faculty interviews can be included here.

Column 2

- Evaluating Journals in [your college/school/department]
  Each discipline has their own methods of evaluating journals. Link to those evaluation tools. They may be national/international search interfaces, local documents, or both.
- Likely Publication Venues
  Our faculty often ask for help identifying publication venues. A small grid with the journal title, acceptance rate, turnaround time, grade or impact factor, and a direct link to search can be helpful for visualizing and performing quick searches of those journals (Figure 3).

Column 3

- Your Librarian
  Make your contact information handy for follow-up emails and appointments. A calendar booking system can help reduce barriers to entry for faculty.
- Support Tools
  Any other resources your faculty member seems interested in can be linked here.

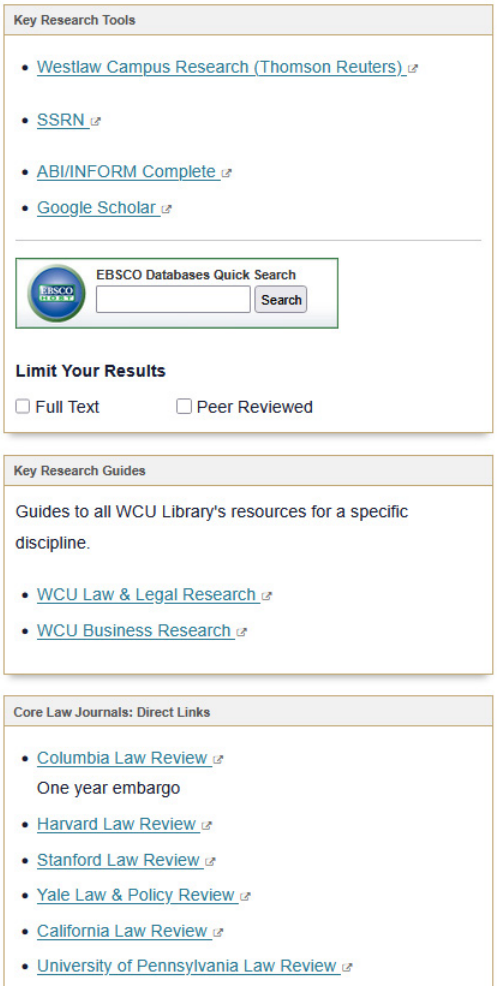


Figure 2: Column 1 research resources.

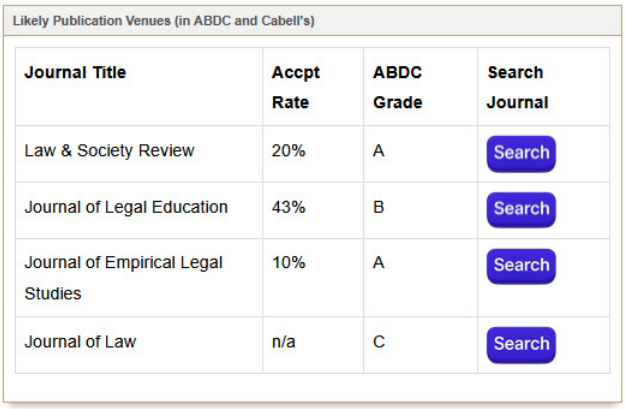


Figure 3: Possible publication venues chart.

Track Success

Because the guide can be set to private and therefore accessible only to users with a direct link, you can monitor whether the faculty member is using it and track the guide's effectiveness over time. View counts may remain modest, but steady use signals ongoing value. If usage drops, you can check in to ensure the guide still meets their needs and remind them that it is available. The guide's usefulness may naturally taper off as the faculty member becomes more comfortable with the scholarly process, or it can be updated to reflect their evolving research needs. As new faculty approach the end of their first year, an email or in-person check-in can confirm whether the guide has been useful and what changes would help.

