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# Putting levity into literacy: Professionally produced library instruction videos

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## Abstract

Students believe that mandatory library workshops are boring and by default so are library instruction videos, but they do not have to be so. The Stanford Libraries have created a series of professionally produced videos, which are examples of effective ways to inject levity into literacy while conveying high-level academic content. Professor and student feedback confirmed that these videos held their attention and are therefore worth the expense incurred in creating them. This paper describes an original and effective method of introducing library services to students through engaging, professionally produced videos.

## Keywords

academic libraries; flipped classroom; higher education; information literacy; library instruction videos; online learning; US

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## 1. Introduction

Library instruction classes are a great introduction to library resources, and to research in general. However, in our librarians' experience, students find these classes exceedingly dull and consequently do not pay enough attention to gain an understanding of the information presented to them. A review of the literature shows that students are easily bored with content that they feel is unimportant or tedious (Dennis and Dees, 2015; White and Collinson, 2010). Our experience is that students get a glazed look, start texting, or even napping as soon as the library instruction session gets under way. They have 'a low threshold for boredom and resistance to memorization' but they 'embrace...an electronic learning environment,' (Willis and Thomas, 2006, p.432). Lecture-style instruction and overuse of presentation slides led to boredom in half the respondents in one study (Sharp, Hemmings, Kay, Murphy, and Elliott, 2017). Another study linked boredom in the lecture theatre setting, coupled with overuse of PowerPoint slides, with lower grade point average in college students (Mann & Robinson, 2009). This reduction in attention span is especially problematic in the era of social media platforms and constant cell phone use. In addition, studies show that Generation Y, those born in the 1980s and 1990s who were raised with digital and electronic technologies, and successive generations tend to have shorter attention spans than previous generations, are easily bored, and prefer education that entertains them (Manuel, 2002).

In order to combat boredom and inattention, librarians can provide students with short instructional videos that are fun and connect to them as a group. Humour can attract and keep students' interest in the subject matter presented (Walker, 2006). It can also arouse their interest in what comes next (Reynolds, Roberts and Hauck, 2017). Students have cited the use of humour as one of the most effective ways to combat learning boredom (Small, Zakaria and El-Figuigui, 2004). Instructional videos that are professionally produced can spark students' interest and make the learning process more enjoyable and memorable, just by adding a small amount of levity.

The Stanford Libraries collaborate with the Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) to provide mandatory library workshops for first year students. PWR classes are required for undergraduates. The program's mission is to develop writing and speaking skills as well as critical understanding that will enable the students to be strategic, thoughtful, ethical, and persuasive in content creation and message delivery. The libraries are a vital component of PWR classes. Library workshops are scheduled at the time students start working on their first research papers.

Due to time limitations and spacing constraints, some workshops happen slightly earlier or later in the term. Students are not always ready to absorb the information presented at the time of the workshops. In order to address this issue, as well as the perceived student inattention and boredom during workshops, the librarians decided to experiment with a flipped classroom pilot program. Flipped classrooms are more engaging and viewed as an active, as opposed to a passive, approach to library education (Willis & Thomas, 2006). The flipped classroom design is geared towards communicating core course content outside of the classroom setting. The libraries' flipped classrooms pilot program utilises online tools to instruct students on how to navigate online library sources, thus freeing up class time for instruction on higher-level search strategy concepts.

As part of the pilot program at Stanford, PWR instructors assign library instruction videos as homework, to provide point of need assistance. The flipped classroom and instruction videos are also very beneficial for the PWR instructors as a time management tool. Since the university is on the quarter system (the academic year is divided into the fall, winter and spring sessions and the summer quarter is typically either taken off or used to make up classes), classes are limited to ten weeks. Classes typically meet twice a week, so instructors have just twenty sessions in which to teach their expansive curriculum. Assigning library videos as homework led to the reduction of required lecture time by librarians during their workshops, and consequently less chances for the students to fall prey to boredom. As a direct result of the videos, the librarians' lectures are cut in half and the remainder of library class time is used by the PWR instructors. This has the added benefit of offering basic 'just-in-time' instruction, which is a preferred method of information literacy delivery among librarians (Small et al., 2004).

