Effective Research Assignments

Information literacy is the ability to find, critically evaluate, and use information for both academic and personal purposes. Along with critical thinking, it is a foundational skill that supports undergraduate learning in all disciplines. Despite the widely recognized importance of information literacy, it remains largely neglected in the general education curriculum. Some instructors assume that their undergraduates are already information literate and don’t adequately prepare them for research assignments, while others fail to see a place for research in their syllabus and teach solely through assigned course readings. In either case, students miss a valuable learning opportunity.

Some Findings about Undergraduate Information Literacy Competencies

Based on a survey of journalism and mass communication faculty, only 1.7% stated they believed the research skills of their students were excellent, while 33.8% stated that they found their students’ research skills to be poor (Singh, 2005).

Faculty who reported their students’ skills to be adequate made library instruction a regular part of their courses to some degree more frequently than those faculty members who estimated their students’ research skills otherwise (Singh, 2005).

According to a study by O’Hanlon (2002), students usually overestimate their abilities to find, evaluate, and use information. Most assess their skills as either ‘Excellent’ or ‘Pretty good.’ When compared with their actual scores on the questions designed to measure their research skills, anywhere from 35.5% to 81% of respondents received poor or failing scores (65% or lower).

UGA Faculty Commentary on Undergraduate Research Skills

Responses to the UGA Writing Across the Curriculum Faculty Survey (November, 2005) indicated a need for incorporating research assignments into the undergraduate curriculum:

- “The greatest problem my students have in writing assignments is where to find information. They are in the mindset of ‘if it is not in Google, it must not exist.’ They are extremely reluctant to go to the library.”
- “[Students have difficulty] distinguishing between personal opinion/reflection, fact, and well-supported conjecture (in education this is often a difficult distinction for the field).”
- “The majority of them have not written a research paper before they come to my class, and they are predominantly seniors! I find this lack of practice to be the single largest impediment to their understanding of research, argumentation, and good writing.”
Research Assignment Ideas & Examples

Below are some ideas on integrating information literacy into your research and writing assignments, based on active learning principles. These exercises will not only reinforce course content, but will require students to use critical thinking skills to find, evaluate and use information wisely.

**Social Issues & Media Bias**
*Description:* Working in groups, ask students to select a current social issue relevant to the course content (i.e. immigration, global warming, education reform, etc.) and find and compare two articles from either a domestic and foreign news source or from a scholarly and non-scholarly source. Examination of different types of sources opens the floor to discussions of bias and/or how information sources are written to different audiences.

**Evolution of an Idea**
*Description:* Analyze the reception of a particular idea or concept (i.e. Natural Selection, Psycho-analysis, Communism, Woman's Suffrage, etc.) over time by finding books/magazines/journals from various time periods, from the idea's inception to the present. Students would evaluate these sources to create an annotated timeline of the discourse. This assignment is a great way to compare/contrast primary and secondary sources while showing how an idea develops and changes over time.

Sample Assignment Ideas from UGA Teaching Assistants

The following ideas for discipline-specific library research assignments were developed by TAs in the Graduate School Interdisciplinary Certificate in University Teaching program.

**Geography: Comparing articles on the Rwandan genocide**
*Description:* Find 2 articles from different sources and compare description of the genocide (language, facts listed, tone). For example, compare magazine vs. peer-reviewed articles, articles from different countries, or articles from different periods of the genocide.

**History: Piecing together a story**
*Description:* The instructor selects a set of historical documents all relating to a particular event. She or he will then assign citations to each student. Each student is then responsible for locating that source and bringing it in to class, where the group will examine the materials and piece them together to tell a story.

*For more examples, go to:*
www.libs.uga.edu/ref/classresources/2006fall/grsc7770

Partner with UGA Libraries

UGA Librarians can help you improve your students' research skills by visiting your class and conducting a library instruction session.

*Request a session here:*
www.libs.uga.edu/graduates/teaching.html

References