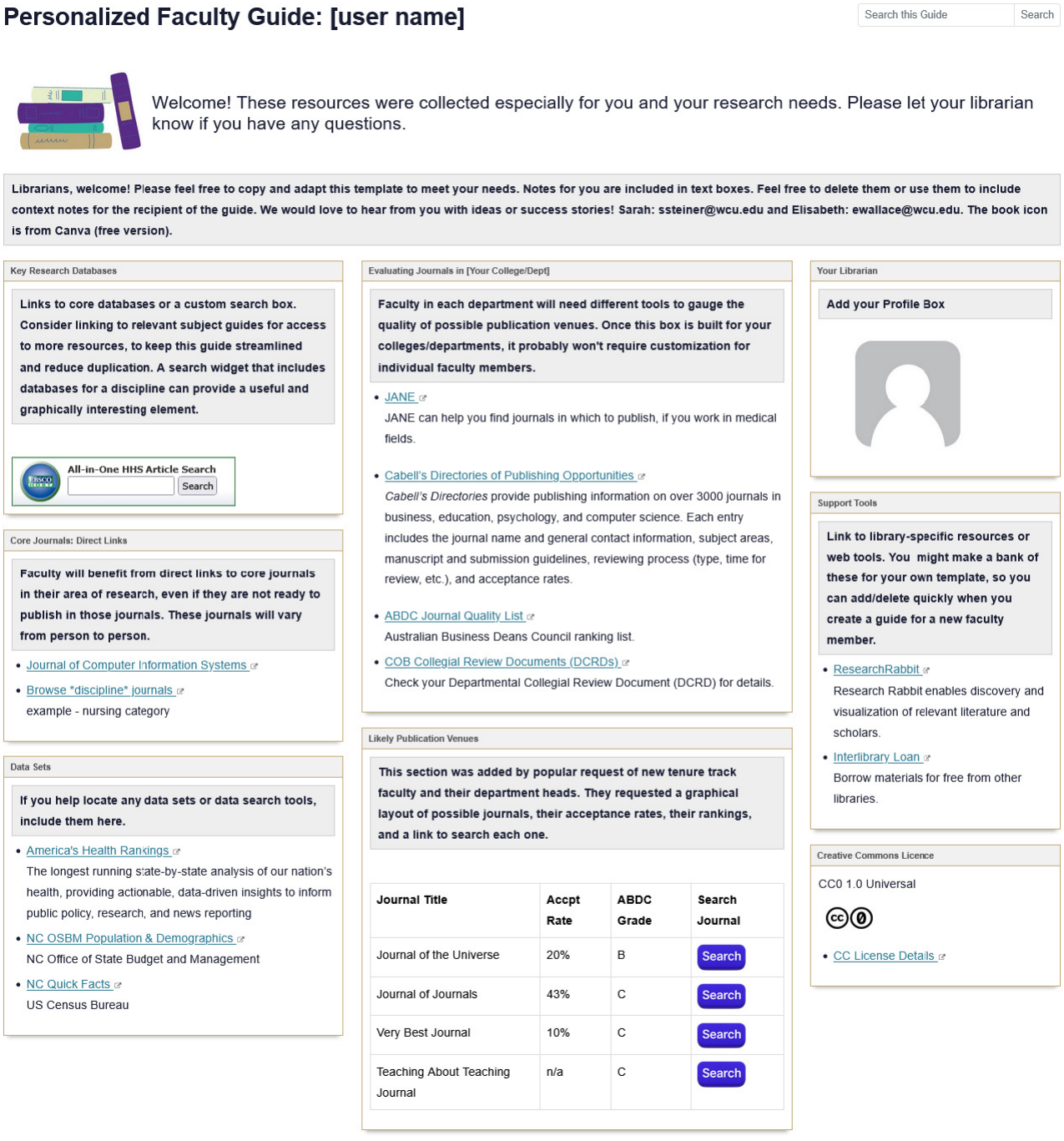


Figure 4: Full research guide template.

Conclusion

We have found this approach to be a powerful way to support faculty scholarship and strengthen partnerships across campus. Although it is particularly effective with new faculty, it can also serve as a meaningful outreach tool for more seasoned researchers. As these guides continue to evolve, they offer a flexible framework that can adapt to changing disciplinary expectations and emerging research practices, ensuring that librarians remain active, trusted collaborators in faculty success.

We developed a template that you are welcome to use as a starting point for your own guides. It is Creative Commons-licensed and available at https://researchguides.wcu.edu/personalizedguidetemplate (Figure 4).

Notes

1. Stephen Fadel, "Designing a Business Faculty LibGuide," *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* 26, nos. 3–4 (2021): 235–53, doi:10.1080/08963568.2021.1955183.

2. Anna Bagshaw and Phil Yorke-Barber, "Guiding Librarians: Rethinking Library Guides as a Staff Development Tool," *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 67, no. 1 (2018): 31–41, doi:10.1080/24750158.2017.1410629.

3. Amy Barker and Ashley Hoffman, "Student-Centered Design: Creating LibGuides Students Can Actually Use," *College & Research Libraries* 82, no. 1 (2021): 75, doi:10.5860/crl.82.1.75.

4. J. Alverson et al., "Creating Audience and Environment-Friendly Research Guides: Findings from a User Study," 2015, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Creating-Audience-and-Environment-Friendly-Research-Alverson-LeFager/c66204e6e34ae323e093320127f3bf662b084d9a.

5. Nora Almeida and Junior Tidal, "Mixed Methods Not Mixed Messages: Improving LibGuides with Student Usability Data," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 12, no. 4 (2017): 62–77, doi:10.18438/B8CD4T.

6. Yolanda Bergstrom-Lynch, "LibGuides by Design: Using Instructional Design Principles and User-Centered Studies to Develop Best Practices," *Public Services Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2019): 205–23, doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2019.1632245.

7. Sarah Thorngate and Allison Hoden, "Exploratory Usability Testing of User Interface Options in LibGuides 2," *College & Research Libraries* 78, no. 6 (017): 844, doi:10.5860/crl.78.6.844.

8. Christopher Chan, Jennifer Gu, and Chloe Lei, "Redesigning Subject Guides with Usability Testing: A Case Study," *Journal of Web Librarianship* 13, no. 3 (2019): 260–79, doi:10.1080/19322909.2019.1638337.