

Alternative Library Assignment Suggestions

(Bulleted items are Variations on the same assignment, not subpoints.)

- 1. Create a reading packet.** Ask students to compile an anthology of annotated readings. The assignment can limit acceptable content (scholarly articles written within the last ten years), or broadened to include popular articles, chapters or excerpts from books, subject encyclopedias articles, web sites, or older materials of merit. Students can be asked to write an introduction to the anthology that displays an overall understanding of the subject; then describe each item, explaining why it is included. A bibliography of items considered for inclusion (and not chosen) could also be required, as well as copies of the items selected. In any subject course in which students would benefit from finding and reading a variety of scholarly materials, such an assignment would guarantee that they use their library skills to locate the articles, their critical reading skills to make the selections, and a variety of writing skills to produce the introduction, the summaries, and the explanations.
 - Prepare an annotated bibliography of books, journal articles, and other sources on a topic. Include evaluative annotations.
 - Update and annotate a bibliography from a chapter of a book that is 10-50 years old individually or in small groups. Perhaps identify new terms or subjects which appear connected with the topic.
 - Update an existing bibliography or review of the literature.
- 2. Compare scholarly and popular resources on a topic.** Find a reference to a study from a newspaper or popular magazine, such as Time, Psychology Today, Life, etc. (keeping in mind, and reassuring students that these may be found in online subscription databases). Then have students find the actual study in a scholarly journal and write several paragraphs comparing the popular sources with the original research.
 - **Locate a topic in an online news website, database or newspaper index.** (The topic can be current or controversial or on a specific event. Then, search a periodical database and identify two scholarly journal articles on that topic in roughly the same time period as the news to read and compare.
 - Locate two articles in a periodical database presenting differing viewpoints, such as scholarly vs. popular or conservative vs. liberal.
 - Compare how a topic is treated in several various print and electronic reference sources. Note any apparent standards in layout of the various sources, including textbook chapters, research articles, newspaper articles, news releases, factsheets, handbooks, and/or government reports.
 - Locate a popular magazine article, then find a scholarly article on the same subject. Compare the two articles for content, style, bias, audience, etc.
- 3. Compare primary and secondary sources on the same topic.** When are either used in a given discipline?
 - Locate primary sources about the date of your birth. You may use one type of material only once, i.e., one newspaper headline of a major event, one quotation, one biography, one census figure, one top musical number, one campus event,

etc. Use a minimum of six different sources. Write a short annotation of each source and include the complete bibliographic citation.

- Choose an autobiography of someone related to the course content. Find secondary sources which deal with an idea or event described in the autobiography. Compare and contrast the sources.
 - Students use bibliographies, guides to the literature and the Internet to find primary sources on an issue or historical period. They can contrast the treatment in the primary sources with the treatment in secondary sources including their textbook.
4. **Search for a recent scholarly journal article on a given topic.** Compare the article content to that of a textbook.
 5. **Examine the treatment of a controversial issue in several sources.** For example, a newspaper editorial, scholarly journal, periodicals from different disciplines, or association websites.
 - Select a topic and compare how that topic is treated in two to five different sources.
 - Contrast journal articles or editorials from recent publications reflecting conservative and liberal tendencies.
 6. **Read several articles which appear to address the same question but reach different conclusions.** Account for the differences by examining methodology, experimental design, and the interpretation of results.
 7. **Research a topic in literature from different time periods and compare.** Pick a topic and research it in literature from the 60s and 70s. Then research the same topic in the literature of the 80s and 90s. Compare and contrast the topic in a bibliographic essay.
 8. **What does “the literature” of a particular discipline look like?** What comprises it? Investigate the production and dissemination of information in a given discipline. How and by whom is the knowledge produced? How and in which media or format is it presented or communicated? What is the publishing cycle? How important is informal communication in the field? How important is grey literature? How do people keep abreast of new information in this field?
 - Analyze the content, tone, style and audience of three journals and/or websites central to your discipline. Examine the instructions for authors for each journal. [Instructions for authors are frequently available on the Web.]
 - Analyze the content, style, and audience of three journals in a given discipline.
 9. **Evaluate and compare Websites.** Use evaluation sheets provided by the library or have students develop course- or topic-specific Web evaluation criteria, and compare sites.
 - Provide a precise statement of the search topic and an outline of the search logic to search the Internet. Run the search on two or three different search engines. Compare the results.

