

Ideas for assignments to build research skills

Assignment	Skills / Understanding
<p>Have an assigned reading that can be found fulltext in one of the library's databases and have students find it on their own [e.g. "Using ScienceDirect, find Valentine, Barbara. "The legitimate effort in research papers: Student commitment versus faculty expectations" (2001) <i>The Journal of Academic Librarianship</i> 27(2) pp107-115"]. Can increase the difficulty of this as the course goes on, so that the database isn't necessarily given or the title isn't [e.g. "In ScienceDirect, Valentine's 2001 article about the disconnect between student and faculty perceptions of research essays"]. This introduces students to the databases that they will be using for research in later years, it also gets students used to finding good academic sources online rather than using search engines for everything. Could collaborate with your subject librarian to put together an online guide to finding the material.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding articles in databases • Knowing sources useful in discipline • Basic searching skills
<p>Ask students to write a paragraph or so about an assigned reading (could be a summary, a critical response, an explanation of how it ties into the previous lecture, etc.), incorporating a direct quotation and a proper paraphrase. Could also ask for a companion paragraph (or just the same one repeated) with a direct quotation used incorrectly and improper paraphrasing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically thinking about reading • Incorporating other voices into own writing • Correctly citing sources • Correctly paraphrasing sources • Understanding what constitutes plagiarism
<p>Mini-essay based on assigned reading (similar to above) with a lightly annotated bibliography (explaining how source was found and why it might be useful/interesting/related) of a few sources they could use to follow up on the topic. Could set a minimum of 2 or 3 different sources consulted to ensure students search beyond the reading's own bibliography. Could also have students show a copy to the person sitting beside them, so that they see different approaches of their peers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically thinking about reading • Chasing citations • Finding related sources • Maybe get a sense of how research in a discipline progresses • Critically thinking about sources
<p>Include in follow-up bibliography from above, one source from another discipline (or more) and explain how the approach may differ.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of a discipline and its effect on content • Critically thinking about context
<p>Ask students to find the best web site they can find on a topic already covered in the class, and hand in the URL with a short explanation of why it's a good site. Could also ask the same for a topic not yet covered, and have students comment on any difference between finding sites on known and unknown topics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Searching for academic web sites • Evaluating web sources • Critically thinking about evaluation • Background knowledge assists evaluation

<p>Students read a little bit on a topic (perhaps a short encyclopedia entry) and come up with a research question or two that interests them on that topic. Then they read a bit more (a longer encyclopedia entry or a short book/article section) and see if their questions change, then read a bit more (a full article or book chapter) and see if their questions change again. Ideally this will get across that research is more than just finding information, and that it's an ongoing process. Also that research isn't about finding sources to back-up your argument, but trying to answer a question.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking about readings • Coming up with research questions • Revising research questions • Research an iterative process • Kinds of information found in different sources • Research about questions, not backing up a pre-determined idea
<p>Essay based only on assigned readings. Students then can concentrate on just putting together ideas and writing, without having to do research too.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically thinking about readings • Organizing thoughts and ideas • Academic writing • Incorporating references • Finding voice
<p>After doing an essay based on assigned readings, students create an annotated bibliography of sources they might use to pursue the topic. This gets at idea of research as an ongoing process, rather than a one-time project. Since the students will have a base of knowledge on the topic, their research experience should be less frustrating and closer to the academic "ideal".</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding sources • Evaluating / choosing best sources • Critically thinking about sources • Research an ongoing process • Research easier with background knowledge
<p>Annotated list of sources students would pursue for a topic; annotation describes how source was found and why it merits a follow-up. Since students don't necessarily have to read all the sources, their evaluations are more likely to be based on content rather than availability, length, emailable fulltext, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding sources • Using different research tools • Critically thinking about sources
<p>Annotated bibliography instead of paper, where annotation gives full summary of source as well as detailed evaluation of it and how it fits the topic. A common substitute for the research paper, it unfortunately reinforces the idea of research as a linear process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding sources • Evaluating / choosing best sources • Critically reading / thinking about sources for annotation
<p>"Regular" essay (or any of the above ideas) with annotated bibliography of sources that <i>weren't</i> used, but were read or examined. Annotation would explain why source wasn't used.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking about sources • Evaluating / choosing sources • Shouldn't necessarily use everything you read / find

Note: This was a handout at the Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre's Fridays at 4:30 session on January 31, 2003. For more information, contact Shelley Gullikson, Information Literacy Coordinator, at sgullikson@mta.ca.