## 2. Instructional video project breakdown

### 2.1 Planning

The overarching goal for the Stanford Libraries' instruction videos was to allow students to understand why they need the libraries and to gain information literacy skills to enable them to become lifelong learners. The video initiative had the following additional goals:

- **Goal 1:** To experiment with an online tutorial to help students become more confident and productive researchers/library users, at their own pace.
- **Goal 2:** To use professionally produced, high-quality videos to create effective 'just-in-time' research support and instruction to students, outside the classroom.
- **Goal 3:** To develop engaging, visually interesting, instructional videos that could be scaled for upper-level students and subject-specific areas in the future.

In the long term, the librarians' plan was to scale the modules to develop a series of videos that addressed different levels of expertise in the research process. These videos were utilised in PWR classes initially, and ultimately the larger campus community, as an introduction to the

libraries. To achieve the above-stated goals there were a lot of planning meetings with many different stakeholders in the libraries, the PWR Department, instructional designers, and faculty in the School of Education.

The librarians and stakeholders agreed on the top ten topics they wanted covered in the videos. The first five of the ten topics have been used in the videos thus far. The agreed-upon topics were:

1. Searching the catalogue
2. Searching the article databases
3. Following the footnote trail and leapfrogging
4. Evaluating sources critically
5. Finding primary sources and using special collections
6. Why not Google?
7. Coming up with search terms and subject headings
8. Scanning abstracts & references
9. Citation management
10. Digital collections

## 2.2 Branding

When the librarians initially began working on the instruction videos, they reviewed many other institutions' offerings to get an idea of which formats were most effective. There were many different formats to choose from: lectures; point-and-click videos; jingles; and animated stories, to name a few. The librarians reviewed more than a hundred library instruction videos and decided to put special emphasis on the entertainment aspect in order to combat user boredom and lack of interest.

The guiding principle for the video content was to keep it relevant and familiar to the audience. The university mascot could serve this purpose easily, but other mascots could be just as effective. For branding purposes, the librarians decided to create a library specific mascot, different from the university mascot, to draw the audience in. The librarians decided to create an animated mascot that would personify the overall campus culture and the libraries particularly. This was a unique opportunity to create a mascot that could be dedicated to promoting the libraries in the future. Since there are many black squirrels roaming the campus – they are not a usual sight in other places – the librarians thought a black squirrel mascot would engage the students' interest, be a familiar sight, and, at the same time, unique to the campus. The mascot would wear a shirt with the university logo to identify it with Stanford, and “nerd glasses” which have become associated with the university and the libraries through past events and promotions. Thus was born the Stanford Libraries' Nerd Squirrel.



**Figure 1:** Nerd Squirrel Figure

The use of an animal mascot also avoided the prevalent issues relating to sensitivities around heteronormative and racial identities. The creators and narrator of Nerd Squirrel took great care to use the pronoun “it” when referring to the squirrel. While students and staff have requested the squirrel have a name and label “it” as a girl or boy, the librarians chose to maintain its non-

gendered existence, and point out that Nerd Squirrel is now its official name. The creators also wanted to find a narrator for the videos whose voice would match the look and feel of the videos. After a few false starts, they found a student with a charismatic voice and upbeat tone. Her cheerful voice worked in tandem with the quirky animation to move the videos along and avoided the monotony that often leads to boredom and inattention in these types of instructional videos.

## 2.3 Professionals

The main aspect that separates the Stanford Libraries' videos from many of the other library instruction videos available online was the decision to pay for professional video services. This step called for a lot of tenacity on the part of the librarians to get the funding required to make polished professional videos. It was crucial that the librarians believe deeply in their vision and were able to argue convincingly to pay for such videos.

Initial funding for the first two videos was provided by an in-house grant, the Payson J. Treat Fund, which was designed to encourage innovative projects to improve and enhance the effectiveness of the Stanford Libraries' services and programs. The librarians were awarded the grant to create the first professionally produced videos to support the flipped classroom pilot project. The departmental budget paid for the next set of videos as a direct result of the overwhelmingly positive feedback the first video received.

