

Tips for Designing Effective Research Assignments

The ability to find, evaluate, and use information is essential for students. However, the skills required to find the best information, and in the most efficient manner, must be taught and practiced repeatedly. Through class assignments, instructors have the power to influence students' development as seekers and users of information. Many students are not information literate or fluent when they arrive at Ivy Tech or begin work in a new program. They may not understand how to locate relevant information, or how to think critically about the information sources they encounter. Their coursework is frequently their only opportunity to learn the difference between "surfing the Net" and substantive research.

A well designed library or research assignment can teach students valuable research skills and improve the quality of their papers. Unfortunately, these same assignments also have potential to confuse and frustrate students, leading to a poorly-written product. The research paper has been the most commonly used method of evaluating whether or not students can successfully apply information seeking skills – but there are other ways (see [Alternative Library/Research Assignments](#) as mentioned below in #8).

A few suggestions to keep in mind when developing assignments requiring research:

1. **Consult with a Librarian before you give the assignment.** Librarians will work with you to design an appropriate assignment that will achieve your course goals/objectives, and suggest resources available to best complete the assignment.
2. **Notify the Library.** Sending a copy of the assignment to your library, or using the online [Library Assignment Alert](#) form, will ensure the library staff is ready to help your students when needed.
3. **Consider these common pitfalls which usually result in negative research experiences for students.**
 - **Avoid asking students to make a shot in the dark -- Always be sure the library holds the needed information.** Only frustration results from looking for what does not exist or has been checked out. Pre-research topics and sources to ensure adequate information is available on a topic or in the format you require, before assigning it. Even online subscription databases change from day to day. Also check that the book (or item) you have in mind is in the same location in the library as you remember; material is often moved from reference to general collections, or sometimes discarded when outdated or in poor condition. If you own copies of sources required or useful for student use, please make them available on our Reserve Shelf.
 - **Avoid the mob scene.** Dozens of students using just one book or article, or looking for the same information usually leads to misplacement, loss, or mutilation of materials. Give students a variety of topics and sources. Make use of our Reserve Shelf, as mentioned above, and use photocopies of "classic" articles if you can conform to fair-use practices. Let us help you check to see if articles you require are in our electronic

journal databases; links can be provided on your faculty web page, in Blackboard, or by email.

- **Avoid scavenger hunts or timed exercises.** Searching for obscure facts frustrates students, can cause chaos in the library (or college), and teaches students little about research. If planning a library exercise, please talk to a librarian about designing one appropriate to the class.
 - **Assume minimal library knowledge (don't assume students have already had a library orientation).** Although many students may be familiar with using *some* library tools (for example, dictionaries, encyclopedias), few really understand the following:
 1. How to locate items in our library (with Library of Congress call numbers),
 2. How many more resources the library has than what can be seen on the shelves (electronic resources--variety and how to use),
 3. The intricacies of subject headings or keyword searching,
 4. **Library jargon**--terms such as "abstract," "annotation," "citation," "database," "scholarly journals" vs. "popular magazines." [See [online glossary](#).]
 5. How to use scholarly journals--Frequently students need to be reminded that experts write journal articles, their audience is other experts, and they expect a level of knowledge about the topic. Initially reading reference books, textbooks, and subject-specific encyclopedias creates a foundation of knowledge on a topic and prepares them to search for articles more effectively.)
 6. Speaking of basics, students may also be uncomfortable using computers and need additional encouragement to use online resources, even the online catalog.
4. **Consider WHY your students should do the assignment.** Set objectives and state the purpose of your assignment.
- Stating the objectives and purpose of your assignment helps your students understand what they will learn as a result of the assignment and how this will help them in the long run. Make it relevant.
 - Focus the assignment on the process of finding information which explains a phenomenon, clarifies a viewpoint, or defines an issue.
 - Do you want your students to become acquainted with key resources in your subject area? Do you want them to do the groundwork for a term project or research paper? What do you want your students to do with the information once they have found it?
5. **Consider HOW your students will do the assignment:** Discuss the research process.
- A **research strategy** is an appropriate step-by-step method for organizing a research project, taking into account the kinds of information sought, the corresponding resources which should be consulted, and the continuous need for evaluation of the results.

