Library Assignments
Challenges that Students Face and How to Help

Necia Parker-Gibson

Many undergraduate college students perennially dread library or research assignments, regarding them as either unrequited drudgery or a source of unrewarding anxiety. I would like to discuss the challenges that students face when grappling with a research assignment, provide examples of situation and design problems, and offer some solutions.

Using the library productively and researching efficiently are less intuitive and more complicated tasks than they might appear. Effective library assignments are difficult to create, and most students (indeed, most researchers) are dedicated to the Principle of Least Effort, also called the Principle of Information-Processing Parsimony, documented by Thomas Mann (1993, 91):

... most researchers, even serious scholars, will tend to choose easily available information sources, even when they are objectively of low quality, and, further, will tend to be satisfied with whatever can be found easily, in preference to pursuing higher-quality sources whose use would require a greater expenditure of effort.

In other words, researchers tend to use whatever is available, is least difficult to use, or offers them the most material for the least amount of work. Familiar tools and materials that are close at hand get used first. This theory suggests one reason why so many students turn in research assignments with sketchy or inappropriate sources.

In addition, focus groups illustrate that, given the choice, students will write about topics with which they are already familiar (even if the topics do not fit the assignment well), use limited tools (Readers' Guide to Periodicals Literature, InfoTrac, ProQuest Direct, et al.), and use the help of friends or other students before they will ask for help from instructors or librarians (Valentine 1993; Fister 1992).

What Motivates Students? How Do They Approach Research?

According to Marilla Svinicki and Barbara Schwartz (1988), students are motivated to use the library and to finish library-related assignments as the result of several factors:

* their need to know (their own curiosity)
* the relevance of the assignment to the class content and intentions
* the interest or perceived value of the material
* lively modeling of the relevant process by the professor or librarian
* the level of success they expect to achieve on or with the assignment

Two related factors that we should continue to consider are the Principle of Least Effort, noted above, and the students’ levels of anxiety associated with libraries and research. Constance Mellon (1996) found in her qualitative study of six thousand freshman composition students that 75 to 80 percent of them suffered a level of anxiety about using the library that she described as the equivalent of test anxiety or math anxiety. Carol C. Kuhlthau (1988) studied the affective domain of the research process for students and elucidated the high level of anxiety and disaffection they hold for libraries and librarians.

The library intimidates students who perceive it as both an institution and a complicated system. The stereotype of librarians in the popular culture that is drawn from literature, movies, and television increases the problem by portraying some of the most able guides to library use as stern, authoritarian, rule-bound, and finicky. This view, which seems common, encourages students to use the library as little as possible and increases their dependence on casual Internet searching to supply them with research sources, in lieu of what have been traditionally considered authoritative materials (Massey-Burzio 1995).

Many students resist doing research in what faculty might consider the "right" way. For a given assignment, they will use whatever is convenient, and anxiety is often at odds with curiosity. Although Stephen Brookfield (1995a) was writing about learning a subject, rather than learning how to do research, what he says...
librarians, in particular, tend to teach this linear, stepwise process, because they are often faced with frustrated students who have a topic and limited time; this sequence can be demonstrated successfully, step by step.

**Making Useful Assignments**

What can we do to make assignments that are useful and that circumvent some of these problems? As faculty, we must recognize that most students will not research a topic as we do because they are not starting from a position of understanding but rather are having to create understanding as they go. Gail Junion-Metz (1996) describes the Internet as “the three C’s—computers, connections and a common language” (3). But the relationship between beginning students and a research project is usually not that straightforward. Often, no common set of tools exists among the students or between the students and the faculty; there may not be a “connection” or a common language. Because many students are not working from a standard base of knowledge in a given subject, or a common base of learning from a set curriculum, what faculty would regard as the “holes” in the literature that a research question might address, are not obvious to them.

