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Calvin H. Wang
Arcadia University

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CONNECTING APHORDABLY

Using Memorably and Succinctly Stated Truths in Library Research Instruction



“Aphorisms are spurs to action. It's not enough to just read one and murmur sagely to yourself, ‘How true, how true.’ Aphorisms make you want to do something; admiring them without putting them into practice is like learning to read music but neglecting to play an instrument” (Geary).

OBJECTIVE

This informal effort has sought to generate a list of aphorisms to use in library research instruction sessions that are appropriate for audience members of all abilities and backgrounds. Aphorisms are succinct phrases of truth or opinion. They can be both established phrases that have been repurposed or novel ones that have been fabricated. The result of this effort is a collection that this instructor can employ readily and that audience members understand quickly and can remember easily. This presentation provides a strategy that recipients can individually validate and imitate.

METHODS

This instructor compiled a collection incrementally over a period of 7 years. Each phrase came from a learning principle developed through presentation and repetition. The process of developing the phrases employed careful observation of audience response with subtle refinement of wording to achieve maximal succinctness with clarity of thought. Since aphorisms often need initial explanation for contextual efficacy, this instructor distributes a standard list to audience members with explanatory text.

RESULTS

Regular and consistent use of aphorisms in instruction has generated a list that this instructor uses for audiences ranging from undergraduates in general studies to medical science professionals. Use of this list has led to the generation of newer phrases and the elimination of obsolete ones both as audience response has confirmed effectiveness and as instructional strategies have evolved. This collection has utility for all audiences with the instructor articulating specific aphorisms as appropriate for an individual session's circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

Although no formal assessment has validated the effectiveness of this instructor's use of aphorisms or the specific collection, audience engagement as informally observed has provided some validation. Employment of aphorisms has streamlined library research instruction thus enhancing audience engagement. Informal polling of individuals participating in additional instruction sessions confirms their ability to recall specific aphorisms.

APHORISM:

(1) A ‘definition’ or concise statement of a principle in any science.

(2) Any principle or precept expressed in few words; a short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import; a maxim.

ADAGE:

A **traditional** maxim; a proverb or short statement expressing a general truth.

MAXIM:

An axiom; a self-evident proposition assumed as a **premise in dialectical or mathematical reasoning.**

PROVERB:

A short, traditional, and pithy saying; a concise sentence, typically **metaphorical or alliterative in form**, stating a general truth or piece of advice; an adage or maxim (OED: All definitions).

WHY APHORISMS?

- Aphorisms streamline instruction by the nature of their brevity.
- Aphorisms facilitate the acquisition of knowledge by their memorability.
- Aphorisms personalize instruction by their individuality.

PRINCIPLES

- The instructor has complete flexibility to use or ignore specific aphorisms based on the individual needs of the audience.
- In teaching, aphorisms require elucidation. The aphorisms themselves are the teaching points. The originating truths become explanations.
- Using an aphorism in teaching is like the joke about voting. Do it early and often.

	IDENTIFY TEACHING TRUTH	CRAFT DRAFT STATEMENT	REFINE THROUGH EXPERIMENTATION	CONTINUE TO REFINE
1	Searchers use interfaces (librarians are interfaces, too) that they're familiar with. It takes time to learn the similarities and capabilities of new interfaces.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	Search interfaces have personalities.
2	It can be challenging to ascertain the appropriate sets of keywords or subject terms authors or indexers have used to identify articles' concepts.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	You're searching a concept, but you're reduced to words.
3	By using general terms to start, searchers begin to gauge the coverage of article databases and judge relevance before they begin specializing their terms.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	Stay general to start a search, then get specific.
4	Limiting searches to full-text eliminates articles in the results that may readily be available through other databases or through ILL.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	Search all articles, not just full-text only.
5	A searcher's choice of keywords is rarely perfect to start, but is often good enough to begin refinement based on articles that do appear. Searchers can evaluate the quality of a search through a sample population within the total search results.	Browse 100 search results before refining your search.	Analyze a sample population of the search results	There are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics.
6	Not all the most appropriate information is available in research articles. Older knowledge may readily be available in review articles or books.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	Consider the age of your topic's knowledge base.
7	Searchers must learn the strategies for obtaining articles not contained in the database in use.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	No search interface has access to everything.
8	Searchers need to be aware that it takes time and effort both to develop effective searching techniques and, more specifically, to find suitable information.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	It's never as easy as you'd like for it to be.
9	Suitable information must often be gleaned from multiple and complementary source materials.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	It's impossible for you to find the article that is the paper you are going to write.
10	Developing proficiency in seeking information takes time and, more importantly, practice; however, sometimes the most subtle refinements in search strategies can come only from a professional information specialist.	Left blank intentionally.	Left blank intentionally.	Don't be lazy: Give your search a try. But don't hurt yourself: Ask for help.

“My ideal is that all of the things that I love are in my head and I don't have to depend on anything [like notecards]...that they'll all just be safely there. And if they don't fit in there, maybe they're too long or something's just not right” (Foster).

AUTHOR

Calvin Wang is the Sciences Librarian at Arcadia University in suburban Philadelphia serving basic and medical sciences where he has worked since he graduated from Drexel University in 2005. The son of an engineer father and artist mother, he solidified his cross disciplinary tendencies through the common core academics of the University of Chicago where he receive his bachelor's degree. He has a previous master's degree in medical sculpting and worked for 10 years in applied materials research and development. By nature he loves words and—contrary to the nature of an aphorism—is naturally given to extended and rambling explications. Send e-mail to wangc@arcadia.edu.

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