

Designing Effective Information Literacy/Research Assignments

Best Practices:

Integrate information literacy objectives with course objectives: Students can simultaneously learn course content and research skills. Put your objectives on the assignment. *Students need to see relevance of assignments to the course. They also need to understand that information skills learned now will be helpful to them in future courses and in real life.*

Consult with a Librarian: Librarians may have some helpful ideas or spot potential problems with an assignment. They can ascertain whether the Library has the needed materials to support the assignment, and can help you keep abreast of changes in the information world that may affect your assignments.

Match the assignment to the research level of the students: Consider the grade level of the students, amount of information literacy instruction they have had, etc.

Be up-to-date: Make sure your assignments require up-to-date research methods and resources. The information world is constantly changing.

Be creative: Traditional research papers are fine, but there are many other types of assignments as well that help students learn and practice information skills. Consider assignments that provide practice in a specific information skill rather than the whole gamut that is required by a research paper. Consider breaking down a big research assignment into smaller steps so that students learn the research process. This can also help keep students on task, help you check their progress, and can help avoid plagiarism! Try to promote critical thinking too—*doing something with information—not just looking it up!*

Put assignments in writing: Your students can better meet and understand the requirements of an assignment when they have a copy to read and show the librarian when asking for assistance.

Write good directions: Ask someone to read your instructions and determine if they are clear, complete, and error-free. Be sure to define technical library and discipline-specific terminology.

Provide a copy of the assignment to the Library: The librarians can better help your students when they are alerted to coming assignments. This also helps the Library build a stronger curriculum-centered collection.

Promote ethical habits of scholarship: Make sure your students understand the importance of academic integrity and the avoidance of plagiarism. Expect proper source citations.

Test the assignment – Is it do-able? Can you complete the assignment with the resources that are available to your students? Have you checked recently that the needed materials are available? Is the assignment too hard? Is it too easy? Does it meet your objectives?

Worst Practices (pitfalls to avoid):

Creating a “mob scene:” Sending a large group of students after the same resource or to research the same topic at the same time can create havoc. Consider placing heavy-demand items on Reserve or giving students broader choices in topics/sources.

Assigning “scavenger hunts” or other trivia-type searches: These often frustrate students rather than helping them learn the research process.

Overestimating students’ research skills: Dissect the assignment and analyze the skills needed to complete it. Do your students have these skills? If not, work with a librarian to design needed instruction, handouts, etc. *Note: Students often overestimate their own research skills.*

The “un-researchable” topic: To discourage plagiarism, instructors often try to come up with unique topics. Make sure your research topic is researchable! For example, there may be little published information available on a very local topic.

Assigning a photocopied assignment from a textbook: Every library is different. A generic assignment may need to be tweaked to work at your school. Make sure you are familiar with the Library and its resources so that you can design research assignments that work.

Setting limitations that are unclear or inappropriate to the assignment:

Beware of restrictions such as, “You may not use the Internet” or “No encyclopedias.” Such limitations must carefully match the assignment/topic. Examples of such problems include:

- Requiring scholarly journal articles for non-scholarly topics.
- Failure to help students distinguish between *free web sites* and *library subscription databases*. Students often mistakenly think they cannot use articles from subscription databases when an instructor bans use of the Internet for an assignment.
- Banning use of the free web when that might be the most appropriate place to search for that particular information need.
- Banning use of encyclopedias when what you mean to ban are general, not subject encyclopedias. Subject encyclopedias can be a good authoritative place to start learning about a new topic.
- Requiring primary sources without defining what primary sources are in your discipline. Primary sources do vary by discipline.
- Requiring too many or too few sources.

Failing to incorporate research/information literacy assignments in your classes because you feel uncomfortable with your own level of information literacy: There is no shame in admitting that you don’t know everything about the modern information world. It is constantly changing! As a teacher, you need to have up-to-date knowledge of the information world in which you and your students are operating. Make a one-on-one appointment with a reference librarian, attend library workshops, or take a course like the *Information Literacy for Educators* graduate course. ☺