Have you ever heard a student say, “I can’t find anything about my research topic in the library?” That statement never ceases to amaze us. In fact, we discover that too many students in biology return from a visit to the library reporting that they cannot find any information regarding a topic. When we query students regarding this lack of information, it becomes clear that they have neither consulted librarians nor exhausted library resources. We believe that mastery of library research skills represents a foundation for lifelong learning and, as such, is a cornerstone of a liberal arts education. This exercise grew out of our realization that too many students in introductory biology are ill prepared to conduct a thorough literature review. Thus, we created a collaborative learning exercise, utilizing a modified version of the jigsaw format (Cohen, 1994; Slavin, 1994), for a college-level Introductory Biology course that fosters library research skills as well as introduces important themes in ecology.

The jigsaw is a collaborative learning technique that emphasizes the fact that we can learn by teaching. This technique gently forces students to dive into the subject matter, acquire new knowledge or a skill, and teach it to another student. Specifically, in our jigsaw exercise each student, through library research, becomes an expert regarding the natural...