

# Navigating Literacies

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**Abstract:** Librarians looking to enhance their knowledge of and support for unfamiliar literacies can begin by examining approaches to these literacies in the field, reflecting upon personal definitions, and by facilitating conversation and discussion among colleagues.

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**Keywords:** *digital literacy, media literacy, data literacy, information literacy, literacies*



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As patrons navigate increasingly complex information environments and explore new mediums for creation and scholarship, librarians are discussing and supporting literacies in new ways. Many libraries are developing programs around data, invention, health, media, visual, and digital literacies, often in connection with, or as part of, existing information literacy programs. Definitions and visions for these literacies can vary widely. For example, “digital literacy” may be framed with an emphasis on baseline technology skills, critical thinking and creative abilities, or critical engagement with online identity and citizenship (Alexander et al., 2017). Those looking to explore “new” literacies face the challenge of navigating these varying definitions, determining what will resonate in their context, and getting potential partners on the same page. In this column, I will share four steps for beginning to navigate varied literacies and describe how my library applied these strategies to digital literacy. Whether you are exploring literacies as an individual or as part of a group, these strategies provide starting points for expanding literacy support in relation to existing programs at your institution.

**Step 1: Identify the literacies you want to explore.** When thinking about focusing on a particular literacy, you can start with your own needs and interests. As Genifer Snipes discusses in “[Everyone’s a Data Librarian Now](#),” you may already be finding new literacy-related topics coming up in your work (Snipes, 2018). Maybe you are receiving more questions about managing data, or noticing a growing number of students seeking help with media production-related projects. In these situations, you may want to explore data or media literacy. You can also reflect more broadly about the priorities at your institution. When my library began to envision a more coordinated effort around supporting digital literacy on our campus, we also identified data, media, information, and invention literacies as key areas to explore because of their connections to our programs and curriculum. Does your strategic

plan mention or allude to new literacy areas? Are there any broader curriculum changes to build upon? Check in with colleagues about any trends they are seeing as well.

**Step 2: Explore approaches to the literacies you have identified, within librarianship and beyond.** What kinds of knowledge and skills are involved in these literacies? Why do they matter? Who do they affect, and how do these groups define literacies? When we started to explore digital literacy at my library, we put a great deal of energy into thinking about the “what” and “why,” especially in relation to other literacies we were supporting. For us, [Jisc’s framework](#) for digital capability and the [New Media Consortium Horizon Reports](#) were helpful entry points to interdisciplinary conversations about digital literacy (Jisc, 2015; Alexander et al., 2016; Alexander et al., 2017).

**Step 3: Develop a definition for your identified literacies.** After exploring how others define the literacy you have identified, take time to reflect upon your own definition. Are there existing definitions or frameworks that speak to you? How would you adjust them for your needs? If you are examining multiple literacies, take time to reflect on the relationship between them as well. For example, you might see information literacy as an umbrella that includes multiple sub-literacies, or perhaps you conceptualize information literacy as part of a network of related literacies. At my institution, we created a [digital literacy framework](#) to help us visually represent the interrelated competencies within digital, information, data, media, and invention literacies. We created this framework with feedback from across the university, and went through multiple drafts. When you are just beginning, try to avoid getting stuck on creating the perfect definition. You can always adapt this definition as you learn more.

**Step 4: Facilitate conversations.** Having an initial definition or framework is a great tool for initiating conversations with collaborators, whether you are building relationships with a few key individuals, or looking to form broader collaborations across your institution. When my colleagues and

I used our draft framework to facilitate discussions about digital literacy, we sought to determine potential partners and advocates. We wanted to identify their needs and to learn about how they think about digital literacy and how that aligns (or perhaps does not) with our framework. For the most part, we facilitated these conversations through feedback sessions embedded in existing professional development opportunities. These included focus groups with faculty and students, one-on-one meetings, and a day-long symposium featuring a keynote speaker, breakout sessions, and lightning talks.

The strategies described here focus on identifying perceptions of the meaning and scope of varied literacies at your institution. This kind of big-picture exploration can be done before, or even in conjunction with the development of new programs and learning opportunities. When you are ready to jump into planning workshops, online learning opportunities, or other forms of engagement, there are many resources ready for adaptation. Some of the resources that our institution has found particularly useful include [data literacy](#) and other lessons from [Project Cora](#), the [Digital Literacy Pop-Ups Toolkit](#), the Media Education Lab's [Teaching Resources](#), and [Digital Tattoo](#) from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Try something new, reflect, and continue to adapt.

## References

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