

Creating Even More Effective Library Assignments: A Guide for Faculty

Establishing and Communicating the Purpose of Library Assignments:

An effective library assignment has at least one specific, understood purpose. It should relate to some aspect of the course subject matter or learning objectives, as well as to a specific information literacy competency. Completion of the assignment should lead to increased understanding of the subject and the process of locating information related to the subject. Students should be told clearly why they are doing the assignment and what purpose/s it serves. Establishing the relevance of the project clarifies its educational tie-in and keeps the assignment from being perceived as “busy work.” A library assignment that meets these criteria is an excellent teaching tool and can enhance and enrich the student's learning experience. It also increases the understanding of the subject matter and builds research skills.

Implementation of Library Assignments:

In order to be effective, a library assignment must be implemented in an appropriate manner and, ideally, tested to make sure it is understandable and doable. If the assignment requires the use of specific sources, students should be given a list of them and arrangements made with the library to assure availability and access. If it involves the use of complex sources or unfamiliar research strategies, students should be oriented to these--by you or, ideally, by a librarian in a customized, scheduled library instruction session. When testing an assignment, try to put yourself in the student's shoes with their experience and perspective.

The “Do” List for Creating Effective Assignments:

✘ **DO Clarify** -- If students have trouble understanding what they are supposed to do, they will have trouble doing it. Give library assignments in writing (not orally) to reduce confusion. Some students, especially beginning researchers, need more structure than others; this may mean advice in selecting and focusing a research topic, or it may mean recommendations for resources to consult.

✘ **DO Use Correct Terminology** -- Students tend to interpret library assignments very literally, and are easily confused by terms they, and the librarian, cannot interpret definitively. Define any questionable words. For example, some instructors differentiate between magazines and journals, while others use the terms interchangeably.

- Does "library computer" mean the Library Catalog, the library's Periodical Indexes, any electronic index or some other database?
- What exactly do you mean when you use the word “Internet” – the World Wide Web? Email? Listservs? Library databases?
- What is your definition of “professional” journal? Is it the same as a scholarly publication? Or merely one geared to practitioners in a particular field?

- ✦ **DO Keep the Assignment Current** -- The library is continually changing, and these changes will affect library assignments. New sources and ways of accessing information replace old ones ever day. Check your assignment regularly so your students are not asked to use outdated or no-longer-existing methods and sources. If you are not sure about a source, contact your library liaison for the most current information.
- ✦ **DO Establish An Appropriate Time Frame** – Run a test of the assignment to see how long it takes before you decide how long students need to do it. Remember to allow for their inexperience and the fact that some materials may be heavily used. If necessary, schedule time and the opportunity for students to learn from the librarians about how to best complete the assignment.

The “Don’t” List for Creating Effective Assignments:

- ✦ **Don’t Make Assumptions about Students’ Knowledge Base**-- Don't assume that your students have had prior experience in using the library, or that other orientations were relevant to your assignment. Transfer or new graduate students may have no experience in this library system. Basic introductory skills may be inadequate for an upper level subject-based research assignment.
- ✦ **Don’t Require Resources That Are Not Available** -- Do not assume what the library has or doesn't have. Resources may change dramatically from semester to semester. The Woodhouse Library may not have exactly the same resources as other libraries you have used. It is always a good idea to retest the assignment before giving it out.
- ✦ **Don’t Assign An Entire Class the Exact Same Assignment** –This will make needed resources difficult to find at best and may result in key resources being vandalized or disappearing altogether. For example, instead of asking an entire class to research the history of IBM, ask them to research the history of a major public American corporation of their choosing. If it is necessary for a whole class to use a particular source or set of sources, considering having them put on reserve for the duration of the assignment.
- ✦ **Don’t Send Students on a Scavenger Hunt** -- The least effective assignment possible asks students to locate random facts. It lacks a clear purpose, teaches little, and is very frustrating. Frequently librarians, not students, end up locating the information.

Role of the Librarian:

When it comes to library assignments, librarians are an excellent resource. We are as expert and knowledgeable in our field as you are in yours. While a librarian will not create an assignment for you, we will be glad to work with you in developing an assignment, look at a draft, and provide comments. Since students will be coming to the Reference librarians for help, it would aid the librarians (and therefore the students) to have a copy of the assignment, and recommended sources, in advance. When an assignment is over, librarians may be able to provide feedback. Did any students seem confused or have trouble understanding the assignment? Were there any resource or access problems related to the assignment? Faculty and librarians working together can make library assignments successful learning experiences for students.