



Library Assignments: A Guide for Faculty

Purpose of Library Assignments:

- An effective library assignment has a specific, understood purpose, and it relates to some aspect of the course subject matter or learning objectives.
- It will lead to increased understanding of the subject through the process of locating information related to the subject.
- A library assignment that meets these criteria is an excellent teaching tool and can enhance and enrich the student's learning experience.
- It also increases the understanding of the subject matter and builds research skills.

Implementation of Library Assignments:

- Students should be prepared for the assignment, told why they are doing it and what purpose it serves.
- If the assignment requires the use of specific sources, students should be given a list of them and arrangements made with the library to assure availability and access.
- If it involves the use of complex sources or unfamiliar research strategies, students should be oriented to these--by you or by a librarian in a customized, scheduled library instruction session.
- When testing an assignment, try to put yourself in the student's shoes with their experience and perspective.

Characteristics of Effective Assignments:

- Clarity -- If students have trouble understanding what they are supposed to do, they will have trouble doing it. Give library assignments in writing (not orally) to reduce confusion.
- Use of Correct Terminology -- Students tend to interpret library assignments very literally, and are easily confused by terms they, and the librarian, cannot interpret definitively. Define any questionable words. For example, some instructors differentiate between magazines and journals, while others use the terms interchangeably. Does "library computer" mean the library catalog, the online research databases, the Internet?
- Currency -- The library is continually changing. These changes will affect library assignments. New sources and ways of accessing information replace old ones every day. Check your assignment regularly so your students are not asked to use outdated or no-longer-existing methods and sources.
- Appropriate Time Frame -- Do the assignment yourself to see how long it takes before you decide how long students need to do it. Remember to allow for their inexperience and the various locations of different materials.

Pitfalls to Avoid:

- Assuming Most Students Already Know the Basics -- Don't assume that your students have had prior experience in using the library, orientation to the library, or that their orientation was relevant to your assignment.
- Requiring Resources that are not Available -- Do not assume what the library has or doesn't have. Resources may change dramatically from semester to semester. It is always a good idea to retest the assignment before giving it out.
- An Entire Class with the Same Assignment -- If an entire class has the same exact assignment, needed resources will be difficult to find at best, will disappear or be vandalized at worst. For example, instead of asking an entire class to research the history of IBM, ask them to research the history of a major public American corporation of their choosing. If it is necessary for a whole class to use a particular source or set of sources, have those titles put on reserve. Librarians can assist you in placing needed materials in a controlled access environment. This will allow each student to have an equal opportunity to use the item. Telling the student to "put it back" just does not work. Even the most honorable of students may reshelve items in the wrong place.
- The Scavenger Hunt -- The least effective assignment possible asks students to locate random facts. It lacks a clear purpose, teaches little, and is very frustrating. Frequently librarians, not students, end up locating the information. Making assignments like these will result in being fed the cold fishy-eyed look of the library director. It's not a pretty sight.

The Role of the Librarian:

- When it comes to library assignments, library staff members are an excellent resource.
- While a librarian will not create an assignment for you, one will be glad to work with you in developing the assignment, look at a draft, and provide comments.
- Since students will be coming to the reference librarians for help, it would help us (and therefore the students) to have a copy of the assignment, and to recommended sources, in advance.
- When an assignment is over, librarians may be able to provide feedback. Did any students seem confused or have trouble understanding the assignment? Were there any resource or access problems related to the assignment?
- Faculty and librarians working together can make library assignments successful learning experiences for students.

Resources:

The library offers a variety of customized orientations or advanced instructional sessions.

To get information on tours and demonstrations or to schedule a session, email library@ccac.edu or contact a CCAC Reference Desk:

Allegheny: 412.237.2768

Boyce: 724.325.6798

North: 412.369.3602

South: 412.469.6374