

DAVID AND LORRAINE CHENG LIBRARY
WILLIAM PATERSON UNIVERSITY

ALTERNATIVE ASSIGNMENTS TO ENHANCE STUDENT INFORMATION –
SEEKING SKILLS

Although the majority of our students are comfortable researching in an online environment, most are not aware of the Library's varied and diverse resources and rely too heavily on web resources that may not be appropriate for college level research. Technology has made the research process easier, but it has also increased the amount of information that is readily available and students need to develop skills in order to effectively locate, evaluate, organize and use information in the most efficient manner.

The following are examples of library-based assignments that can be adapted and used within any discipline or subject field. These assignments require students to explore, utilize and evaluate various library resources as well as Internet resources. **Information skills are best learned when linked to course content.** These assignments illustrate ways to incorporate the University's Learning Literacies (information literacy, technological literacy, critical thinking, and quantitative literacy) whenever possible.

We welcome the opportunity to work with you to plan assignments that will help students develop their information research skills.

Annotated Bibliography

Have students find a specified number (and type) of sources on a topic and write descriptive or evaluative annotations.

Objective: Students will become familiar with the process of locating and accessing library resources while also learning to critically evaluate resources. Students will also learn how to extract keywords, phrases or concepts from a topic and become accustomed to developing search strategies. Students will also become familiar with the format of a particular citation style.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Use of the library online catalog to locate books
- Use of at least one library database to locate journal articles
- Allow students to include one web site since this will provide the opportunity for students to evaluate and properly cite a web site as a source.

Technology Options:

- Students can import or prepare article, book and web references using bibliographic management software such as RefWorks.
- Students can learn to use the bibliographic management tools available in many of the databases.

- Using an assigned theme or issue, with criteria for selection, students can develop a shared list of online readings for investigating that theme.

Quantitative Literacy Options:

- Require students to include a statistical source such as a table or graph as one of the sources. Ask students to interpret and summarize the content of the table or graph.

Compare and Contrast Sources

Assign a topic and have students locate one article published in a popular magazine and one article published in a scholarly journal. Ask them to analyze the sources in terms of content, language and purpose.

Objective: Students will develop an understanding of the differences between popular and scholarly texts and become familiar with the concept of discipline specific resources.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Use of specialized databases to locate articles
- Recognition and documentation of different types of publication formats
- Develop critical evaluation, comparison and analytical skills

Technology Options:

- Using a discussion board ask students to comment on the different types of articles, their audiences and when it is appropriate to use a resource or when it isn't appropriate.

Quantitative Literacy Options:

- Ask students to locate data on a specific topic from more than one source. This could be data presented in a research article, a government statistical source, a magazine article or data found on the web. Students can then compare and contrast the presentation of data on a specific topic.

Analysis of Database Results and Web Search Engine Results

Assign a topic and have students conduct a search in an article database and on the web and discuss the results of their search in terms of what kinds of sources they found and the quality of the sources they found.

Objective: Students will develop an understanding of the difference between the content available on the "free" web and content available in Library subscription databases. Also encourages students to interpret and evaluate the results of searches based upon citations.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Using library databases appropriate to the subject area
- Developing search strategies by refining or revising search terms
- Evaluate the results of web search using established criteria
- Evaluate the article located in a database based on established criteria

Technology Options:

- Ask students to cut and paste links to examples of good webpages into Blackboard for discussion and review by members of the class or team
- Ask students to email one good article to the class or post the article in Blackboard (Note: depending on the database used, there can be problems with providing accurate links in Blackboard)

Quantitative Literacy Options:

- Ask students to locate information using a dataset, such as census data by starting from the U.S. Census Bureau webpage. Then ask students to locate the same information using Google or some other search engine.

Citation Examination

Have students review a bibliography found in their textbooks (or alternate source). Ask students to identify what type of resource is denoted by each entry. You may also ask students to locate and obtain a copy of one (or several) of the listed sources.

Objectives: Students will learn to identify sources of information through citations and be able to differentiate among citations for books, articles and web sites. Students will also recognize the importance and value of utilizing a bibliography or works cited list in gathering additional sources of information on a particular topic.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Use citation information to locate additional information
- Navigate library resources to determine availability of specific sources
- Increase familiarity with scholarly resources and the importance of citing sources

Opposing Viewpoints

Select an issue or topic that offers the opportunity to defend or reject a particular position. Divide the class into two groups (pro or con) and have students gather evidence in support of their assigned position. Have students discuss their findings during an in-class debate.

Objectives: Students will learn to formulate search statements specific to their needs, identify and evaluate sources of information and use that information to construct arguments (pro or con)

Information Literacy Skills:

- State a research problem and articulate an information need
- Organize and use information for a debate
- Analyze and critically evaluate alternative sources of information and opinion
- Use evidence to construct arguments

Technology Options:

- Students representing the pro or con "side" can work together to summarize their arguments in one or two slides for an electronic presentation.

