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Better Research Assignments

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Faculty often are frustrated by students' research papers. The solution may lie in their own hands: the design of the assignment itself.

We all know the problems with students' research papers. Students turn in papers with improper sources. Or they have good sources but use the material poorly. Or they use the internet when a research database would have been better. Or they start their research so late that they only had time to find the first three barely relevant articles. Or perhaps they don't have enough citations from the right kinds of sources. In a nutshell: bad research, bad citations, and bad papers.

Students don't enjoy the research process any more than faculty enjoy the resultant papers. Researchers in the United States recently asked a range of college students, "What one word sums up how you feel at the moment you receive a course-related research assignment?" In response, students offered the following: "angst, tired, dread, fear, anxious, annoyed, stressed, disgusted, intrigued, excited, confused, and overwhelmed" (Head and Eisenberg).

Students are overwhelmed. They lack context. Even when they want to do their research properly, they lack the skills and knowledge to do so--which is why they go to the internet and especially to Wikipedia, which gives them the context and overview they desperately need (Head and Eisenberg).

But why are students researching so poorly? Well, part of the problem is that faculty are so good at their jobs. Gloria Leckie defines faculty as being the very model of expert researchers: "The model requires a long process of acculturation, an in-depth knowledge of the discipline, awareness of important scholars working in particular areas, participation in a system of informal scholarly communication, and a view of research as a non-sequential, non-linear process with a large degree of ambiguity and serendipity. The expert researcher is relatively independent, and has developed his or her own personal information-seeking strategies" (202).

How is this a problem? Well, students are none of this. Many students don't know that faculty conduct research or understand that scholars in different disciplines approach research differently. They may not know that faculty publish their work, nor do they understand the peer review process. They don't know who is important in different fields. They may not know the word citation; never mind how to follow a citation trail. They have never attended a scholarly conference. They don't know faculty interact with other faculty at other schools. Because of "their level of cognitive development, ambiguity and non-linearity may be quite threatening. They do not think in terms of an information-seeking strategy, but rather in terms of a coping strategy. Research is conceptualized as a fuzzy, library-based activity which is required of them to complete their coursework" (Leckie 202).

So it seems that faculty and students agree that students' research needs help. But what's the solution? Leckie argues that research paper assignments are "flawed from beginning to end" and "students are doomed to failure" (201). The solution, then, begins with the research assignment itself.

She argues that instructors should "integrate information-seeking and evaluative skills into the course content" with the following six steps, each part done by the class at once as short assignments:

1. Narrowing the topic
2. Understanding and using the scholarly literature
3. Demystifying scholarly research
4. Finding and using the scholarly literature
5. Understanding legitimate shortcuts
6. Developing a strategy for the completion of the research paper. (206)

In a nutshell, the best papers come from research assignments that emphasize individual tasks and resources as much as the topics themselves. While this process requires precious class time, the resulting papers are (almost) always remarkably better.

Problematic research assignments are those that include scavenger hunts; those that require scholarly resources when good quality popular sources would be more appropriate; and those that require students to use a complex research database not demonstrated in class. We also recommend faculty first complete the assignment themselves, which may uncover problem areas such as missing, outdated, or discarded sources.

Librarians are glad to help with this process. Please send us your assignment if you would like our feedback. We're familiar with our library's collections and often can anticipate the problems students will have. Also, please send a copy of your final assignment to the library. We'll keep it in a folder at the Help Desk to refer to when students approach us for help.

If you'd like more information or a consultation on your research assignments, please contact one of these librarians:

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