

PATHFINDERS IN THE
INFORMATION PROVISION
PROCESS

About pathfinders

Pathfinder

- A pathfinder is a subject bibliography designed to lead the user through the process of researching a specific topic, or any topic in a given field or discipline, usually in a systematic, step-by-step way, making use of the best finding tools the library has to offer. Pathfinders may be printed or available online (The Dictionary for Library & Information Science in Old Dominion University Libraries).

About pathfinders

Pathfinder

- is a webpage created by librarians for library users as an aid to their research.
- They're used widely by academic and school libraries, but also by public and special libraries and archives.
- Pathfinders are also referred to as research guides, subject guides, course guides, etc, depending on context, situation, or preference (Puckett, 2012).

About pathfinders

Pathfinder

- Pathfinders have been used in libraries for many years to save researchers time, and to help them avoid frustrating dead ends.

About pathfinders

- Pathfinders may improve the research experience of users as they work their way through the library research process.
- Research is not an easy process, especially when looking for exhaustive, authoritative sources.
- Well-designed, cohesive pathfinders can improve the research experience by providing effective direction toward relevant resources and away, or around, less appropriate tools.

About pathfinders

- Pathfinders are usually intended to address an audience with a particular and specific information need.
- They contain instructions, links, and other information meant to help users with a specific research context or task.
- Guides may exist to help library users complete a class assignment requiring research, accomplish a useful library procedure (placing an ILL request, checking out e-books), carry out research on a given topic or in a subject area, or perhaps learn to use a particular research tool like Zotero (<https://www.zotero.org/> a free, easy-to-use tool to help you collect, organize, cite, and share research).

About pathfinders

- librarians have been using pathfinders in one form or another for a long time e.g the handouts Libraries create and distribute to facilitate students' independent use of Library services
- Many libraries have by now transitioned from using paper-based research guides to providing this kind of information via specialized webpages.

About pathfinders

What's different about creating guides on the Web? Web-based research guides

- don't just provide information: they can serve as active research tools, with links, search boxes, and other interactive elements;
- are infinitely discoverable (even by users who aren't aware that the library provides them) via web searches;
- are available any time of the day, when your library is closed, to researchers from inside and outside your constituency, who never set foot in the library or speak to a reference librarian;
- can be updated easily as users' needs change, as assessment reveals potential improvements, and as research tools change;

About pathfinders

- contain content that can be shared and reused among guide authors and repurposed by other libraries;
- can be created collaboratively by multiple librarians and even faculty members;
- can include multimedia elements like audio and video and self-updating elements like RSS feeds; and
- benefit from a working knowledge of how to write well for the web (studies show that we read web content differently from print content).

What Are pathfinders used for?

- Gathers all of the most useful, relevant, reliable and authoritative resources on a variety of academic, work-related or general-interest topics.
- act as portals to information about resources in a variety of formats.
- used as curriculum tools for bibliographic instruction; help library users find materials or help those unfamiliar with a discipline understand the key sources.
- offers users a plan of action, a place to start from when finding information.
- A map for locating important information destinations with signs and helpful hints along the way.

What are research guides for?

- Pathfinders are useful as a reference or instructional tool for library users who have a specific information need.
- They can serve a number of teaching-related functions
- Great tool to help new staff orient to the library
- Library marketing tool

How to make a good library pathfinder

a. Provide a brief introduction and explanation for your pathfinder

- With an introduction, users will get a firm grasp on the subject matter of the pathfinder, so that they will quickly be able to judge whether or not it is a useful research tool.
- An intro teaches users about the purpose of pathfinders and how to specifically use this pathfinder in particular.
- Do not assume your patrons are familiar with pathfinders or that they know how to use them.

How to make a good library pathfinder

b. provide a variety of resources, both in print and electronic forms. Some resources to include are:

- Reference Texts (reference guides, encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs, bibliographies)
- Books (can be background information, specific information on the topic of the pathfinder, or biographies)
- Articles (from journals, magazines, and other periodicals, many of which can be found online)
- Web Pages (can include pages devoted to the topics, university web pages or syllabi, web portals, Web sites for various organizations, online museum exhibits, and myriad other resources)
- Multimedia Resources (audio and video recordings, images, films)
- Indexes and Abstracts

How to make a good library pathfinder

b. provide a variety of resources, both in print and electronic forms.

- If your library has access to many online resources, favour these to allow patrons to interact with many materials easily from outside the library.
- Also, try to include at least one free online resource in each section of your pathfinder.

How to make a good library pathfinder

b. provide a variety of resources, both in print and electronic forms.

- Carefully consider your audience when evaluating more complex research tools.
- If your pathfinder will primarily be used by freshmen and sophomore students, include resources that are easy to access and use.
- If there are complex tools available that would be valuable, include instruction on how to use them in the pathfinder.

How to make a good library pathfinder

C. Instructions for Searching

- Many of your library patrons will begin their research by going to Google and Wikipedia.
- Help them make good, responsible use of these resources and then direct them to the library catalog or to databases if appropriate.
- In your pathfinder, you should highlight helpful ways to search.

