As a discussion starter – read the following blog post:

“‘I need three peer reviewed articles’ or the Freshman research paper” by Meredith Farkas (10/27/2011)

For the past six and a half years, I have been teaching Freshman about peer-review and how to find peer-reviewed articles through the library (or Google Scholar). I’ve developed all sorts of activities in different disciplines to get students thinking about audience, writing style, and the format of the articles they find. And every year, I become more and more convinced that having first-year students use peer-reviewed literature in their research is a terrible idea that takes the focus away from what is important for them to learn.

[…] I understand perfectly that faculty want their first-year students to find quality resources and they want their students to have an understanding of scholarly communication. But is the best way to do that forcing them to find scholarly articles for a research paper? That requires so many different skills that many of these students don’t have yet:

1. The ability to turn a topic into a search strategy
2. The ability to search in library databases
3. The ability to look at a citation and determine whether it is a scholarly journal or not (or maybe they’ve just checked a box in a database which means that they never need to learn this important skill)
4. The ability to read an abstract and determine whether the article is relevant to their topic
5. The ability to read a scholarly journal article and synthesize information from it
6. The ability to integrate evidence from the scholarly literature into their paper
7. The ability to write effectively

The first year should be about showing students that they can do it. It should be about getting them excited about participating in research and contributing to the scholarly conversation. And that doesn’t mean making things easy, but it also doesn’t mean stacking the deck so much against students that they are soured on research. […]

[…] But when the focus is on telling students that the only quality stuff comes from the peer-reviewed literature, we are distancing what students learn in school about information literacy from what they will do in the real world. Information literacy instruction should be relevant to students’ lives and help them develop transferable skills, but in so many cases, the assignment the students have forces us to focus on getting them through a single class, rather than on giving them skills they can use later on.

What should first-year students focus on in terms of writing and research? Well, I think it’s great to have them do a lot of writing, and a lot of it should be focused on different types of writing, not just research papers. They need to develop their ability to make an argument without focusing on integrating evidence. And students can learn how to integrate evidence even without doing any searching. Instructors can provide sources that allow students to write an argumentative paper where the focus is on synthesizing what they’ve read and integrating evidence into their paper. And it’s easier for faculty to assess how they did if they’ve actually read the articles. I think they also should learn about scholarly communication, but not through an assignment that requires them to find, read and use peer-reviewed journal articles.

I love what Kate Gronemeyer and Anne-Marie Deitering described in their article “Beyond Peer-Reviewed Articles: Using Blogs to Enrich Students’ Understanding of Scholarly Work”, where they had students in first-year writing classes read blogs by scholars in specific disciplines to understand scholarly communication. By using something familiar to students (blogs) they can focus on learning about scholarly communication rather than focus on learning how to read peer-reviewed articles. It also can get them to see themselves as researchers who can contribute to the conversation. It makes it all so much more accessible. I also love the idea of giving all students in a class peer-reviewed articles from different disciplines and have them analyze them together. It can not only help them to understand and dissect peer-reviewed literature, but it can also show them the differences in scholarly communication in different disciplines.

Students need to learn how to read, analyze, evaluate and synthesize information from the scholarly literature, and I don’t think those learning goals are met by most research paper assignments. I think some focus on understanding the different types of journal literature and the audiences for each would also be valuable, but their understanding of that can be assessed by activities where they have to find different types kinds of sources or where they have the sources already (or even just
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citations) and have to figure out what they are. I’d want students to develop the component skills necessary to make them successful at writing a research paper before they are actually asked to do so. […]

Discussion Points:

• Research is not linear -- it is messy and recursive…Students can’t learn “how” to write or “how” to research in one class --- it is about learning “about” writing or research or the conversations in the discipline – transfer knowledge – each writing and research assignment will put them into different conversations in different fields. (Wardle & Downs, 2008, 2013)

• Research takes practice -- “As you undertake these first projects, remember that good researchers are made, not born. Through trial and error, given sufficient opportunities to practice, and with a bit of coaching, you acquire these skill sets, work habits, and intellectual behaviors. But you'll do so only over time. One research experience, one library session, one year won't teach you everything you need to know to move effortlessly in the library’s research environment…” Harvard Freshmen Library Tools

• Research is about joining the scholarly conversations or “discourse communities” within the disciplines
  o Deciding what the conversation is – and what you want to learn about or investigate (Harris’ research as “project”)
  o Who’s having the conversation or talking about the topic? (determining the information need)
  o Where could you find information about the conversations? (locating information)
  o Evaluating the merit of the conversations (evaluating sources)

Scaffolding Assignments:

• Use just a primary text from class – “Seed text”
• Add in background sources -- or information about an aspect discussed in the text
• Bring in another conversation – book, article to “jump off” from the source
• Evaluate the different sources (annotated bibliography)
• Put the sources into conversation – literature review or bibliographic essay

Rethinking Information Literacy and Research in the First Year – Further Reading:

• Meredith Farkas – full article at Information Just Wants to be Free
• Barbara Fister - “Burke’s Parlor Tricks” Introducing Research as a Conversation” – (Inside Higher Ed, November 11, 2011).
• John Bean, Engaging Ideas. 2nd ed.
• Gerald Graff, They Say/I Say. 3rd ed.(upcoming Feb. 2014)
• Joseph Harris. Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts.

Research Guides for Students:

• Beginning Research at Colgate
• Tools of the Trade: A Library Starter Kit for Harvard Freshmen

Creating Effective Assignments:

• Keys to Designing Effective writing and Research Assignments – The Teaching Professor
• Assignment Ideas (Memorial University of Newfoundland)