

Tips for Creating Library Research Assignments

1. Define the learning outcomes for the assignment.

Make sure your students understand why they are doing this assignment and how the skills they develop will benefit them.

The Learning Literacies Strategies Team identified the following areas as central to building information literacy skills. These areas can easily be adapted to a project in most disciplines

- Inquiry: Recognize and articulate an information need
- Appropriateness of research: Develop effective search strategies. Select, locate and use appropriate information sources
- Evaluation: Analyze and critically evaluate information
- Synthesis: Organize and synthesize information and use the information to accomplish a specific purpose for an identified audience
- Integrity: Understand and apply principles of academic integrity relating to information literacy

2. Make sure the assignment is clearly related to the content of the course.

Students don't respond well to assignments that want them to experience the library. Fetching articles or books without a clear purpose may seem like "busywork"/not college-level work.

3. Describe the types of resources you want students to use.

Don't assume that students understand what a term means (such as journal, databases, citation, etc.). Indicate the types of resources that are acceptable for the project. If you want students to locate research articles using a specific database (such as PsycInfo or Biological Abstracts), direct them to that source; otherwise they will probably use Yahoo or Google. Are newspapers OK? Websites? Interviews? Media?

Students often have difficulty differentiating between different types of sources especially magazines and journals. Here is a tutorial developed by the Cheng Library.

Popular vs Scholarly Tutorial <http://www.wpunj.edu/library/tutorials/schPop.html>

Provide resource lists to help beginning students know how to get started or ask a librarian to help you develop a resource list for your class.

4. Help students understand the criteria needed to evaluate the sources.

Develop your own rubric for students to use; or, refer students to the Cheng Library's guides for evaluating sources

5. Don't tell students to "not use the Internet".

Most academic journals owned by the Cheng Library are accessible online ("on the Internet")

A better approach is to help students understand when a source is appropriate or not for the task at hand. Some of the articles in wikipedia can provide a good introduction to a topic; others don't. This is similar an earlier instruction to "not use an encyclopedia". When students are beginning a research project, a general introduction from a subject encyclopedia or a chapter in book provides an overview and a context for their project.

6. Give students clear examples of citations.

Students have considerable difficulty determining how to cite an article in a journal for example. To them, a journal article may look like a webpage. The Library has several citation guides on its webpage. <http://www.wpunj.edu/library/refpubsx.shtml>

7. Consider alternatives to the traditional research paper.

There are many ways to ground a research project in an application appropriate to a discipline with elements of Information gathering, evaluation and organization. Examples:

- Develop a business or marketing plan or prepare a professional presentation
- Develop a lesson plan foror prepare for a debate on
- Write a literature review... or analyze a scholarly article...
- Design and develop a webpage with essential links on...
- Read a book critically and write a detailed book review...
- Fact check an article in a newspaper...or compare and contrast two articles on an issue...
- Identify and evaluate three websites of quality

8. Consider the level of the student when developing a research project.

Beginning students often find it difficult to select appropriate topics and even more difficult to develop a research question or problem to investigate. They often don't have enough background in the discipline to formulate a thesis statement for a paper or other project. Require students to do background reading first and require approval of their topic. Provide suggestions, models or criteria for students to assist them.

9. Develop strategies to discourage plagiarism.

Students often find it difficult learning to deal with "the" experts yet so much of what we do in adult life is to consider the opinions of others, evaluate what the research says or investigate a specific problem – are radio towers dangerous? Rather than avoid engaging students in certain aspects of the research process, consider ways to help students incorporate the perspectives of others while at the same time strengthening their ability to formulate their own opinions based on the evidence.

Consider separating a complex project into stages. Require students to submit drafts of papers along the way. Have students write an essay incorporating their own opinions about a controversial issue before they seek out alternative viewpoints.

Help students understand the scholarly research process and the value of accurate citations. For more information, check out http://www.wpunj.edu/library/copyright_plagiarism.shtml