For example:

1. State your topic as a question or statement and develop a list of relevant keywords and synonyms.
 2. Use the online catalog (IvyCat) to find books on your topic. Which keywords worked best?
 3. Select and search appropriate periodical databases (you may wish to list particular resources) to find more recent information in magazines and journals. Which databases and searches worked best?
- Students benefit from opportunities to reflect on their research strategies and think critically about what they are doing. Give them opportunities to discuss where they are in the process and how to know when to take a different direction.
 - **Break down the assignment into incremental steps** due progressively throughout the semester. Ask students to choose a topic early in the semester and refine the limiting idea; locate a certain number of potential sources for an initial bibliography; check the appropriateness of the sources selected (this could also help prevent plagiarism); have them turn in a revised topic statement (and outline?) based on consultation of initial sources (emphasizing the process of incorporating new information into the student's knowledge base).
 - **Help students develop specific, well-defined topics.** Students often choose "hot topics" when conducting research, and may have difficulty abstracting a research question from a current news event. Before students select their topics, consider an exercise in which students define a research question for a number of news headlines. Provide guidance in limiting broad topics, restating too narrow topics, and composing thesis statements or research questions (if preferred).
 - **Include the evaluation and analysis of information** as part of the research process.
 - **Provide examples** of all steps in the research process you are requiring as part of your assignment.
6. **Explain the assignment clearly, preferably in writing.** Give students a clear idea of what the assignment involves, describing specifics such as length, format for references (MLA, APA), and suggesting types and quantities of acceptable sources to be used. Provide complete, accurate (current) citations for specific works recommended to students. (As for the "preferably in writing"-- verbal assignments often get mistranslated by the time students ask for assistance in the library. Instructors who provide the library with written assignments will earn the undying gratitude of the staff! You can use our handy [online form](#), or email it to us.)
7. **Help your students:** Provide resource lists.
- Resource lists give students somewhere to start by suggesting specific sources (or types of resources) for a particular assignment. Make sure you provide accurate information!

- Librarians may be able to provide you with a subject-related resource list.
- The Ivy Tech Librarians, statewide, have created [IvyLynks](#), a section of the Virtual Library, listing selected Internet sources for specific subject and program areas.

8. **Consider alternative designs for the assignments.** Suggestions for alternatives to the research paper can be found at <http://www.ivytech.edu/library/madison/librarynews/alternativeassnmts.pdf>

Some examples:

- Prepare an annotated bibliography on a topic.
- Locate a popular magazine article and a scholarly article on the same subject. Compare the two articles for content, style, bias, audience, etc.
- Prepare a research guides that will introduce new majors to the information resources and research strategies in their subject field.
- Compare different accounts of the same event.
- Identify key issues or scholars in a discipline.
- Compare the way two different disciplines handle the same topic.
- Analyze a key publication in a discipline.

9. **Encourage students to talk to a librarian or library assistant when they have questions.** Students frequently need to be encouraged to approach library staff. They sometimes feel they should know the information already or that they would be disturbing the library staff. Students need to realize library research is part of the new knowledge and skill set they learn and continue to develop at college. At the same time, students need to understand that not everyone who works in the library is a librarian. Often a work-study student may be hired to file periodicals and check out materials. Students needing help should look or ask for a librarian or library assistant to assist with research questions.

10. **Visit the library often.** Familiarize yourself with the changes, improvements and new materials that appear regularly (these days, often online in the Virtual Library). A librarian is very willing to speak with you about services, resources, database searching, and more.

11. **Electronic journals and periodical databases are not “the Internet.”** Students are frequently not willing to use online periodical databases or electronic journals since they were told not to use the Internet. Please clarify that a database or electronic journal to which the Library subscribes is not the same as searching the World Wide Web. We simply use the Internet as an interface to access this information. Much government information – on all topics – is also freely available on the Web (or housed online), but should not be classed with the voluminous unverified material that you may be trying to keep your students from using. Consider bringing your class to the library for a session on evaluating sources of information (including the Internet), so that students can learn to choose wisely from all of the sources available to them. (You might even provide extra credit for “Internet” sources found that prove to be excellent.)

12. **Schedule a library instruction session.** With sufficient lead time, librarians can provide presentations and written materials geared specifically to your course and assignment, as well as general orientations for more inexperienced students. PLEASE ASK! You may use the [online form](#), to request a session, or come to

the library to make your request.

- Try to tie the library session to an assignment that is relevant to the course, and provide opportunity to apply what they have learned during the session.
- The best library assignments not only take students through the procedural steps of using the library, but also ask them to read, analyze, and apply the information.
- Remember: students will be more confident and willing to use the Library and information resources once they have successfully completed your library assignment.

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1. Tips for Effective Research Assignments from Library and Information Access, San Diego State University. <http://dometest.sdsu.edu/about/depts/instruction/pitfalls.shtml> Last viewed: 7/24/2005,
2. Guidelines for Effective Library Assignments from Library Instruction, University of Oregon Library System. <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/instruct/assignments.html> Last viewed: 7/23/2005.
3. Instructional page of the Paulina June & George Pollak Library at California State University, Fullerton © 2001. Prepared by Suellen Cox and Margaret Hogarth. http://www.library.fullerton.edu/information_comp/Assignments.htm Last viewed: 4/12/03.
- 4.

Adapted from Tips for Designing Effective Library Assignments, Virginia Tech University Libraries, Nicole Auer, Library Instruction Coordinator. <http://www.lib.vt.edu/help/instruct/assignments.html> Last viewed: 7/26/2005.

Other Tools to consider: The [Complete Book Citations Assignment](#) or the [Complete Journal Citations Assignment](#)