Some strategies for guiding student use of digital collections

All of these align with the broader principles of providing clearly articulated learning goals and careful scaffolding.

- Anonymous assessment to determine student background knowledge, esp. gaps (e.g., a short written survey asking questions about the difference between a subject and keyword search, or an open question asking students how they would go about looking for a given primary source).

- Guided play with a chosen database during class. Give students a task and let them figure out what they find challenging or don’t know how to do.

- In-class demonstration of database navigation—on a ‘need to know’ basis, after students have discovered hurdles and blind spots for themselves.

- In-class exercise where whole group looks at one object together and simply describes it. Asking students, “What do you see here?” provides a chance to assess how students see differently from you, determine what guidance they need.

- ‘Scavenger hunt’ assignments where students independently select examples of something very specific (e.g., satirical cartoons focused on railways, newspaper headlines about a particular historical event, instances of a given word in context) to bring to class and discuss together. Such a small step can both foster rich exchanges and help you learn what guidance students need for a larger assignment.

- Collaboratively generated guide to using a chosen database: Based on their explorations of the tool, students identify areas where they are likely to need reminders about how to navigate, sort, view items, save a selection, etc.

- Glossary of terms that you prepare and distribute: This could focus on navigation options offered by the database (e.g., basic search/boolean search/proximity search), or on terms they’re likely to encounter within a database.

- Special collections visits, using material objects to help students understand what they’re looking at in digital collections (e.g., a chance to compare octavo and quarto books from a given period to consider how the reading experience of these might differ; a chance to see a novel in its serialized and one or three-volume form; or a comparison of an image as it appears on ArtStor vs. in person, to discuss how those modes of access differ).

- Others?