How to make a good library pathfinder

C. Instructions for Searching

- Consider the following tips:
- Start with searching guidance for the library catalog.
- This is especially important if your library is dealing with mostly or only print materials.
- It is also a less complex library tool that will ease novice users into the process of searching and using library resources.

How to make a good library pathfinder

d. Organization of the Pathfinder

- to make pathfinders useful and effective, design them according to users' needs, which means starting with general, "overview" resources, and then moving to more specific facets of the topic as the project progresses.

How to make a good library pathfinder

d. Organization of the Pathfinder

- For example, a pathfinder focused on a specific country might begin with an encyclopedia article about that country in general, and then branch into different aspects of that country, such as history, economics, religion, politics, and culture.
- From there, each of these topics might split again into more specific sections. For example, history could branch into different periods of history, which can then branch into resources on important people, places, and events.
- Different types of resources should be scattered throughout the pathfinder, so that books, articles, and multimedia resources are placed together at each level of the pathfinder.

How to make a good library pathfinder

d. Organization of the Pathfinder

- For example, a pathfinder focused on a specific country might begin with an encyclopedia article about that country in general, and then branch into different aspects of that country, such as history, economics, religion, politics, and culture.
- From there, each of these topics might split again into more specific sections. For example, history could branch into different periods of history, which can then branch into resources on important people, places, and events.
- Different types of resources should be scattered throughout the pathfinder, so that books, articles, and multimedia resources are placed together at each level of the pathfinder.

How to make a good library pathfinder

E. Make Your Information Useful, but not Overwhelming

- topic should be specific enough that you won't need pages and pages of resources to scratch the surface of your topic, but that it is also broad enough that more than one book on the subject has been published.

How to make a good library pathfinder

E. Make Your Information Useful, but not Overwhelming

- In general, 5-10 pages should be sufficient for a pathfinder, though numbers can certainly shift based on the topic at hand.
- Regardless of page length, a pathfinder should provide enough information that a library patron can begin research on the topic.
- It should also help the patron find and access the resources described in the pathfinder, and explain when and how to use the included resources.

How to make a good library pathfinder

E. Make Your Information Useful, but not Overwhelming

- In general, 5-10 pages should be sufficient for a pathfinder, though numbers can certainly shift based on the topic at hand.
- Regardless of page length, a pathfinder should provide enough information that a library patron can begin research on the topic.
- It should also help the patron find and access the resources described in the pathfinder, and explain when and how to use the included resources.

How to make a good library pathfinder

F. Distribution

- To get the most out of your pathfinders, distribute them as much as possible.
- E.g in academic libraries, arrange with lecturers to present pathfinders directly to the classes they are intended for so that you can explain the pathfinders in person and teach students how to use them.
- you should keep digital files of the pathfinders at the reference desk so that print copies can be made and given to patrons when needed.
- put your pathfinders up on the library Web site so that patrons can access them from anywhere at any time.

Common Problems in Creating Research Guides

1. Too much information.

- Without proper plan/objectives the temptation is great to throw everything into the research guide
- while the intentions of attempting to provide everything the user might maybe good it has great potential of confusing users and discourage them from using the overloaded guide.
- The intent of a Pathfinder is to present *a selection* of resources—print, electronic, and nonprint—not to list every single item a library has on the topic.
- Its important that there is a well thought-out plan for a pathfinder

Common Problems in Creating Research Guides

2. Too much text

- many of us tend to think in terms of writing large amounts of text rather than images or another medium that might convey equivalent information.
- Our users may not be text oriented and text on a webpage maybe processed differently from printed resources
- When too large text is used, it can discourage users

Common Problems in Creating Research Guides

3. Poor visual design.

- Librarians (except web services librarians) rarely get much training in good design principles and how design can have a positive or negative impact on how users are able to use and absorb information.
- Fortunately, most softwares intended for creating research guides already provide an attractive, usable visual baseline

Common Problems in Creating Research Guides

4. Nothing but links.

- Links to databases and other useful websites are common and necessary for most guides
- but a guide that's nothing but a link farm doesn't convey a lot of information and isn't very useful as a teaching tool.
- A corollary to this problem is the guide that overwhelms the user with a long list of databases to choose from, but no guidance as to which ones might work best for a given type of research.
- This type of guide often annotates links only with text copied and pasted from the database vendor's description, full of jargon that goes over users' heads.

Common Problems in Creating Research Guides

4. Nothing but links.

- An effective Pathfinder does not display a long list of URLs, but rather a short, descriptive list of relevant, developmentally appropriate Web sites.
- The links should be specific enough to guide the researcher into the data.
- Briefly describing the content of each site listed helps users to develop their information-seeking strategies

Common Problems in Creating Research Guides

Software for creating pathfinders

- LibGuides, a product by the company Springshare.
- It's a content management system (or CMS: a system for creating and publishing webpages) designed specifically for librarians to use in creating online research guides, and I think it warrants a brief specific mention.
- LibGuides is so popular for its ease of use and simple, attractive design

Examples of lib guides

<https://simmons.libguides.com/home>

<https://simmons.libguides.com/LIS>