

PERRLA Case Study

Western Washington University RN-to-BSN & MSN Programs

Executive Summary

Western Washington University's RN-to-BSN and MSN nursing faculty weren't looking for a citation tool – they were looking for a way to give students a reliable formatting workflow without sacrificing class time. What they found was that PERRLA fit naturally into scaffolded assignments at every level, even as their courses evolved away from traditional research papers toward podcasts and visual storytelling.

Over 6 months, 22 of 24 invited students activated their accounts, creating 224 papers, 617 references, and 346 citations. Where faculty could directly compare PERRLA users to non-users, the grade difference was clear: students who used PERRLA averaged 9.5 out of 10 on APA formatting. Students who didn't averaged 7.5.

The Challenge

Nursing faculty at WWU face a familiar tension: APA formatting matters, but class time is finite and clinical content comes first. Dedicating even a portion of a session to citation mechanics means something more important doesn't get taught. As Assistant Professor Dr. Katie Wahler put it, the question wasn't whether formatting was worth teaching – it was whether it was worth the trade-off. When students were left to figure it out on their own, the results showed up in their grades.

- → Limited class time consumed by citation formatting instruction
- → Students left to self-navigate APA produced inconsistent results

About the Programs

Western Washington University's BSN program prepares registered nurses for advanced clinical practice, building foundational skills in evidence-based care and scholarly writing. The MSN program serves practicing nurses pursuing graduate-level specialization, where expectations for academic writing and research are significantly higher.

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The Solution

Dr. Wahler built PERRLA into a scaffolded assignment sequence – starting with an annotated bibliography, moving into an individual synthesis paper, and culminating in a group podcast. Each step used the same research and citation workflow, so by the time students reached the final assignment, PERRLA was already part of how they worked. Rather than requiring it, Dr. Wahler strongly encouraged it and included a tutorial video directly in the course – and students adopted it anyway.

Student Voices

"It takes much of the guesswork out of formatting, which is something I find difficult."

"It has been a huge relief to be able to use it."

"I wish I had access to it in my RN program."

By the Numbers

Over 6 months, WWU's nursing students created 224 papers, 617 references, and 346 citations – a 92% activation rate for a tool that was never required. The clearest proof came from a fall quarter assignment where faculty could directly compare users to non-users. Students who used PERRLA averaged 9.5 out of 10 on APA formatting. The two who didn't averaged 7.5. The lower citation count reflects how students used PERRLA across assignment types – building reference lists for annotated bibliographies and visual projects where in-text citations aren't always required.

What Faculty Found

The most immediate payoff was time. Drs. Wahler and Espina had previously carved out class time to walk students through citation formatting – a small but recurring cost in a three-and-a-half hour hybrid course. With PERRLA available, that segment came out of the syllabus entirely. As Dr. Wahler put it, even if it's just 15 minutes of one class, "that's a whole thing you may not have to talk about at all" – freeing that time for content students actually came to learn.

The tool also held up as assignments evolved. When Dr. Espina shifted her MSN students toward visual storytelling and voice-over presentations, PERRLA remained relevant – students still needed to build reference lists and manage citations regardless of the final format. Faculty were also comfortable recommending it without reservation. PERRLA's rule-based formatting engine – built by humans, not generated by AI – addressed academic integrity concerns directly.

Lessons & Recommendations for Others

Build PERRLA into the assignment sequence, not just the syllabus – students adopted it at a 92% rate because it was tied to specific assignments they were already doing, not just listed as an available resource.

Let the assignments evolve – PERRLA doesn't require traditional paper writing to be useful. As long as students are working with sources, it fits. Annotated bibliographies, synthesis papers, and visual projects all benefit from a reliable reference workflow.

Trust the grade data – when faculty can compare PERRLA users to non-users, the difference shows up. Building in one assignment where formatting is explicitly graded gives you the clearest picture of the tool's impact.

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