Once the librarians decided on the squirrel mascot and the type of video they wanted to create, it was time to find a video team that would help create content that reflected their vision. Initially, the librarians met with the university's in-house video team that specialised in instructional and educational videos. There was a surprising amount of pushback from them regarding the video presentation. They felt that the librarians' ideas were geared too much towards entertainment and that the videos would be commercial in nature and not educational enough. The video team's suggestion was to stand in front of a chalkboard and lecture, because this was the format that other lecturers had used in the past. Having already reviewed hundreds of these types of instructional videos and found them ineffective in keeping the viewer's attention and combating boredom, the librarians had to decide whether they wanted to follow their original vision or follow the timeworn lecture model.

The librarians decided to go with their original vision of what the instructional videos should be and find a new video production company instead. They found a video company that shared their vision and passion for the project. This new video company was the perfect partner because they were unconventional, but simultaneously incredibly professional in the creation and delivery of the video product. However, as this was an outside video company, it was much more expensive than the original in-house video team. At that point, there might have been hesitation in committing to something that the libraries thought they couldn't afford. However, videos are not helpful if students are not watching them; the funding used to create them is then wasted. This was the case with one PWR student who explicitly stated that he initially planned to fast forward through the assigned videos, because he assumed immediately that since it was a library video it would obviously be boring. Luckily, his classmates had discussed how much they enjoyed the videos, specifically the cute squirrel character, so he was convinced to watch the videos so that he too could join the discussion.

The potential boredom pitfall was a major consideration during the video planning process. Depending on the length and dryness of the subject content of the videos, the amount of animation would need to increase accordingly. This is why there is considerably more animation in the longer Primary Sources video compared to the initial Catalogue video. The animators were also able to add points of levity during the videos, such as the Nerd Squirrel's habitual "angry humph" when it felt slighted, seen in almost every video; cheeky comments; and

interactions between the Nerd Squirrel and the content being presented. The Nerd Squirrel also made considerably more appearances, in many disguises, in the longer Evaluating Sources and Primary Sources videos, as humorous asides, but also to emphasise concepts or specific services. Understandably, the increase in animation also corresponded to an increase in the cost of the videos.

## 2.4 Pricing

The very first video focused on the Stanford Libraries' catalogue, and it had a whopping price tag of \$11,789. The first video cost almost as much as the next three videos combined, because the video company's graphic artist had to create the character animation from scratch. Once the characters were created, the cost of the videos decreased. The second video was titled How to Search Databases, and cost \$4,600, nearly \$7,000 less than the original Catalogue video. The third video titled Leapfrogging through Citations, was the shortest and consequently the least expensive video, at only \$2,900. The fourth video titled How to Evaluate Sources Critically, cost \$5,600 because the emphasis on content relied on more costly and complex animations. Lastly, the Primary Sources and Special Collections video cost \$8,700, again because the large amount of content in this video needed more visually stunning components to keep it flowing and make it engaging. The total cost for the first five videos was \$34,231.

**Table 1:** Price breakdown by video and length

Video	Cost	Duration (min.)
How to Use the Catalog	\$11,789 + \$600 update	3:19
How to Search Databases	\$4,630	4:57
Leapfrogging	\$2,900	2:14
How to Evaluate Sources	\$5,600	5:12
Primary Sources	\$8,712	6:11

While these prices may cause some understandable hesitation, the incredibly positive student and instructor feedback made a strong argument for continuing to provide professional level instruction videos. The Stanford Libraries' administrators expressed a commitment to making this investment because the return on investment (ROI) has proven worthwhile. The videos were expensive because they featured professionally created animation to emphasize concepts as opposed to adding more screen captures from the Libraries' site and catalogue. The most expensive video, How to Use the Catalog, has already needed to be updated after the catalog's user interface changed; adding \$600 to its cost. At one point, the librarians looked into upgrading the Nerd Squirrel into 3D animation, but the cost would have been prohibitive, as every single hair on the character would need to be modelled and rendered for each shot, thereby adding minimally another \$20,000 to the cost of each video.

