Creating Effective Library Research Assignments

PURPOSE OF COURSE-RELATED RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

An effective research assignment...

- has a specific purpose that is clearly understood by students.
- relates to some aspect of course subject matter or learning objectives.
- leads to increased understanding of the course subject matter and the process of locating information related to a subject.
- makes students aware of the variety of information sources and formats available (e.g., print, electronic, archival, multi-media).
- teaches students to select and evaluate quality information sources appropriate to their topics.
- teaches students how to ethically use information.

PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS

- Tell your students why they are doing this assignment and what purpose it serves within the larger context of the course.
- Invite your Library Liaison to your class for one or more assignment-focused research instruction sessions. Library instruction is most effective if it is connected to a specific assignment. The librarians can tailor the session to your specific needs and learning outcomes.
- The Ames Librarians maintain Research Guides by subject for all disciplines taught at IWU (linked off library homepage). Your Library Liaison can also create a course-specific Research Guide to point students to specific resources.
- Please include Library Liaison contact info on your syllabus and/or Moodle course page.
- When appropriate, actively encourage students to set up individual research assistance meetings with their Library Liaisons.
- Library Liaisons are listed on the Ames homepage under “Contact”.

DESIGNING EFFECTIVE RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

- Be specific about your expectations. This element of assignment design can prevent recurring problems such as use of poor sources, plagiarism, reliance on Google, etc.
- Clearly list assignment parameters on the student handout: important due dates, steps in the process, number and type of sources, etc. Also, specify the types of resources students can use to complete the assignment.
For example, will you only accept peer-reviewed journal articles from library databases? Is this distinction clear to your students?

- What are your policies for citing magazines, newspapers, and websites? Be sure to make clear that library databases and electronic journals **do not** count as “websites”.

- Can the libraries collections support the assignment as written or will students be heavily reliant on interlibrary loan? (ILL is fine, it just needs to be considered in the timeline).

**HEAD OFF PROCRASTINATION**

- Good research is always an evolving process, not something that can be accomplished last-minute. Breaking your assignment down into specific, progressive tasks with deadlines helps to prevent procrastination.

- Have students turn in 10 possible sources (or more!) and then help them cut to the best 5 or 7.

- Consider assigning a bibliography (ideally, an annotated bibliography) that is both required and due well before the final assignment is turned in. This allows you to note whether the student is on the “right track” in finding sources you deem to be appropriate.

- Do an in-class review of preliminary sources that students have found. Determine as a class whether the source is reliable, credible, authoritative, etc. Invite a librarian!

**AVOID THESE PROBLEMS**

- Assuming that most students know the basics of conducting research. Our research and practical experience indicates that many students enter IWU lacking rudimentary research skills.

- Scheduling a library instruction session for a day you will be absent. If at all possible, try to attend library instruction sessions to show students it is important. Our resources and interfaces often change from year-to-year and faculty frequently tell us they learn something new at each session.

- Forbidding students to use anything from the Internet. This often confuses students since library databases are web-based.

- Sending an entire class to look for one piece of information or researching the same specific topic; this is particularly difficult when printed materials are involved because the first person checks out the item(s) everyone needs. In this situation, consider placing the item(s) on reserve.

- Using discipline-specific terminology or jargon without adequate explanation. For example, a “primary resource” means vastly different things depending on the discipline.

Remember that you can always consult with your Library Liaison when designing a new research assignment or re-working an existing assignment!