Designing Effective Library Research Assignments

The purpose of library research assignments is to develop skills in what academic librarians refer to as Information Literacy. Information literacy skills are not separate from subject core competencies, but are a set of skills inherent to developing mastery within the disciplines. In 2009, the Academic Senate at COM officially recognized the importance of information literacy by approving it as one of the five general education Student Learning Outcomes for the college as a whole.

If information literacy skills are to be successfully acquired by students, the instruction should be delivered at the point where subject content and information literacy skills converge. Greater student success can be achieved in this area if instructors partner with librarians to create effective library research assignments. Toward this end, the library faculty has created a Shared Responsibility Chart that elucidates the relationship between instructors and librarians for successfully achieving the standards of information literacy. *Please note that one of the primary goals of the library faculty at COM is to help instructors integrate information literacy into curriculum without infringing upon the academic freedom of the instructor or preempting the subject content of the course.*

The following is a list of tips and suggestions for instructors to consider when designing effective library research assignments:

- Consult with a faculty librarian before finalizing the assignment - The librarians at COM can help you design an assignment to make use of appropriate resources to meet the assignment's objectives. The librarian may suggest a Library Instruction Session to prepare students to use specific resources.

- Be explicit with the assignment - Give students a clear idea in writing of what the assignment involves, suggesting types of sources to be used and not used. If specific titles are required, check with a faculty librarian to ensure students will have access to the materials.

- Clarify and state your objectives, to yourself and your students - What do you expect students to learn about library and electronic research as a result of the assignment? What intermediate steps might your students need help with? For example, can you assume that they know how to look for scholarly articles? Do they know that there are separate databases for periodical and newspapers?

- Tie your objectives into the college-wide information literacy SLO and use the proposed Information Literacy Rubric developed by COM librarians.

- Promote critical thinking - Design assignments that require students to evaluate information or integrate the results of their research, rather than use "scavenger hunt" assignments for which students are unprepared. Most students have no idea

how to find obscure facts, so they rely completely on the reference librarian or Google searching, and as a result they learn very little about searching for and evaluating information. Consider for example:

- o Having students compare periodical articles on the same topic from a popular magazine and a scholarly/professional journal.

- o Evaluate the information retrieved from a web search for credibility, accuracy, or bias.

- Assume minimal library research knowledge - The world of information retrieval and access is dynamic and few students will know what's available to them or how to effectively search for information and evaluate what they find.

- Allow a variety of topics or resources - Providing students with a range of topics helps to distribute access across more materials.

- Verify that the materials students must locate are accessible using COM resources. Try to find them yourself before assigning students to search.

- Make sure that the materials you are asking them to look up are comprehensible to your average student. For example, do you really want a freshman to read a PhD dissertation on X?

- Use the Course Reserve service - To avoid large numbers of students trying to obtain the one required book or article, put items on Course Reserve. In addition to library materials, personal copies, examples of tests or projects can be placed on reserve for your class.

- Schedule a Library Instruction Session (aka "Library Orientation") that gives your students hands-on experience using the online public access catalog (OPAC) and the databases. Please fill out and submit a copy of the *Library Instruction Request Form* and a faculty librarian will contact you for scheduling.

- Expect things to change - In the online environment things change quickly, so it's important to verify the availability and location of desired materials, Internet sites, and even electronic library services.

- Citation format - Clearly state what citation format is required for the assignment and discuss the purpose and mechanics of citing. COM Librarians have created a Bibliography Pathfinder that provides an overview on the need for citation and resources to help facilitate a successful bibliography or 'works cited' page. Please distribute it to your students.

- Distribute other library handouts - The faculty librarians have created a variety of handouts to help instructors and students with their research needs. The Database

Pathfinder identifies the available research databases and provides access instruction. A complete list of these items are available on the Library Forms and Handouts page.

- Be aware of Distance Education resources at the library - The library offers reference services that are tailored to our DE students. Students working on their assignments from off-campus are able to obtain a wealth of information to meet their research needs by using the resources listed on the library's Distance Education page. This includes a PDF presentation of Library Resources at COM.

- Emphasize respect for library materials - Ensure that students are aware that library materials and electronic resources are common goods and must be shared by many people.

- Refer! - Let students know that the faculty librarians at COM are available and want to help them succeed with their assignments. Librarians can also refer students to nearby libraries or suggest other ways to obtain materials not owned or available in the COM Library System.

For more information, please email your library faculty at askthelibrary@marin.edu.

Source: Compiled from a variety of college libraries' web resources, to include City College of San Francisco web site: http://www.ccsf.edu/Library/instruct/topten.html