CREATING EFFECTIVE LIBRARY ASSIGNMENTS

Purpose of Research Assignments

An effective library research assignment should relate to course content and learning objectives, leading to an increased understanding of the subject and the process of locating information related to that subject. The library assignment can enrich and enhance students’ learning experiences by asking them to find relevant information and use it in a meaningful way. The skills learned in this type of exercise can prepare a student for a lifetime of information use and learning.

Characteristics of Effective Assignments

Clarity: Providing a written explanation of the assignment helps students clearly understand what is expected of them and enables them to begin the research process. A written assignment also helps librarians and other support personnel assist students more effectively.

Effective use of terminology: The terminology used in library assignments can be confusing for students who tend to take written assignments literally. It is important to define and clarify questionable terms. For example, some faculty members use the terms “magazine” and “journal” interchangeably, while others do not.

Currency: The library is constantly adding new resources in a variety of formats. These changes can affect library assignments as new resources and research methods replace outdated ones. Check with a librarian to assist you with designing and updating course assignments to include new or updated resources.

Realistic time frame: Depending on the availability of library resources, some assignments may take a while to research. Giving students some idea of the length of time you expect them to spend on a project is also helpful. Also consider whether you want to arrange library instruction and include that in your syllabus development. Scheduling library instruction can help students to understand the seriousness of the research project and sends the signal that you want them to succeed.

What You Can Do to Ensure a Successful Assignment

• Students love online resources. Consider incorporating the use of electronic resources when possible to take advantage of the students' comfort level while expanding their knowledge.

• Encourage students to ask for help. They can stop by the Reference Desk, call us or use our email and chat reference service if they need assistance.

• If specific sources are required or preferred, check with the librarian in advance to verify access and availability.

• Support the assignment with an instruction session from a librarian, if possible.

• When scheduling library instruction, share a copy of your research assignment(s) with the librarian so we can customize the class to meet your needs.
Librarians are happy to assist with designing effective research assignments. We can help you spot problems early and suggest resources for your students.

Helpful hints for designing good research assignments

- **Be realistic about your students’ research knowledge.** Your students may have no previous experience with library research or database searching or how a library is organized. In fact some may have never used a library and many students assume incorrectly that all information can be found online for free. Consider creating a quick online survey to assess your students’ experience with research.

- **Diversify the class assignment.** If an entire class has exactly the same assignment, resources may become scarce. In the past, resources have been vandalized or have disappeared altogether when students were in competition for the same items. If a single resource will be needed by most or all of your class, call to put it on reserve instead.

- **Use caution when assigning scavenger hunts.** Scavenger hunts are successful in limited applications, usually in fields such as tax and law, when students are required to find information from standard professional sources that they will use throughout their careers. General scavenger hunts are often unsuccessful because students see them as busy work, and in most cases librarians end up locating the random facts for the assignment. Ask a librarian for help in determining the best application for a scavenger hunt.

- **We advise not telling students that they “cannot use web resources.”** Much of the information to which the library has access is only available online and not all students understand the difference between content on the internet and in online databases, leading them to think they can only use books and print magazines and journals. If you do decide to limit use of the Web, plan to discuss this with your students. If you are concerned about your students’ ability to evaluate the quality of information they find on the Web, we’d be happy to help!

**How can we help you?**

Whether you are designing a new research assignment or looking for someone to help your students learn to find and manage information effectively, we encourage you to give us a call! Working together, we can ensure that our graduates have the information literacy skills they need for career success and lifelong learning.

**Information Literacy and Library Instruction Contact:**

Lisa Louis  
Reference & Information Literacy Librarian  
Head, Research & Instruction  
(361) 825-5905  
lisa.louis@tamucc.edu