Students of the so-called “Generation X” have different expectations and training than previous generations. They want support and feedback but also insist on some autonomy; they are conditioned to expect immediate gratification; and they expect whatever they learn to have meaningful application (Caudron 1997). The *Sesame Street* generation, living in the age of computers, has spawned a “culture that is easily bored and readily distracted, one in which entertainment is transformed from an occasional personal and group diversion to a way of life” (Berman 1998, 123). Assignments do not have to entertain the students, but they should be clear and meaningful. We should provide various kinds of academic and sometimes social support in the form of explanations and encouragement.

In addition, students who are beginning to use the library may be in a mental state that William Perry (1970) classed as dualistic—things are either right or wrong, or the answer is A or B, with no room in their view for C or D or anything in between. Some students may even feel that you are acting in an obstructive or deceptive manner if you try to explain otherwise.

Some authors have found faults with Perry’s scheme, commenting that his group of subjects (Harvard first-year men) was too homogenous (white, elite, and male), that the dualistic stage does not last long, and that differences in development likely exist between men and women (Belenky et al. 1986). However, dualistic thinking may explain the difficulty of some students who show up at the library or at the instructor’s office, complaining because they cannot find “one true source” on a topic.

**Sources of Assignments**

Library assignments most commonly come from faculty members who want to expose students to the literature of the discipline: “The emphasis of this assignment is on development of up-to-date awareness of the literature covering particular topics” (Porter 1992, 48). They usually have the specific (if sometimes undeclared) purpose in mind of getting the students into the library in the first place. Three types of assignments are common: a lengthy paper or a series of shorter papers; abstracts or summaries of articles for an annotated bibliography; or worksheets or workbooks with short, block answers or multiple choice answers.

Some librarians who teach research classes for credit may create library assignments to expose their students to specific routines and research tools. Most such assignments are short papers or short-answer worksheets or workbooks. Some librarians allow students to work on assignments from other classes as they learn the tools. Librarians who teach “one-shot” lectures may give quizzes or assignments that are short and sweet by necessity, whose purpose may be as simple as increasing the chances that students will listen to them during a presentation.

What elements make bad assignments, and conversely, what elements make a library research assignment excellent?

**Difficult Language and Other Challenges**

Some of the challenges students face in completing library assignments include
difficult language, unfamiliar and complex tools, the implied need for one correct answer in assignments that involve specific tools, and misunderstood or poorly worded assignments.

Students may be frustrated by assignments involving difficult or esoteric content or language. Misunderstandings can occur even if the vocabulary is natural to the professor and used in class, for many students act as if they understand what is said and try to deduce the new meanings rather than ask questions. When students do research, they are trying to understand the jargon of a given discipline as well as that of the library and the research process. That may heighten anxiety and demoralize learners, especially at the start of the research process, when they are first developing a focus and skills.

One good strategy is to separate the subject vocabulary into one assignment and the research project into another, sequenced so that the necessary vocabulary is available to the students when the research begins. When making an assignment, specify in detail whatever is required; what is meant by a journal, an abstract, a database, and provide examples, if possible; define what constitutes a primary, a secondary, and a tertiary source for the discipline. Many students do not know these terms. Research manuals help, if the students will use them. Manuals in print for many disciplines can be found under “Research Methodology” in most library catalogs.

**Challenging Tools, or One Right Answer**

Impossible assignments, to students, are those that require challenging tools or resources, and specific, detailed answers or are set up to have only one answer, making success difficult and reducing curiosity and motivation. For example, in a music bibliography class for beginning graduate students, the instructor, who was a practiced scholar but new to teaching, assigned weekly music bibliography worksheets to students who, for the most part, did not have any background in music research. Each assignment consisted of several complex questions that required very specific, detailed answers, and the use of tools such as the RILM (Repertoire International de Littérature Musicale) in print format, the New Grove Dictionary of Music, Schlagert's Einzeldrucke vor 1800, WorldCat, and other FirstSearch databases, and various subject dictionaries.

Most of the students were being forced to learn too quickly and to leap from knowledge to analysis, while being graded on their efforts. The combination of challenging tools, which were not only complex but sometimes in a foreign language, and the added appearance of low relevance, low chance of success, and odd and reflect on the assigned tools. The assignments were spaced further apart but weighted more heavily. Although some students still complained, we no longer had students in tears at the reference desk, and the music librarian and faculty member received far fewer calls from frantic students than did the previous professor.