- Find and evaluate a website. Cite the website in a specific citation format and write a brief evaluation (2-3 paragraphs). Note reasons why these pages are, or are not appropriate for university level student research or for in-class use. Due to the evolving nature of the WWW, attach a printout of the first page of the website.
10. Identify an article on a given topic using a periodical database. Read the article and write an abstract of it. Compare it to the published/provided abstract.
 11. Provide a precise statement of a search topic, a list of keywords and synonyms and comparable thesaurus terms as appropriate, and an outline of search logic to search a periodicals database. Justify the choice of database. Perform the search. Analyze the results, revise search strategy and perform the more effective search.
 12. Compare Internet search engine and periodical database searches using identical search statements. Print or email the initial search results and compare the findings. Revise and appropriately search each source again. Compare the final results.
 13. Read and update an older review article.
 14. Find out more about the people and issues involved in a significant event or a classic publication in a given discipline.
 15. Conduct the research for a paper except for writing the final draft. At various times students are required to turn in 1) their choice of topic, clearly defined; 2) an annotated bibliography of useful sources; 3) an outline; 4) a thesis statement; 5) an introduction and a conclusion.
 16. Research a topic and present it as a poster or webpage.
 - Create a web page on a narrow topic relevant to the course. Include links to web sites, e-journals, discussion lists, and organizations.
 - Working in groups or alone, prepare a print or web-based guide to introduce others to the various information sources in a discipline or on a specific topic.
 17. Maintain a research log by recording the methodology, sources consulted, and keywords or subject headings searched. Note both successes and failures. How did the results affect their thinking on the topic? [Forms may assist students understand how to structure their approach.]
 18. Select a scholar/researcher in a field of study and explore that person's career and ideas. Besides locating biographical information, students prepare a bibliography of writings and analyze the reaction of the scholarly community to the researcher's work.
 - Explore a scholar or researcher's career and ideas by locating biographical information, preparing a bibliography of writings, and analyzing the reaction of the scholarly community to the researcher's work.
 19. Identify and examine the assumptions implicit in an article. Identify the author's thesis and outline the theoretical framework used to account for the results. [Specific questions may assist the students in focusing on various aspects of the article.]

20. Examine the experimental design, data, and interpretation of the data in a research paper for adequacy and consistency. [Again, selected questions may assist students to focus on specific aspects.]
21. Working in groups or alone, examine a small number of items such as books, articles, or websites. Establish indicators of quality, where these indicators are found, and the appropriate use for each item examined. Report findings to the class.
22. Review a book or film. Discuss the author's credentials. Compare the book or film to similar works in the field. Evaluate the film to its source book or play.
23. Read selected articles from various sources and indicate whose voice is being represented in a particular passage or argument. Is it the author who is a reporter or researcher? Or is it a geography professor at Ball State University, a pediatrician, the CEO of Home Depot, or a politician?
24. Read the articles cited in a research paper. Explain how each is related to the paper. When is it appropriate to cite other papers? What different purposes do the citations serve?
25. Compare the reference lists of two published articles on the same topic. Evaluate the choice of materials cited by the authors. What clues do the citations indicate about the article?
26. Critique an article. Locate two web pages supporting your response to the topic. Cite the URLs in an appropriate format and highlight the points indicating this support.
27. Examine the format of various abstracts. Note that some abstracts do not reflect the article title or content. Write an abstract for a published paper. Compare your abstract to that provided at the beginning of the article and/or in a periodical database.
28. Read an editorial and find facts to support it.
29. Each student in the class is given responsibility for dealing with a part of the subject of the course. He or she is then asked to 1) find out what the major reference sources on the subject are; 2) find out "who's doing what where" in the field; 3) list three major unresolved questions about the subject; 4) prepare a 15-minute oral presentation to introduce this aspect of the subject to the class.
30. Assemble background information on a company or organization in preparation for a hypothetical interview. For those continuing in a particular academic field, research prospective colleagues' and professors' backgrounds, publications, current research, etc.
31. Determine the adequacy of a psychological test based on the literature about the test. Then develop a test battery designed for a particular clinical (or other) situation, by using published tests and the literature about them.
32. In biology or health classes, assign each student a 'diagnosis' (can range from jock itch to Parkinson's Disease). Have them act as responsible patients by investigating both the diagnosis and the prescribed treatment. Results presented in a two-page paper should cover: a description of the condition and its symptoms; its etiology; its prognosis; the effectiveness of the prescribed treatment, its side effects and contradictions, along with the evidence; and, finally, a comparison of the relative effectiveness of alternate treatments. This can also be accompanied by oral or visual presentations, slideshow, poster session, etc.

