

ASSIGNMENTS

Purpose

- Actively engage students in learning.
- Provide realistic learning outcomes that will:
 - increase subject knowledge
 - teach and provide practice for research skills
- Assess student progress

Preparation

Assume nothing.

Consider ahead of time:

- students' current knowledge and capabilities.
- the time limits imposed by the length of the course.
- workload imposed by the size of the class.

Keep expectations reasonable.

- overly demanding assignments frustrate and confuse. - assignments limited to a few specific learning goals can satisfyingly lead to more advanced knowledge and skills.

Assess the resources available within the library system:

- do not assume that necessary resources are available.
- more resources may be needed for large or advanced classes.
- heavily used resources may need to go on reserve.
- other courses may be using the same resources.

Limit resources to be used:

- place appropriate limitations on the format or timeliness of the resources to be used.
- be specific and give reasons for limitations.
- examples of limitations:
 - popular vs scholarly sources
 - primary vs secondary source material.
 - nothing published before a certain date
 - specific slant or emphasis
 - articles vs books
 - no. of sources to be used

Do not unnecessarily limit formats or timeliness of resources, for example:

- journal articles alone may not provide a cohesive understanding of a topic.
- books may not provide recent information.
- Canadian content requirement may not apply.
- the Internet can provide reliable information.
- government resources can be useful in many subject areas, not just political science and economics.
- recency of resources may not always be essential.

Limit and focus topics:

- may waste student time to require them to narrow down assignment topics that are too broad or ill-defined: for example: China, gender issues, Canadian politics.
- suggesting overly broad topics means less control over the final topics chosen.
- overly specific or narrow topics may not provide enough resources for an assignment.

Arrange in advance for specific library assistance, such as:

- advice on resources, feasibility of assignment.
- provision of specific library tutorials
- provision of guides to specific tools or subject areas.

Allow sufficient time for completion of an assignment.

- consider breaking lengthy assignments into a series of steps with staged completion dates, so that the assignment(s) can be monitored more easily and students are guided through the research process.

The assignment itself should set a scholarly example

- do not use unidentified abbreviations.
- any titles or names suggested should be fully, accurately and specifically identified.
- list the style manual to be used. Follow the rules of this manual when citing resources on the actual assignment.
- use correct grammar, sentence structure, spelling.

Never reuse old assignments without updating them.

Finally, assignments are meant to teach students, not try the skills of the librarians!

Distribution

The Library:

- give a **copy of the assignment** to the library ahead of time.
- give the library guidelines on the **extent of the help** which students should receive from reference staff.
- for a large class which is using all the same resources, or an assignment that requires the use of a number of resources, the library may be able to prepare a **pathfinder** or pre-pull materials and locate them in a specific area for the duration of the assignment.

The Class:

- review the assignment with the class, including:
 - **how much time is required** to complete the assignment. Suggest some preliminary investigation as soon as possible, so they have an idea of what is involved.
 - **the need to use the library**. Suggest that it is normal to ask for assistance in the library, and that it is essential to take a copy of the assignment to the library.
 - **the types of resources required, including:**
 - any limitations, with reasons.
 - any specific emphasis or focus
 - any special locations: i.e. resources on reserve, etc.
- **office hours** available for consultation with faculty. Also, library hours when reference desk is open to offer assistance.

During

When suggesting resources:

- do not use abbreviations
- write citations out rather than giving them verbally.
- note if you are not sure a suggested resource is in the library, follow-up with library.
- note that citations to resources not in the library can be used to identify related materials that are in the library.
- note that resources which are not in the library may be ordered on interlibrary loan, but this requires time.
- note if you are not sure about the accuracy of a title, or a publication date.
- use the phrase “a journal called...” not “journal of...” when referring to a journal title.
- contact the library immediately if you become aware of any problems students are having.

Completion

Ask for feedback:

- from the students.
- from the library.

Revisions:

- note needed revisions to the assignment immediately so you will remember them for the future.
- ask Library to update any handouts or pathfinders that they prepared before doing an assignment again.

Resources:

- ask the library to order missing resources for future assignments

Share:

- share particularly good assignments with colleagues in other fields as well as your own.