JMU Libraries LibGuides Tips of the Week
James Madison University Libraries
Research & Education Services
2017-18 LibGuides Refresh Project
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#1: Be Cautious When Including Search Boxes

If a search bar exists on a page, users will be inexorably drawn to it, even if it is clearly labeled as *not* doing what they want it to do.

*Source for this tip:* We saw this in action multiple times during the usability testing.

- One user tried several times to use the default “Search this Guide” box to find specific topics, no matter which page or guide they were on.
• For another user, the JMU Library Catalog search widget was the first place they tried searching for *articles*, despite the distinctly book-focused description and labeling. That search box was so magnetic that even when they were considering or discussing an unrelated task, we could see the mouse returning to the search box again and again, ready to click.
What to do

- Since the automatic “Search this Guide” feature in LibGuides is unhelpful and confusing for our users, it has been removed as a default from the top-right corner of JMU guide pages.

- ➔ No need to avoid all search boxes, but do be aware that regardless of labelling and descriptions, users are highly likely to think that any search box is a Google-type portal to “everything.” Use the boxes wisely.

Hillary Ostermiller
Tip of the Week

#2: Reduce Amount of Text with Plain Language

Source of This Tip

Several of our study participants noted text-heavy pages as they traveled around our guides. They said the amount of text intimidated or overwhelmed them.

What to Do

If your pages are text-heavy, consider eliminating as much as you can. Luckily, there’s lots of easy-to-read (we mean, skim) resources out there to help you:

- Tips for Getting Started: Writing for Web Accessibility
- plainlanguage.gov

If you just can’t help yourself, consider placing the most important text at the beginning of your page using the Inverted Pyramid approach.

Why Does this Matter?

Providing concise language on our web presence isn’t just about advertising, it’s about making our resources as accessible as possible by living the principles of universal design. For example, plain language is more accessible for international audiences as well as people with varying levels of cognitive abilities. We’d also argue that such language is more accessible for people who don’t feel confident about their research skills given the use of words like intimidated and overwhelming by our study participants.

A Word About Resource Descriptions

We’re not advocating for the removal of the default resource descriptions from your guides. Some participants skimmed resource descriptions while others seemed to ignore them entirely. We’re finding that description language might need to be edited depending on the target audiences of your guides. We’re also observing how students look for language in the guides that matches language from their assignments or experience with research (e.g. I need peer reviewed sources). They also venture into our guides by looking for the names of their majors or minors to help them locate resources. (We’re still picking at all that.)

David Vess
#3: Beware of right column ad space area

Place your contact information (and other important information) strategically on your LibGuide so users see the information and are not blinded by the location of it on the page.

**Source for this tip**

During the usability testing, a user was prompted to find contact information for a librarian on the LibGuide page. The profile box was on the right-hand side of the page. The student did not see it on the page during that task and went elsewhere on the library website to find contact information.

Toward the end of the session, the user realized that the librarian’s information was on the right-hand side of the page. Throughout the usability testing, the user had not noticed it.

**What to do:**

The right-hand column of a website is often used for ad space or timely content (examples from The JMU Breeze website and Facebook).

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![Image showing examples of right column ad space]
Be aware of what you place in the right-hand column, specifically with three column pages. Users do not see this right-hand column as a place that holds important information compared to other areas of the page.

➔ If your contact information is an important piece of the page, try moving it to the far left column.
➔ Get rid of the third column altogether. Recently, librarians at North Park University conducted a study on key user interfaces in LibGuides, including the number of columns. Their results suggest that two column LibGuides are the most usable. Check out their study here.

Alyssa Valcourt
#4: Rethinking how we use box names

The box names we assign to help users navigate through our LibGuide aren’t doing their jobs. Some participants seemed to ignore box names when trying to use the guides. Other directly stated that the names weren’t prominent enough.

This example from the Marketing Research Guide, where I’m expecting the box names to serve as Headers in order to establish visual hierarchy for the page, demonstrates the problem:

![Marketing Research Guide example](image)

Source for this tip

During the usability test sessions, we asked participants to mark up guides to tell us about the usefulness of the content and design. Here are two sample comments we received:

![Marketing guide, Find Articles tab](image)

![Communication Studies guide, Speech & Debate tab](image)

Figure 1: Marketing guide, Find Articles tab.