Quantitative Literacy Options:

- Are crime rates increasing or decreasing? Are abortions among teenage women increasing or decreasing? Ask students to use statistical data in presenting either the pro or con perspective.
- Ask students to present data on their topic either in a presentation or a slide for a specific audience

Analyze a Study Published in a Scholarly Journal

Select an article reporting the results of a scholarly study within a specific discipline. Provide students with a rubric showing the criteria for evaluating a research study. Ask students to identify and describe the various elements of the student including the hypothesis, variables, methodology, population, data

analysis, findings, citation style (as appropriate to the discipline) and then to comment critically in the study.

Objectives: Students will be introduced to the scholarly communication and research methodologies of the discipline.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Use an appropriate library database to locate and retrieve a study;
- Summarize information in an organized manner;
- Identify valid and invalid arguments;
- Summarize and interpret data as presented in the study

Technology Options:

- Students can share articles through email or if the source of the article provides a stable URL, the articles can be shared in Blackboard.

Persona in a debate

Have students in the class adopt a role as a specific player in a debate. For example, an economics class might debate issues pertaining to reforming health care. One student/or team can represent the physician, another can be the patient, another the insurance company, etc. The students can focus their research around a specific persona and present arguments based on that perspective. This can be both a group and individual project with each student preparing a written summary of their research in addition to participation in the debate. The debate can be videotaped.

Objective: Students can focus their research and analyze and issue from a particular perspective. The debate format provides an opportunity to present arguments and evidence in support of their persona's point of view.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Use appropriate databases to locate selected articles on a specific issue;
- Identify relevant webpages or organizations such as the American Medical Association or the Insurance Industry or AARP that might provide data to support the perspective of a senior citizen, a physician, an insurance industry executive;
- Summarize and organize findings in preparation for a debate;

Technology Options:

- PowerPoint
- Videotaping (consider ethical issues such as securing permission for taping from all of the participants – this is especially an issue if the material could end up on the Internet)

Nature of Evidence

Begin with a simple statement or hypothesis, such as "Child Poverty is a major problem in the U.S". Each student will be asked to find and bring to class at least two pieces of evidence to support or contradict the statement. This evidence can be in the form of an article in a newspaper or magazine, a speech or presentation, a research study, a government statistical report or other source, interview with an expert or some other relevant source. Students can discuss their evidence in teams or with the entire class, explore contradictory information and discuss criteria for evaluating this information.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Use a variety of sources to locate information on a specific topic.
- Analyze information based on specific criteria

- Compare and contrast information from different sources
- Discuss reliability and validity of evidence

Quantitative Literacy Options:

- Are crime rates increasing or decreasing? Are abortions among teenage women increasing or decreasing? Ask students to consider the use of data as evidence.
- Ask students to make judgments about a trend based on the data

What do the numbers mean?

Using tables from a standard statistical source, such as the Statistical Abstract of the U.S., students can locate a table on a specific topic (crime in the U.S., foreign aid, teen pregnancy, demographic changes etc. and analyze the data as reported. Students can develop a list of possible research questions based on the data.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Locate statistical data from a standard source.
- Interpret table using all relevant headers and footnotes
- Develop possible research questions based on the data

Technology Options:

- Using the online version of the Statistical Abstract, download data into Excel and create a graph to illustrate the table.

Quantitative Literacy Options:

- Students should explain the information presented in the data source
- Ask students to make judgments about the data presented and to draw conclusions based on the data

Community Analysis

Select a municipality in the United States and prepare a statistical overview of that community including demographic, economic, education, health, energy use and other desired variables.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Locate statistical data on a community using a variety of published sources
- Evaluate data sources based on selected criteria
- Include historical data to analyze changes in that community over a specified time period
- Organize the data into a structured presentation (report, presentation, webpage)
- Prepare a bibliography of statistical sources to accompany a report or presentation

Technology Options:

- Use Excel to organize the data
- Prepare a slide presentation on the selected community

Quantitative Literacy Options:

- Prepare a chronology of events or trends in the community
- Develop a graph or chart about the community for a specific audience

Become Familiar with the Journals in a Discipline

Have students select a journal (s) from a list of journals in the discipline and review the content of each over the last 2 volumes or years. (Make sure the library has access to the journals) Based on this review,

each student could report on the content and audience for each journal and identify some of the research trends.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Locate journals by title
- Become familiar with the research trends in a discipline
- Summarize findings and share with other students

Technology Options:

- These summaries could easily be shared within Blackboard. Students could identify areas for possible research projects

A Week in the Life of...

Students can select an individual (historical, contemporary, real or imaginary) and research the events and issues of the time and develop & present a portrait of that individual. This could fit any discipline – what would it have been like to be an artist during the 19th century in Europe or a worker in one of the first steel mills, etc.

Information Literacy Skills:

- Use a variety of resources (books, articles, newspapers, including primary sources to provide evidence of what it would have been like to have lived at a specific point in time.
- Prepare citations for the resources used
- Think creatively to find evidence that would make the presentation interesting

Technology Options:

- Develop a PowerPoint presentation incorporating sound, media, images, artwork to illustrate the life of this individual

Revised

Library User Education

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