As part of the video approval process, the librarians received high-quality images of the Nerd Squirrel. These images were used to create promotional materials that were given as freebies

to remind patrons of the libraries' services. The librarians created library branded stickers of the Nerd Squirrel in its many guises to hand out to students in conjunction with the videos. These guises included the Nerd Squirrel depicted as happy; angry; a detective; an astronaut; an adorable devil; and a criminal, just to name a few. These stickers would serve to promote the videos and the Libraries more generally and reinforce the concepts that the videos covered.

The stickers really caught on with students, especially as they all love to decorate their laptops. In many instances, the students would immediately put the stickers on their laptops as soon as they received them. In one library instruction workshop, a student chose to wear the astronaut Nerd Squirrel sticker on his shirt, so it would be close to his heart. The videos and stickers served to form a positive association with the Nerd Squirrel and through it, the Libraries. The stickers became very popular with both students and instructors, so much so that PWR instructors even asked to pre-order a new batch of stickers from the Primary Sources video before the video was finished or previewed. The initial sticker order was for 500 stickers for \$300, but due to the increase in interest, a second order was made for 1,000 with a cost of \$500; larger bulk orders activated discounts on the sticker website. Students also suggested that the Libraries get a Nerd Squirrel Fathead, a standing adult sized cut-out, which can cost \$98. The students' and instructors' positive and enthusiastic reception of the Nerd Squirrel was proof positive that the videos were worth every penny spent to create them.

## 2.5 Length

The Golden Rule to get viewers to love instructional video is K.I.S.S. (Keep It Short and Simple). The longer the video, the less attention the students pay to it. Producing multiple short videos on different aspects of the libraries gave students the choice to watch what they needed for the specific task at hand. The librarians' aim was to keep all videos under seven minutes, but ideally under three minutes. Depending on the amount of content, they opted for longer run times, as opposed to rushing through the content. The videos were posted on the both the PWR and Stanford Libraries YouTube Channels, a playlist of the videos can be found at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2oKT-ILdPA&list=PL\\_RCUu6isf5FMnMETHtZf7AvWSLBbsies](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2oKT-ILdPA&list=PL_RCUu6isf5FMnMETHtZf7AvWSLBbsies)

They were also embedded in Libraries' guides and PWR resources websites, for ease of access. For posterity, the videos were also added to the Stanford Libraries' Digital Repository (SDR), and examples of the accompanying stickers were added to the University Archives. The process involved sending the video URL to the SDR team who then provided a PURL for accessing the videos.

## Conclusion

Creating the instruction videos was a lengthy process. It took nearly nine months to find the right video company; create the first storyboard; select affordable animations; record the narration; do the post-production edits; and finalise the first video. Because the videos were created in addition to the librarians' usual reference and instruction job responsibilities, the following videos each took approximately five months to create.

At the very beginning of the process, the librarians decided that there would be multiple videos covering a variety of topics pertinent to library education, and that the videos would be short, ideally no more than seven minutes each. The completed videos have been viewed thousands of times and received many positive reviews from users. There is an intense thirst for knowledge among the libraries' users and there is much appreciation for the professionalism and attention to detail evinced by these instruction videos. The Evaluating Sources Critically video has been viewed 4,000 more times than any of the others. It was very timely, because at the time the video came out, a professor was gaining worldwide attention for a study showing

that out of 7,800 middle school to college students, about 80 to 90 percent cannot identify fake news. Students and instructors also commented on how relevant this particular video was because it included a website from a White Nationalist group that was featured in the daily news right after the video was released. The last video created, as this article was written, dealt with Primary Sources and using Special Collections. Breaking down library topics into short bite-sized videos served to address two points: shorter videos informed students without boring them; and short videos on different topics served to educate students at different points in their research, depending on their needs. In some instances, students independently chose to watch all the videos at once!

In conclusion, bite-size professional videos, that are set within the campus culture and inform while also entertaining, are a great way to draw students in and alleviate the boredom they express regarding library instruction. It is clear that library instruction offers a useful introduction to library resources, therefore, it is worth the investment to make a lasting – and positive – first impression. Students may not remember all the steps needed to access archival material using finding aids, but they remember the Nerd Squirrel dressed like an astronaut and the video that explains the finding aid process. The Stanford Libraries' instructional videos convey crucial information literacy instruction with a much-needed added touch of levity.

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