

## Designing Effective Information Literacy Assignments

### Best Practices:

- 1) **Put assignments in writing.** Your students can better meet and understand the requirements of an assignment when they have a copy to read and reread.
- 2) **Make your syllabus clear.** 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.
- 3) **Provide a copy of the assignment to the Library.** The librarians can help your students more readily when they are alerted to coming assignments.
- 4) **Emphasize *process* rather than *product*.** Focus on the quality of the sources. Ask your students to write abstracts of journal articles and include a bibliography. If they use information from websites, they need to know who authored the site, when it was last updated and whom they can contact.
- 5) **Integrate information literacy objectives with course objective:** This is HUGE. Students can learn course content and research skills simultaneously. Just as they need to see the relevance of the assignment to the course, they also need to see how the information skills will help them for the assignments----not just in your course but in other courses and in, (gulp), REAL LIFE.
- 6) **Match the assignment to the research level of the student:** Consider the education level of the students and the amount of info. literacy skills they have.
- 7) **Encourage critical thinking:** Traditional term 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 (ex: evaluating a website), rather than the whole gamut required by a research paper.
- 8) **Be up-to-date:** Make sure your assignments require up-to-date research methods and resources. The information world is constantly changing.
- 9) **Promote ethical habits of scholarship:** Make sure your students understand the importance of academic integrity and the avoidance of plagiarism. Expect proper source citations.
- 10) **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 difficult? ...too easy? Does it meet your objectives?

## Research Pitfalls

**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. Note: Students often overestimate their own research skills.

**Creating a traffic jam:** Sending a large group of students after the same resource or to research the same topic simultaneously can create an unworkable situation. Consider placing heavy-demand items on Reserve or giving students broader choices in topics/sources. Or, best of all, give the librarians your "wish list" for books and A/V that support your course.

**Setting inappropriate limitations on the assignment:** Beware of restrictions such as, "You may not use the Internet" or "No encyclopedias" unless there is a valid reason for doing so. Other pitfalls include:

- Requiring scholarly journal articles for non-scholarly topics
- Allowing students to confuse web sites with subscription databases
- Requiring too many or too few sources

**Assigning scavenger hunts:** unless students have had a course in research sources, a scavenger hunt doesn't actually teach students how to research and could make them resent the process and everyone involved.

**Expecting traditional library research on a topic that is too new or too local:** There is often little information published on these topics. This is where subscription databases can be invaluable.

**Failing to put information literacy skills into your assignments because you are uncomfortable with your own level of information competency:** There is no shame in admitting that you don't know everything about the modern information world. It has changed *dramatically* in the past decade. As a college instructor, 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 and you can work out a customized reference toolbox that will help your students produce first-rate results.