**Frustration Interferes with Function**

Poorly designed or unclear assignments frustrate or anger most students, especial-
for the class that they teach or the library that they use. For example, a teaching assistant might make assignments for his class in a database to which our library does not subscribe. The library, as a place and as a conception, is in an accelerated state of change. What worked well ten years ago may be inadequate today; resources that worked one way last year may have changed in the last six months. Professors must design or update assignments to reflect the current tools.

**Good Intentions Will Not Help Bad Design**

Professors should set concrete objectives and design assignments to accomplish them (Bonwell 1998). The design should accommodate students’ learning styles. All students can be characterized as independent or dependent learners by examining personality styles (extrovert versus introvert), information processing (holistic versus sequential), instructional preference (auditory learning, visual learning, kinesthetic learning, or some combination of these), and whether they are social learners (learning-oriented versus grade-oriented) or read/write learners (Fleming and Mills 1992).

Perhaps the simplest strategy, short of testing the students thoroughly, is to design assignments that appeal to more than one of the instructional preferences. Assignments that students can look at, think through, walk through, and talk through are best. Bad assignments are often aimed at only one type of learner and are usually easy for those who learn as the instructor learns (Weinstein 1995). Although most students have developed ways to compensate for their own preferences in relation to an instructor’s preferred teaching style, the more students an assignment can appeal to, the better.

**Keep Rewards in Line with Effort**

Poor assignments can carry grade weights that are out of balance with the amount of work involved, another source of frustration, anxiety, and bad press. For example, a teaching assistant who was an experienced technical writer created a library assignment for her first-year students worth fifteen points. Each student had one of six different worksheets with at least ten multiple-part questions that required use of many different sources, from *Statistical Abstracts* to *Benet’s Encyclopedia* to *Who’s Who*. This assignment was far too elaborate and complex in relation to its reward for the students, most of whom were not mature enough to appreciate the instructor’s intention to show them the range and strength of sources in the library.

**Assign Appropriate Tools**

Bad assignments often require that students use inappropriate tools, or they forbid some appropriate tools. Certain resources are not appropriate for research, but those should be specified by title, not as a group or category. For example:

- Some instructors forbid “encyclopedia” as sources. What they want to eliminate is complete dependence on World Book or Britannica, but the students assume that they are not allowed to use many subject-specific encyclopedias, such as *The Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, *The McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*, or *The Encyclopedia of Women and Religion*, which are often appropriate for beginning researchers who would benefit from an overview, especially as they develop their topics.

- Some instructors forbid the use of the Internet, and students assume that they are not allowed to use the library’s Web-based subscription databases that carry journals with appropriate, helpful articles.

- Some instructors require a specific tool that may not work for the student group or the assignment, or in that specific library. For example, freshman English composition students were assigned to use the MLA index and forbidden to use other indexes. Although the MLA is often excellent for graduate students, it tends to be less fruitful for undergraduates engaged in simple literary criticism because it includes indexing to book chapters and dissertations that a library may not own. Humanities Index, a related title included in an online index that even shows call numbers for journal titles that we own, is often a much better tool for them. Our library holds 80 percent of the titles that Humanities Index covers. Students searching MLA and then looking for their citations in our library are twice as likely to be frustrated by not finding what they seek, compared with those who use Humanities Index. Students who say “There’s nothing in the library!” on a topic may be using the wrong tools, either by accident or because they have been constrained by their instructors.

- Some professors forbid the use of e-journals or journals available only in a particular library in electronic format, which limits the students to the journals on the shelves. Depending on the library’s collection, that may not be a problem for the quality of the research, but it definitely dismays some students.

**Reduce the Restrictions**

Bad assignments may either forbid or require the students to ask for help (Weinstein 1995), or they may forbid or require the students to work together. Stephen Brookfield (1995b) insists that requiring students to work together on projects outside of normal class time can create difficulties, in particular for the growing numbers of nontraditional students.

