Planning Research Assignments

Many classes include some kind of research assignment or literature review that requires students to seek out evidence in support of an argument or thesis. A well-designed evidence-based assignment can help students develop research skills, critical thinking, and subject knowledge; however, without some guidance from instructors, students often limit their exploration to a small number of familiar sources and approaches. In this issue of the Bulletin, we discuss ways that instructors can help students develop effective research skills.

TYPICAL CHALLENGES THAT STUDENTS ENCOUNTER

- **Terminology fluency:** Students may have difficulty understanding what instructors mean by “literature review”, “primary sources”, “peer-reviewed”, “empirical studies”, and other academic language.
- **Search strategy know-how:** Students need to know which databases or print resources might be helpful, how to search them effectively, and when it would be appropriate to use them.
- **Summarization skills:** Students may find it challenging to recognize an author’s thesis or summarize the content of a source.
- **Evaluative abilities:** Students may have difficulty judging the quality, authority, or currency of sources.
- **Documentation proficiency:** Students often need help with properly citing sources, documenting their research via notes, selecting quotes, and managing their references.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

- What skills and experiences do my students already have?
- What skills and experiences do I want my students to gain from the research process?
- What sort of research-based assignment will best develop these skills and experiences?
- How will I introduce, explain, and demonstrate the research process?
- How will I evaluate the quality of sources selected by students?
- How will I recognize when students have difficulties?
- How can partners on campus, such as libraries and writing centers, support my students’ needs?

GUIDING STUDENTS THROUGH THE RESEARCH PROCESS

- Scaffold assignments to keep track of student progress at each stage of development (e.g., literature review, annotated bibliography, paper outline, preliminary drafts).
- Offer and model examples of effective research practices.

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• Design assignments that involve peer work at the library or online that allow students to explore resources (e.g., have students research a specific problem in small groups or build a collaborative annotated bibliography online).
• Describe the specifics of the assignment – length, citation format, acceptable types of sources – in writing and orally. Let your students know the purpose of the assignment and your evaluation criteria. Define any potentially unfamiliar terminology.
• Consider scheduling a workshop with your subject librarian. The workshop can be tailored to your class and introduce students to research strategies and tools needed for the assignment.
• Direct students to other sources of support: office hours, writing centers, drop-in library workshops, online tutorials, and library research help (available in person, via email, and 24/7 via online chat).

HOW CAN CIDR HELP?

If you would like to consult with CIDR as you develop your course or assignments, call 543-6588 or send a message to info@cidr.washington.edu.