Figure 2: Communication Studies guide, Speech & Debate tab.
What to do:

Other libraries have designed style sheets to address this issue (Auburn, Colorado School of Mines, Missouri, Harvard). We should work with David, Harper & Greg about a long-term solution that maximizes our guides’ mobile compatibility and accessibility, but here are three short-term workarounds.

Option 1. Use floating boxes. Add Headers in a Rich Text/HTML box and paragraph formatted as H3 heading.

Option 2. Use floating boxes with Headers styled as “Special Container” and paragraph formatted as H3 heading (formatting explained by FIT).
**Option 3.** Keep traditional box frame. Re-write box names as descriptive labels, and utilize Headers (paragraph formatted as H3) to direct students through the visual hierarchy of the page.

Elizabeth Price
# LibGuides Tip of the Week

**#5: The power of CTRL+F**

**Source for this tip:**

It was suggested in 2011 that using [CTRL+F might be the most important computing skill](https://example.com). Participants in our usability tests relied on this shortcut frequently when trying to find information using our Research Guides.

For example, participants chose their Research Guide by searching the [Browse by Subject page](https://example.com) for the keywords inherent in their information need.

In our pilot testing, participants were asked to research “equal pay for women.” All five chose the [Women’s Studies Research Guide](https://example.com). In the second round, participants were asked to research “animal rights.” Several used CTRL+F to see whether we had a guide on animals or law. Ultimately, two participants chose [Biology](https://example.com), two chose [Energy & the Environment](https://example.com), and one chose [Government & Law](https://example.com).

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![Screenshot of student using CTRL+F to search for a guide about animals.](https://example.com)

*Figure 1: Screenshot of student using CTRL+F to search for a guide about animals.* [Video clip](https://example.com).
What to do:

Keep in mind that students may use CTRL-F (or Command F) to see whether a tab contains the information that meets their need, from their initial selection of a guide to their choice of a database. This behavior sometimes occurred when they encountered unfamiliar terms, including “peer-reviewed,” “systematic reviews,” and “experts” to help with research.

If your discipline uses specific terminology (e.g., refereed journals instead of peer-reviewed journals) consider working that information into your Research Guide so that students can use CTRL+F to identify resources that will help them.

One option is structured database descriptions. See examples on my Finance guide. This method requires using the Custom Description field when adding databases, and making sure the Description Display is set to Display beneath item title. I keep a file on my computer with the HTML coding and description for each database.

Another option that is beyond the scope of this project team is adopting universal language for JMU guides. Examples of other libraries’ style guidelines include Illinois’ naming conventions, UNH’s Best Practices, or Auburn’s Guidelines and Best Practices. Style guidelines promote matching language between guides and the main library website and reducing library jargon (e.g., periodicals, reference, etc.).

A related thought: We might consider what this search and selection behavior means for multidisciplinary guides that aren’t pitched toward a major (such as Entrepreneurship), and as a library analyze the ROI of maintaining and/or marketing these types of guides.

Elizabeth Price
#6: The Seductive Power and Majesty of Course Guides

Students *love* research guides that are tailored to specific classes. *Love* them. Heart eyes all over the place.

**Source for This Tip:**

During our usability testing, students frequently called out course-specific guides as being particularly helpful. They did this either unprompted or when asked what they liked best about the research guides.

This fits well with the overall trend we saw of students finding the guides most useful when they could easily see themselves in the content. In every case, students looked for specific references to their majors, their classes, and words in their assignment prompts (see Tip #5).

**What to Do:**

- Let’s not go nuts here. *Do* create guides for courses that have special resource needs, but of course it’s not feasible, practical, or very helpful to create a guide for every course you might support.

- Be mindful of how course guides map to their corresponding subject guides.
  - We recommend creating course-specific guides as stand-alones so that they appear on the Course Guides page of the website.

  ![Course Guides]

  - *But also!* We recommend mapping to these course-specific guides from the appropriate main subject guide.
    - Many students and faculty treat their department’s subject guide as a library homepage, often by using the “JMU Libraries” Canvas link. ([Stats on Canvas library link usage](#)) are available in the RES space of the Hub.)
• Users are sometimes confused by drop-down menus in LibGuides—they either click on the main tab and miss the drop-down completely, or they don’t realize there might be content on the main tab. You can help by using the main tab as a table of contents for the sub-pages. From the stats, I can see that users are navigating to various sub-pages both via the drop-down menus and via the lists of sub-pages.