Bad assignments require too much information, or information not readily available either locally or regionally. Or conversely, they require information that is too easily available—such as assignments that allow the use of information from the Internet that is of questionable value.

**Vary the Tools and Results Required**

Bad assignments require tools that are unique to a particular library (i.e., a specific volume) but that have not been placed where their use and location are controlled. Library assignments must take into account worst-case scenarios and disasters. Focusing on a single volume or a single database increases the chance that the materials will be unavailable when the students are ready to work.

**Write the Assignment Clearly and Unambiguously**

In many cases, bad assignments are poorly written or not written at all. Students often misinterpret verbal instructions. Even with an assignment sheet, many students lack the means or experience to interpret complex assignments. Assignments must be written clearly and simply, especially for group projects (Kraft 1985).
Assign Writing Assignments Early—Do Not Catch Students by Surprise

In his study of student practices in writing literature papers, C. W. Griffin (1998) found that the single element that made students successful in writing good papers was how soon they began. Students benefited from thinking early about the paper, its topic, and how to do it. Therefore, it makes sense to mention the term paper or shorter papers well before they are due and to encourage students to consider them early and often. Fister (1992) and Valentine (1993) have suggested that a detailed assignment, with suggested topics and other guidance, helps students to be more productive in their writing and research. Some students do want guidance, and then may not use it as a starting point:

But students were unsure of their skills. “Give us a bibliography!” they said; I did, and they limited themselves to that bibliography. I gave them a journal list, and they limited themselves to those journals. Finally I asked: “Where do you think you might look for reliable literature?” And once the right question was asked, these clever students hotfooted to the library to ask the experts—the librarians! (Stanford 1992, 41)

On the other hand, Kuhlthau et al. (1989) urge that students not be offered too much help too early, as they feel that too much direction can interrupt the student’s own learning.

Do Not Catch the Librarians by Surprise

For librarians, bad assignments catch us by surprise and require us to give a lot of direction and assistance to students without advance warning. That impact is doubled if the assignment sheet is indecipherable, and tripled if the assignment is made at the same time of the semester as most other term papers or other high-anxiety, complex assignments. Bad assignments are harder to help students complete. Indeed, because many students try to avoid asking librarians for help, when they do ask, it indicates a troublesome assignment (Fister 1992; Massey-Burzio 1995; Valentine 1993).

What Do Good Assignments Have in Common?

Good assignments are balanced. They include specific objectives that have been conveyed to the students, work related directly to those objectives, and detailed, clear instructions. They are designed at an appropriate level with relevant content, and are well-modeled or demonstrated.

Good assignments are explicit about what is to be learned or known. They require the students to learn what they need to know on the way to an answer (Bonwell 1998). Good assignments have more than one right answer. They allow students to work together in researching and in developing strategies—if not for the writing of papers—to share skills and reduce anxiety (Weinstein 1995). They allow for more than one type of learning style, are flexible, relate to other assignments and to class content, and are discussed in class for at least five minutes. Professors should encourage questions about the assignment, and students may even be “walked through it” verbally or actually (Bonwell 1998; Weinstein 1995).

Good assignments require a tangible output, such as research papers or worksheets, but (perhaps) should allow for variation to suit style (for example, allow auditory learners to talk about what they learned; Bonwell 1998). Good assignments use students’ lower-level skills such as memorization or comprehension, and they develop Bloom’s taxonomy’s higher-level skills, including application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. For a short-answer worksheet ask, What would you use for this assignment, and why? and you will begin to touch on analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of research tools. Of course, few assignments can do all of these things.

The best assignments teach lasting skills and knowledge. They give practice in useful research skills and are based on real life situations or needs. Good assignments may allow students to teach other students by group presentations, in one-to-one situations, or think-pair-sharing. They allow feedback in a complete cycle—to students, to the instructor or librarian, and from students and the instructor or librarian. Of course, the best assignments suit your students’ skills, meet their needs, apply to your library, and are processes that you can demonstrate with confidence.

REFERENCES

Murphey, T. 1989. Sociocognitive conflict:
Confused? Don't worry, you may be learning! ETC.: A Review of General Semantics 46 (winter): 312–5.