



Tips for Effective Library Assignments

The high tech academic library environment can be an overwhelming and frustrating experience for undergraduate students. Despite what students might think and tell their instructors, most students do not navigate well in a college library. Students have not yet learned the difference between surfing the Net and substantive research. Most high schools do not prepare students for the research skills they will need to find, evaluate, and use information effectively. The following guidelines are meant to assist instructors, ensure students of a positive and successful learning experience, and reinforce library use as a means of learning.

Alert the GTCC Library

With advanced notice (at least 5 days) and a copy of the research assignment, our Reference Librarians will be better prepared to: identify available resources for students; direct students to resources more effectively; and anticipate increases in demand for specific materials and provide security for these items (ex: materials can be kept behind Reference Desk or Circulation Desk). An online **Assignment Alert Form** is available from the library's web site. To access and fill out this form, click on **Lists, Info, Requests, Forms, Policies** from the Library's home page; from the next screen, click on **Requests and Forms**; then click on **Assignment Alert Form**. You can also call our Reference Librarians, Belinda Daniels-Richardson at **ext. 2636** or Alisha Webb at **ext. 2287** or drop by the Reference Desk to discuss your next research assignment.

Consult with a GTCC Librarian

If you need assistance in developing effective library assignments, our professional Reference Librarians, are an excellent resource. We will be more than happy to work together with you. We can also assist you in identifying the availability of resources, develop and conduct a customized instruction session for your students, or prepare handouts or online guides to support your assignment.

Clear instructions

When planning library assignments, make sure they are clearly defined and understood by your students. It is best to give instructions in writing, since students frequently misunderstand or forget an oral assignment. Terminology that is imprecise or vague can wreak havoc on students. For example, many students upon entering college will be unfamiliar with library terms such as *citation*, *abstract*, *journal*, and *database*. Make sure students understand the terminology presented to them in the assignment.

Purpose

Stating the objectives and purpose of the research assignment helps your students understand what they will learn as a result of the assignment and how it will help them in the long run.

Accuracy/ availability of material

Check the library's online catalog and other electronic databases for the availability of specific resources before assignments are developed. Also, when students are given a specific list of library resources to consult, make sure the titles and locations are correct. Resources relevant to assignments can be placed on **Reserve** at the **Circulation Desk** or kept behind the **Reference Desk** to prevent the disappearance of these items.

Attitude

Recognize that students will take their cues from their instructors. The attitude an instructor takes towards libraries and research skills instruction will inevitably communicate itself to students.

Schedule library instruction To make sure the assignment is appropriate to the knowledge or skill levels of your students, schedule a library instruction session for your students before they begin a research assignment. These instruction sessions work best when scheduled at the beginning of a research assignment, so that students can see the relevance to their assignment.

Teach research strategies While the research process may seem obvious to the experienced researcher, it is generally unknown to undergraduate students. Steps in a typical undergraduate research process may include:

1. Defining or narrowing a topic by finding background information or an overview using an encyclopedia article or textbook chapter.
2. Searching the online catalog for books.
3. Searching appropriate electronic databases for periodical articles.
4. Evaluating resources.

Designing a research assignment in stages helps students learn the steps of the research process. For example, a preliminary assignment may include a summary of an encyclopedia article, a bibliography of proposed sources, or an abstract of a key article or book. This process also provides you the opportunity to make sure students are choosing appropriate resources for their assignments.

Foster critical thinking Rather than assigning the traditional research paper, how about designing assignments that foster critical thinking? For example, have students:

- Compile ten or more sources for a bibliography on a specific topic and then pick three or five of the best sources. Make them justify their choices in writing or explain their selection criteria.
- Judge criticism or opinions from an article against one's own views.
- Evaluate several Internet web sites on the same topic for accuracy, comprehensiveness, authority, etc.
- Write critical annotations for several articles on the same topic.
- Compare the differences between a popular magazine article and a scholarly journal article on the same topic.

Problems to avoid **Trivial pursuit or scavenger hunt assignment** - Students can become easily frustrated when they are asked to find obscure facts. It is best to provide them with a specific list of available resources in the library when researching a topic.

Shot in the dark - For example, asking students to find the full text of a scholarly journal article on the *Internet*. Using an Internet search engine to find full text scholarly articles will yield very little after much time and frustration. It is best to ask students to search an electronic database/service available through GTCC Libraries such as a NC LIVE database. Consult with the Reference Desk if you would like to know more about our current subscriptions to various electronic databases.

The mob scene - This happens all too often when the entire class is working on the same topic and need to use the same resources. If several students or the entire class will be working on the same topic, ask about placing items on Reserve at the Circulation Desk or keeping items behind the Reference Desk. Or enable students to choose from a range of topics. This guarantees that students will not be competing for the same materials.

Time management As most students are notorious for waiting to the last minute to start assignments, it needs to be stressed to them that conducting research in the library can take time and that it is best to start as soon as possible. If the assignment is an extended project, establish deadlines for different stages of the assignment to help students pace their work. Also make sure the due date or time frame is realistic based in the availability of resources in the library.