

Tip Sheet

Creating Effective Library Assignments

Effective research assignments offer students an opportunity to learn and practice information literacy skills. Overtime these projects enable students to develop effective research strategies that often result in a commitment to lifelong learning.

Information Literacy skills including basic search strategies, evaluation methods, and the knowledge of discipline-specific sources are vital in the success and development of today's students and tomorrow's life-long learners. An effective research assignment can provide an opportunity for students to develop these skills. Unfortunately, assignments also have the potential to confuse and frustrate students.

Common Problems

- The assignment assumes that all students are information literate and have had previous experience doing library research.
- The assignment indicates that internet resources cannot be used. **Note: Many scholarly resources are only available online.**
- The assignment requires all students to use the same source or a small number of sources, which often makes it difficult for the students to access the material needed.
- The assignment suggests the use of printed materials that the library does not own and online sources that the library does not provide access to.
- The assignment focuses on finding facts and lists of information not on developing a search strategy, judging the quality of the source, and synthesizing the information found.

However, a well-designed assignment can teach students valuable research skills and improve the quality of their papers. Here are some suggestions

Set objectives and make them clear to students

Objectives help students focus on the information literacy or research skills they should learn as a result of the assignment.

The student should learn to:

- Develop a suitable topic for research, using the library reference collection and other sources of background information.
- Select and use appropriate library catalogs, article databases, printed materials, and Internet search tools to locate relevant materials.
- Distinguish between popular and scholarly sources and detect signs of bias in print and electronic resources.
- Avoid plagiarism- quote and cite sources in a way that gives proper credit to the author.

Teach research strategies

Breaking down the assignment into steps will help students accomplish your stated objectives. The following might be an appropriate research strategy.

1. Define your topic using an encyclopedia article or other reference materials for background information.
2. Develop a list of relevant keywords and phrases to use in searching.
3. Use the library catalogs to find books on your topic.
4. Use online databases and journal finder to find information in magazines, newspapers, and journals.
5. Use Internet directories and search engines to locate authoritative, high-quality web sites.

Research is a personal process that requires practice. Students benefit from opportunities to reflect on their research strategies and think critically about what they are doing.

Provide resource lists

Resource lists direct students to the most useful information sources for a particular assignment.

*Because so many reference sources are moving from print to electronic formats, you may want to check **Journal Finder** -the library's listings of print and electronic journals.*

Alternate project designs

- Students keep a "research log" documenting where they looked for information, analyzing which search techniques worked and which did not, and discussing how the material they found or did not find affected their thinking on the topic.
- Help students identify a significant event or publication in the discipline, and ask them to find out more about the people and issues involved.
- Ask students to analyze the content, tone, style, and audience of three journals and/or web sites basic to the discipline.
- Ask students to compare how a given topic is treated in different reference sources, both print and electronic.
- Group students and ask them to prepare a guide that introduces others to information sources in a subject field.

Librarians are available to meet with faculty who are designing or redesigning syllabi and research projects. This collaborative process helps to promote the University's commitment to information literacy and provides students with specific opportunities to learn and practice effective research methods.