Think like a librarian:  
Best practices for offering open workshops

“The key is to focus on the BENEFIT, not the tool.”  
- Seth Godin, marketing guru

**Best practices**

1. **Ask the students what they want.**  
Surveying students doesn’t have to be formal. Make observations while you are on the reference desk, when you are teaching one-shots, talk to your colleagues and teaching faculty, read the literature.

2. **Embrace your inner marketer.**  
Pair innovative techniques with the most direct ways to advertise workshops. Word-of-mouth can be the most effective and you will have many repeat attendees. Come up with snazzy titles since they will spark curiosity and interest.

3. **Find organizations on campus that are willing to co-sponsor and/or provide support for your workshops.**  
This can be as simple as adding your workshops to a campus calendar or advertising at academic events. Send announcements to campus departmental listservs. Take advantage of orientation activities at the beginning of the semester. Some examples of campus partners could include the Graduate College, Center for Teaching Excellence, Vice Provost’s Office for Research, etc. These will vary from institution to institution.

4. **Ask a variety of librarians to teach.**  
Librarians have a diverse array of academic interests, leverage those strengths. If your science librarian has a passion for Journal Impact Factors, ask him or her to teach a session on how to interpret impact factor data. If you have a librarian who is interested in GIS, ask him or her to teach SPSS or ArcGIS. By including your colleagues, you will not only build a team spirit in the library but you will increase learning since the instructor has a passion for the topic.

5. **Stagger days and times when your sessions are offered.**  
Keep in mind that all students have busy and varied schedules, so if you want in-person attendance, you need to make sure that you offer each workshop several times per semester, on different days, at different times.
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6. Set up an online registration system.
This will not only help you keep track of your numbers, but a registration system could keep track of student’s disciplines. If your instruction lab holds 15 students, set a limit of 15 registrants with a wait list of 5. There may be a percentage of students unable to attend each time, but this will help to increase attendance.

7. Send an email reminder the day before the workshop.
The day before the workshop, send an email reminder to the 15 students, plus the 5 on the waitlist. Since these are open workshops, sometimes students will sign up at the beginning of the semester, and by the time the workshop rolls around, something has arisen in their schedule. In order to make sure the instructor’s time is valued, the following text could be added to the email reminder, “This is a really popular workshop, so if you are unable to attend, please reply to this email so that the next person on the waitlist will be able to attend.”

8. Use the email reminder as an opportunity to share more information e.g. time management tips.
Show students that you care about their academic careers by incorporating “something extra” into your reminder emails. For example, include quick tips on how to use Table of Contents Alerts or recently updated features in RefWorks.

9. Incorporate active learning into all your sessions.
It’s tempting to lecture in these types of situations. However, for learning to truly occur, activity needs to happen. Be as creative as possible in active learning segments. By using various techniques in each session, the instructor will be meeting the learning needs of whomever may be in the room.

10. Give attendees more than what they expect.
Since attendees choose to attend open workshops on their own time, don’t waste it. Plan well, be thorough. Be cognizant of the nature of the open workshop: attendees will have varying academic experience and come from a multitude of disciplinary backgrounds. Provide handouts on other topics that may be relevant to their academic work e.g. searching the online catalog, announcements for upcoming library events.

11. Offer your content in multiple formats.
Since student’s schedules vary widely, acknowledge that people who want the information from your workshop may be unable to attend an in-person session. There could be several reasons for this: maybe it doesn’t fit their schedule, maybe they are a distance learner, maybe the student is naturally an online learner. Consider offering your workshop in multiple formats e.g., LibGuides, podcasts, or videocasts.

12. Consistently and constantly reevaluate your sessions.
Sometimes a workshop that was successful one semester will not be the next. Make sure that your topics are timely and update your lesson plan on a regular basis. Mix up your workshops with a variety of concept-based and tool-based workshops. A few examples include how to find the tough stuff (e.g., conference proceedings, dissertations and statistics) and searching for and legalizing using digital images.

13. Try something new.
Consider offering a topic that the library has not traditionally considered in the past. For example, one of the most innovative ideas for a workshop at Illinois is “Past Writer’s Block.” In this session, the library offers a research community for students who are struggling to get through the research process. Material covered includes an advanced introduction to Getting Things Done (Allen, 2001), time to share research woes/solutions, and tips on how to get research subject expertise and writing assistance. Another example might include addressing professional development needs by covering how to create and design an effective poster session.

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14. Don’t expect a full turnout. 
Upon building an open workshop program, it will take time for word to get out on campus. It’s okay to start slow, it will help the program to gain solid footing in what it is trying to accomplish. It also provides an opportunity to try new ideas and work out the kinks on a smaller group before being inundated with eager students.

15. Recognize the diversity in the room. 
Remember that open workshops attract learners at all stages of the academic process. In other words, attendees will not only include students from a variety of disciplines but also students that embrace technology, students that prefer print, students that just entered graduate school and students who are just about to defend their thesis. Be prepared to answer a variety of questions – and admit that you might not have the answer, but you can get back to them!

16. Consider teaching workshops geared to faculty. 
Faculty have instruction needs as well – as technology changes, librarians can to do a better job of sharing these innovations with teaching faculty. Take the opportunity to offer open workshops geared toward their needs. This could be as simple as demonstrating a new database and working advanced searching skills into your examples or how to set up Table of Contents alerts for journals in their field.

Example topics for workshops

Advanced searching skills - Google, foundations in searching your library resources, demystifying the literature review process, locating grant funding, finding where you've been cited, how to identify the best publication for your research
Citation management - Zotero, Mendeley, RefWorks, EndNote
Building scholarly communication skills - Author's rights, how to read journal impact factors, considerations in copyright,
Technology and the library - doing research on smartphones, Twitter for professional development, personal information management tools (e.g. Evernote, Dropbox), current awareness tools, using digital tools for archival research
Data services - data management tools (SPSS, SAS), data management plans, geographic information systems (e.g. map making using census data), data visualization tools (e.g. Many Eyes)
Presentation skills - how to develop a research poster, using presentation tools (e.g. Prezi)
Research specifics - market new databases by offering instruction or particularly difficult databases to manage (e.g. Lexis Nexis), using library resources after leaving the University

"Librarian is a service occupation. Gas station attendant of the mind."
- The Gold Bug Variations by Richard Powers

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