

Designing Effective Research Assignments

Research is a craft that must be learned; do not assume that students must or will eventually figure it out on their own. Faculty members' research styles and behaviors differ from students; assignments should be designed with this difference in mind. Here are some suggestions for designing research projects which should foster student success.

IN GENERAL:

- **Set the tone:** Students will value the library as an educational resource only if their professors place a premium on it from the start. Build library assignments INTO your course, to enrich and extend the content of your class, rather than a means for merely teaching library use.
- **Explain the purpose of the assignment and its relation to the course:** students seem to need some help figuring out what relationship a research project has to the aims of a course as a whole. While many students understand that they need to have a "thesis statement," or use "footnotes," few think of the project as an opportunity to ask and then seek answers to questions of their own. Nor do they understand that student research is a way to deepen and extend class readings and discussion; far too many believe that they are being tested by a teacher who already has the answers anyway. (Hence, the ubiquitous student lament, "I don't know what Professor X wants from me.")
- **Use correct and precise terminology:** terminology that is imprecise or vague can lead to needless frustration for students---and the librarians who attempt to direct their research efforts. For example, does directing students to use "the library computer" mean the Library's online catalog, a specific database, or any computer connected to the Internet? Similarly, "You can find the article online" necessitates a search of any of a number of full-text databases or, again, a search of the World Wide Web (where, in fact, the full-text for a number of scholarly journals "exists"). Students will also often take what you say very literally, especially when they are new to a discipline and inexperienced with methods of academic inquiry. Prohibiting the use of the Web for research, for example, may suggest, in some students' minds, they cannot use the Library's online catalog or electronic databases!

IN PARTICULAR:

- **Assume minimal knowledge of library and research resources,** despite what students tell you. We see very few students--certainly very few freshmen--who can work their way around the various print and electronic materials the library offers them. Technological proficiency is no guarantee that a student will be a savvy information user.
- **Emphasize PROCESS over and above the final PRODUCT:** Students tend to think of research in linear terms, perhaps because, in high school, they are taught the research paper as a series of discrete tasks, performed in a certain order and in a certain fixed way. Students should expect the research process to take some wrong turns, to be quite "messy" at times. The more we encourage them to think about research as problem-solving, and to reflect on that process, the more likely it is that they will function well and confidently in the academic environment and beyond.
- **Avoid the "quantitative" approach to assignments:** Students who are told to have (for example) 5 books and 3 periodicals in a bibliography tend to think quite literally. They will not necessarily use more than 8 sources and they may not choose the best or more appropriate sources. Students will take what's readily available. One way to break them of this habit is to ask them to justify their information selections. Students who have to justify their selections

(rather than simply annotate them) of particular resources, or to explain why these and not others are most appropriate will be forced to think critically about the relationships between sources they use.

- **Avoid the mob scene:** A class that descends upon the library en masse, at the last minute, scrambling to find the same information in order to complete the same project is likely to find that there is not enough information or enough reference staff to go around. They are also likely to learn very little from the experience that will help them cope with future research projects.
- **Avoid the elusive topic scenario**, which arises when a professor sends students out with research topics that the library's collection cannot even begin to support. Take stock of the library's resources before you design an assignment. Also remember that new sources (in print and electronic formats) are added to our collections all the time. We may know about one or two nuggets you haven't unearthed yet.
- **Schedule a research workshop in the library for the right reasons and at the right time.** Students learn best when they have an incentive to do so—a task at hand that makes the workshop meaningful.
- **Put students on a schedule that will accomplish learning goals:** While we like to believe that the majority of students are working on their final projects intermittently throughout the semester, most procrastinate. As librarians can attest, a great many students routinely cut things dangerously close to the deadline. Professors will sometimes require preliminary bibliographies, proposals, thesis statements, or outlines earlier in the term. But be aware, however, that even the staggered approach is no guarantee that students will treat the assignment more seriously, or give more time and thought to their process of information collection.
- **Remind students that professional librarians are available at the Reference Desk and by appointment.** Savvy researchers know full well the value of human resources, particularly their colleagues in the field and their institution's reference librarians. Students often rely on their peers for assistance but forget or do not understand the supportive role of a reference librarian.
- **There are [alternatives to the research paper](#).** Even if you do not assign a research paper to your students, we can work with you to shape other types of assignments. These can be just as beneficial in introducing students to the methods of academic inquiry.