33. Students follow a piece of legislation through Congress. This exercise is designed primarily to help them understand the process of government. However it could also be used in something like a 'critical issues' course to follow the politics of a particular issue. (What groups are lobbying for or against a piece of legislation? How does campaign financing affect the final decision? etc.).
34. Similar to the above, have students follow a particular foreign policy situation as it develops. Who are the organizations involved? What is the history of the issue? What are the ideological conflicts?
35. Ask each student to describe a career they envision themselves in and then research the career choice. What are the leading companies in that area? Why? (If they choose something generic like secretarial or sales, what is the best company in their county of residence to work for? Why?) Choose a company and find out what its employment policies are--flex time, family leave, stock options. If the company is traded publicly, what is its net worth? What is the outlook for this occupation? Expected starting salary? How do the outlook and salaries vary by geography?
36. Write a biographical sketch of a famous person based on a given number and variety of sources. Use biographical dictionaries, popular press and scholarly sources, and books to find information about the person.
37. Nominate someone or a group for the Nobel Peace Prize. Learn about the prize, the jury, etc. Justify your nomination.
38. Choose a topic of interest and search it on the Internet. Cross reference all search engines and find "all" websites which discuss the topic. Like a research paper, students will have to narrow and broaden accordingly. The student will then produce an annotated bibliography on the topic, based solely on Internet references.
39. Everyone becomes an historical figure for a day. Students research the person, time-period, culture, etc. They give an oral presentation in class and answer questions.
40. Similar to the above, students adopt a persona and write letters or journal entries that person might have written. The level of research required to complete the assignment can range from minimal to a depth appropriate for advanced classes.
41. Write a newspaper story describing an event--political, social, cultural, whatever suits the objectives--based on their research. The assignment can be limited to one or two articles, or it can be more extensive. This is a good exercise in critical reading and in summarizing. The assignment gains interest if several people research the same event in different sources and compare the newspaper stories that result.
42. News conferences offer good opportunities to add depth to research and thus might work particularly well with advanced students. A verbatim transcript of an analytical description of a news conference can serve as a format for simulated interviews with well known people of any period. What questions would contemporaries have asked? What questions would we now, with hindsight, want to ask? How would contemporary answers have differed from those that might be given today? Here students have an opportunity to take a rigorous, analytical approach, both in terms of the questions to be asked and the information contained in the answers.
43. Write a review of a musical performance. Include reference not only to the performance attended, but to reviews of the composition's premiere, if possible. Place the composition in a historical context using timetables, general histories and memoirs when available, using this information to gain insight into its current presentation.

44. Write an exam on one area of the course; answer some or all of the questions (depending on professor's preference). Turn in an annotated bibliography of source material, and rationale for questions.
45. Write a grant proposal addressed to a specific funding agency; include supporting literature review, budget, etc. Have class peer groups review. (Best proposal could be submitted for funding of summer research).

Prepared by Sharon Griffith, Librarian, sgriffit@ivytech.edu, adapting material from the following sources:

1. 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: 6/12/03.
2. Alternative Research Assignments, Natalie Pastor, San Diego State University.
<http://infodome.sdsu.edu/about/depts/instruction/altresch.shtml> Last viewed 6/3/2003.
3. Ideas for Library Related Assignments, Collins Library, University of Puget Sound. <http://library.ups.edu>. Last viewed 6/12/03