A Guide for Assigning Research Projects

Some Do’s and Don’ts for Assigning Research Projects

Based on the A.C. Buehler Library’s experience providing instruction and reference services, we can pinpoint some factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a research assignment and others which contribute to research frustration. The following suggestions are offered in the spirit of enhancing the research process and product for students, instructors, and librarians.

Do’s

- Plan on spending the time and energy necessary to develop and implement an effective research assignment.
- Clarify and state your research objectives. What do you expect the student to learn as a result of the assignment, and how do objectives for the assignment fit in with your course objectives? Sample research objectives: 1.) to select and focus an appropriate research topic in a field; 2) to distinguish between popular and scholarly materials on a particular topic; 3) locate and evaluate the information necessary to support an argument.
- Consult with a librarian about the requirements of the assignment and the availability of relevant print and electronic resources. The library is continually changing; new sources and ways of accessing information change everyday. Ask your liaison librarian to create a course web page to direct your students to appropriate resources.
- Schedule one or more library sessions to provide your students with skills, awareness of available sources, advice on developing search strategies, and to become acquainted with your department’s liaison librarian.
- Require students to use the resources of the Elmhurst College Library.
- Specify the level of research expected (e.g. popular vs. scholarly sources, number of references, books vs. journals). Encourage your students to use books as well as journals and the Internet. The large number of electronic resources available will tend to steer students toward journal literature, but often books will provide more in-depth information and analysis.
- Confirm topics early in the process. Encourage (even require) students to explore the resources available before deciding on a specific topic.
- Specify a particular style manual and your stylistic expectations. Most students are unaware of the multiplicity of style manuals and are baffled by choices. Papers are easier to grade if all students use the same manual.
- Discuss plagiarism. Clarify your expectations about paraphrasing, citations, etc. A carefully structured assignment, in itself, will foster creative responses and discourage plagiarism.
- Structure the timing of the project, and build in a period of response to the information gathered. Incremental due dates, help to break the research process down into manageable stages. Intermediate steps might include handing in a preliminary working bibliography, reporting on a research in progress, and writing an abstract or outline. It is important to schedule a period of reflection as stage in the research process. Students are all too prone to think that research entails two steps: gathering information and writing the paper. They need encouragement to react to, assess, and organize the information gathered.
Don’ts

- Never assume that your students have adequate library skills. Students may seem to be comfortable with research because they are comfortable with computers. However, they are typically not familiar with research resources or the conventions of your discipline.

- Do not ask students if they think they need a library session. Each session is designed to fit the requirements of a particular assignment. Research skills are gained with practice over time, and students do benefit from repeated instruction.

- Avoid referring students to specific journals to find articles on their topics unless browsing will serve a purpose. Browsing is not the best approach to most research for novice researchers. Students will generally have more success if they are referred to bibliographic sources (both electronic and print) that will help them locate information in a variety of journals.

- Do not limit sources to a single format, such as journals or books. That particular type of source may not be readily available or appropriate for a given student’s topic. It is more useful to require a minimum of each type or a ratio of types in order to provide options.

- Do not confuse Internet resources accessed through popular search engines with electronic resources subscribed to by the Library and delivered via the Library’s web site.

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