

Creating Effective Library Research Assignments

Here are some suggestions for instructors that will help make a library research assignment a successful learning experience for your students.

Check to see whether the library has the resources your student will need.

It is frustrating for students to not find the resources that they need in a USM library. To check if USM Libraries have a specific resource, and have it on the campus you want it on, please consult the URSUS catalog or call the Information Desk at 780-4272.

Do not assume that students “know the library.”

Many students have never used the library for anything except studying or reading Reserve materials. Most will need your guidance and/or a librarian’s guidance to complete library research assignments. For information about scheduling an instructional session for your students with a librarian, please see the Instructional Services page. An online request form is provided.

Explain the assignment clearly – preferably in writing.

Specify what students are to do, define terms, and give complete citations with call numbers for specific works. This will not only help students, but will help librarians understand what you want if the students come with questions about the assignment. Please feel free to call on us for help with this information.

Avoid the “mob scene.”

Dozens of students trying to use one book or article or trying to locate same piece of information usually leads to misplacement, loss, or mutilation of library materials. Use the Reserve service where appropriate or notify the librarians ahead of time about an assignment.

Avoid scavenger hunts.

Searching for obscure fact without any guidance is frustrating for students and teaches them nothing about doing research. Instead, scavenger hunts become an exercise for reference librarians to perform.

Avoid telling students not to ask for help.

Libraries are complex institutions, each one being a bit different from the next. It is expected that students will need assistance, and library staff are trained and happy to provide that assistance.

Avoid arbitrary restrictions on sources students can use.

For example, telling students to consult newspapers – but not to use the Internet – might discourage student from using the full-text online newspapers to which the library subscribes; or, telling students to find journal articles – but not to use computers – would prohibit the use of some of the most important indexes, many of which are only available online. If you are concerned about your students’ ability to evaluate the quality of information found on the Internet (a legitimate concern!), please consider scheduling an instructional session with a librarian.

Consult with a librarian before making the assignment.

A librarian can advise you of the availability of library resources, suggest appropriate library resources, point out potential problems with the assignment, and in some cases order appropriate materials. If you anticipate a number of your students coming to the library and asking questions, as a courtesy, please leave a copy of your assignment at the Information Desk in advance or with a library liaison so that we will be familiar with it by the time you students come in.

Complete the assignment yourself before you assign it to your students.

There's nothing like a run-through to discover what problems your students might encounter while working on your assignment. Does the library still have the resource that you had students use last year? Sometimes subscriptions are canceled, titles change, old sources are replaced by new ones. Can you find the needed materials on the shelf or on the library's website? While libraries rely on a logical system to arrange their resources, every library is unique. Sometimes a specific item is more difficult to find in one library than another. Do your students need any additional "clues" about where and how to access the sources they will need? By completing your own assignment, step-by-step, you will discover anything that needs to be clarified or changed.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this page, or would like further information please contact Bill Grubb, Head of Reference & the Information Literacy Program, bgrubb@usm.maine.edu or 780-4672.

You may also contact the liaison in your area. Call the Learning Commons at 780-4272 for the name and contact information for your liaison. They can answer questions about ...

- Your assignment
- Print, non-print, and electronic resources that are available to the USM community.
- Using our course reserves system.
- Accommodating an entire class using specific sources.
- Arranging for library instruction in which a librarian provides instruction for your students, either in the physical classroom or online (Blackboard, Elluminate, or other means).