• Remember to use friendly URLs for your course guides! It’s some of the easiest naming you’ll ever do. (For example: http://guides.lib.jmu.edu/bio103, http://guides.lib.jmu.edu/cob300, http://guides.lib.jmu.edu/hth354)

• Minimize how much content you repeat. If a few classes use the same specific resources that aren’t common to the whole major, consider grouping them together. This comes up a lot for me with SMAD, which has distinct, rarely-overlapping concentrations. I’ve chosen to give each concentration its own page of the SMAD guide rather than develop even more course guides.

One Last Thing:

When looking at a course-specific guide for the first time, students often assumed that the content and resources were provided by the instructor rather than curated by the librarian. This is less likely to happen when the course guide is tied to a class visit, but it still worth keeping in mind!
As always, let any member of the group know if you have questions, comments, or requests!

Hillary Ostermiller
#7: Invisible Tabs

**Source for this tip**

On our LibGuides, we tend to have multiple tabs running across the top that allow us to create specific pages for our students to use. However, while conducting our usability tests, we noticed some students did not even realize the tabs were there!

![Image: Communication Studies: Home](image)

"GENERALLY I'VE NEVER NOTICED THESE TABS UP TOP"

**What to do:**

When LibGuides 2 arrived, they created the option to choose between top navigation and side navigation. While our usability study did not compare the preference by students, other libraries have done usability testing on the preference. There is still a mix reaction from students, but a majority of the studies out there shows that students feel sidebar navigation is easier to understand.

[Duke University Library Usability Test](Duke University Library Usability Test)

[Harvard University Best Practices](Harvard University Best Practices)

[North Park University Usability Testing](North Park University Usability Testing)

While we have not explored the world of sidebar navigation at JMU Libraries, we can still create top navigation that is easier to understand and use.
- Label tabs clearly and concisely. We should use as little jargon as possible, while also being sure that the content in the page is labeled accurately.
- Make sure to address the tabbed navigation when providing instruction.
- If you can point out the tabs on your homepage, do it! For example on the Home page of the LibGuides I am currently editing, I have been including a line on the top to let students know the tabs are there.

Let us know if you have questions, comments, or requests!

Alyssa Valcourt
#8: Link order is important. Number of links is too!

Source for this tip

When we list sources on our research guides, the order does matter. Alphabetical order might make sense to us but that does not show our users what resources are the best to use.

When running our usability tests, we had some students select specific databases based on how where the database was listed. There was a belief that the first choices listed were the top choices, when that is not always the case.

For example, we had a student go into a research guide that is not in their subject area and asked why they chose the first database on the list. The student responded, “Honestly just because it was under, it was the first one in the key databases. It’s probably the best one.”

Also, keep in mind how many links you list on your pages. When there are too many options, a student just starting to find information might feel overwhelmed with the amount of links and unsure of what resource will provide the best information.

What to do:

Instead of having links in alphabetical order or no order, place them in an order that places the go-to databases on top of the list. Also, try to have lists that are not too long and overwhelming. If there are many databases you want to share, try breaking them up into different categories. This can make it easier for students to determine where to go to find the resources they need.
Alyssa Valcourt

Figure 4- Help organize your page by breaking resources up into sections.
#9: Check Your Links!

It’s good to get in the habit of checking for broken links in your guides on a regular basis. Better to find them ourselves before our users do!

**What to Do:**

In LibGuides, the Link Checker is under Tools. Click it to generate a report of assets (links, books, databases) that are currently throwing an error.

Once the list is generated—

1. You can start by filtering to assets you own.

2. For each item, click the link in the URL column to verify that it isn’t working.

   a. If the link actually IS working, click the trash can icon on the far left to dismiss the item from the report (it will be checked again later). If it’s a persistent false positive, click the plus sign to add the item to the Exclusions List (it won’t be checked again).

   b. If the link is truly NOT working, click on the number in the Mapping Count column to see where the asset is being used. You can either edit the asset in the guide(s) where it appears or change it by clicking the edit icon in the Asset column on the far right of the Link Checker report.

**Keep in Mind:**

- False positives show up a lot. On the Link Checker page, Springshare has provided a list of reasons why they might be appearing.
• Many of our A-Z Databases will show up on the list as false positives, so you might want to filter the list by Type (Link or Book) to cut out that noise and also save yourself a tiny heart attack when you think for a second that all of our databases are broken.

• You might be using assets on your guide that are technically owned by someone else, so you could still have broken links on your guide even after you’ve checked all of the assets you own. Do a quick skim of the full Link Checker report to look for any assets you use but do not own.

Hillary Ostermiller
#10: Use Search Widgets (embeds) with Care

**Note that the two paragraphs in bold type are the gist of this message.**

Search widgets from various systems like the Library Catalog or Quick Search give us a great way to assure that we give guide visitors a path to quickly start searching. Over time we have learned to accept that we have a multitude of visitors who approach search in different ways. Adding a pathway to immediately begin searching, along with more in-depth information and lists of resources on a guide page, seems like a great compromise, but our attempts to cater to various types of visitors may cause us to unwittingly compromise the mission of our guides.

Over the course of our studies, only 2 out of our 5 participants encountered pages with search widgets embedded on them, but they always either used the widget or noted it. These interactions were coded with the “Search Widget” theme and appeared 15 times in the 2 participants’ sessions. The Search Widget theme was further divided into two types: Search Widget Magnet and Search Widget Misuse.

Much like the search box magnet phenomena already covered in a previous tip of the week, we observed that the search widget draws a user’s eyes and mouse pointer to the box almost as soon as a page renders on the screen. There were 5 Search Widget Magnet moments out of 15 occurrences in the Search Widget theme.

**The remaining 10 occurrences were coded with the Search Widget Misuse theme.** In each instance, the student ignored descriptive text around the widget and searching with it incorrectly. We imagine the small heading and descriptive text around the widget certainly contributed to this problem, but there’s an interesting nuance to this behavior. Both participants placed the search widget in context of the page in which it was embedded. The participants received a visual signal that the search tool covers all the content on a specific guide and proceeded to search.

We realize this finding is limited to a few people, but we think this is worth paying attention to because the message of context was carried with the participant through extensive and repeated searching in the Library Catalog for peer reviewed articles over multiple tasks. We’ve seen how context can be quite powerful and lead to a combination of confusion. Ironically, the persistence of misuse appeared to stem from the participants’ trust of an authoritative website. One participant seemed to think that a library webpage could never lead someone astray. She repeatedly noted that she must be doing something wrong.

As noted earlier, our attempts at serving those who wish to launch into search, and those who wish to browse lists of resources, conflicts with a potential mission of guides – to help users choose the right resource for a given need. If we want students to focus on looking at lists of resources and their descriptions, we need to think carefully about placing widgets into guides. What could the placement of a search widget communicate to your students? Are there better ways to help people who want to search immediately? Perhaps large labels such as Find Books about X or Find Articles about Y, might help if you feel you need search widgets on your guide.

David Vess
#11: In Their Own Words: How Students Describe Guides

We asked our study participants how they would describe JMU’s Research Guides to one of their peers. Here are some of the responses we got:

“A link to figure out where you want to start your research.”

“A curated selection of library and non-library resources geared toward a specific topic.”

“A way to narrow down all the research that’s open to you, make it specific to your discipline.”

“It narrows down [where to start].”

What to do:

You may notice that we rebranded this service as Research Guides, because that word resonated more with students than the previous term Subject Guides. This switch is reflected in the new website design.

In addition to using the new name with students and faculty, consider specifically mentioning the change to upper-level students who were familiar with the former term.

As always, stay vigilant about not referring them to LibGuides externally. That’s a whole other can of worms. :-)

Elizabeth Price

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LibGuides Tip of the Week

#12: More Resources & Feedback

We hope the “LibGuides Tip of the Week” emails have been useful for you this summer!

Feedback

If you can, please take a few moments to respond to this very, very, very short survey:
http://jmu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6JTLtbjZOi8uSr3

Resources in RES > Documents > RES Projects > LibGuides Refresh 2017-2018

All of this summer’s tips are compiled in one document in the folder above (and attached here).

Last July, I also facilitated three LibGuides working sessions, focusing on Best Practices, Content Types, and Statistics. The slides from those sessions are available in the same RES folder on the Hub and also attached to this message.

Remember that Springshare also provides a great deal of support for LibGuides, including articles, guides, videos, and live training sessions.

Please feel free to pass this information along to anyone else who might find it helpful!

Hillary Ostermiller