

What You Ask for Is What You Get: Some Dos and Don'ts for Assigning Research Projects

*Deborah Fink, Instructional Services Librarian
Norlin Library*

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It begins with a few, but soon there are dozens of students--all looking for the same issue of a recent journal, the same volume of a subject encyclopedia, information on the same person, books on the same topic. Who or what has prompted these hordes of students and their requests? More paranoid reference personnel may be convinced that the requests are a carefully designed plot to drive them out of their profession, if not out of their minds. Generally, however, they are the product of very little thought or planning at all; they are simply the results of poorly designed library assignments. Every library staff that serves students has experienced the frustration of such assignments.

In an effort to preserve the mental health of both librarians and students at the University of Colorado, Boulder, the following tips were developed as a workshop for teaching assistants and were then offered to faculty as an article in the premier issue of our library newsletter, "Information from the University of Colorado Libraries."

Research assistance is available to students in a variety of ways through the UCB Libraries. Various workshops, advertised with flyers and newspaper ads, are offered each semester. Individual assistance is provided at reference desks in Norlin Library and in the branch libraries. Both students and faculty may make appointments with reference librarians for more in-depth assistance. In addition, faculty may schedule a library presentation for courses that include a research assignment. Guest lectures by a librarian may include an overview of materials available in the field as well as how to use particular sources, such as the public access catalog (PAC), bibliographies, periodical indexes, and online bibliographic services, such as humanities and science indexes. Strategies for organizing research, integrating traditional and electronic access, and evaluating sources are emphasized.

Based on the experience of providing these instructional services, reference librarians can pinpoint those factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a research assignment or that lead to research frustration. The following suggestions are offered in the spirit of enhancing the research process and product for students, instructors, and librarians alike.

Do:

1. *Plan on spending the time and energy necessary to develop and implement an effective research assignment.* Designing the assignment, assisting students throughout the semester, and grading the final products are all labor-intensive activities.
2. *Clarify and state your research objectives.* What do you expect the student to learn as result of the assignment, and how do the objectives for the assignment fit in with your course objectives?

Sample research objectives:

 - the student will be able to select and focus an appropriate research topic in the field;
 - the student will be able to identify and use the key reference sources in the field;
 - the student will be able to locate and evaluate the information necessary to support an argument.
 - *Be sure the library can support your research requirements.* Avoid subjects that are so current or so specialized that a limited quantity of materials may be available, as well as topics that are beyond the scope of our academic departments.
 - *Consult with a librarian while developing your assignment to be sure it is appropriate for your objectives and for available materials.* Contact the instructional services librarian or the appropriate branch librarian to schedule a consultation.
 - *Schedule a library presentation to provide your students with library use skills, awareness of available sources, and the ability to develop a search strategy.* Call the instructional services librarian or the appropriate branch librarian.
 - *Specify the level of research expected.* Consider scholarly vs. popular sources, numbers of references, types of references (books vs. journal articles, etc.).
 - *Specify a particular style manual, your stylistic expectations (e.g., footnotes vs. endnotes) and the basic parameters (e.g., length, format).* Most students are unaware of the multiplicity of style manuals and baffled by the choices. Papers are easier to grade if all students use the same manual.
 - *Discuss plagiarism.* Clarify your expectations about paraphrasing, footnotes, and the like. A carefully structured assignment, in itself, will foster creative responses and discourage plagiarism.
 - *Confirm topics early in the process.* Guide students to appropriate and manageable topics at the outset.
 - *Structure the timing of the project, and build in a period of response to the information gathered.* Assignments that are made early in the semester and never referred to again inevitably create last-minute panic. Incremental due dates serve to structure the research process in manageable stages. An important stage to schedule as part of the process is a period of reflection on the information gathered and ideas generated. Students are all too prone to perceive research as two steps: gathering the information and writing the paper. They need encouragement to react to, assess, and organize the information gathered.
 - *Develop mechanisms for monitoring progress.* Projects submitted in stages (outline, notecards, rough draft, etc.) provide ongoing interaction and feedback.
 - *Refer students to the libraries' self-instructional materials.* Printed guides are available throughout the libraries, and slide/tape presentations are located at the entrance to the Norlin Library reference department.
 - *Encourage students to ask for assistance at the reference desk.*

Do Not:

1. *Assume that your students will have any library skills or expect them to be able to locate information without a knowledge of the access sources.* Call the instructional services librarian or an appropriate branch librarian to schedule course-related instruction.
2. *Give a student a sketchy reference of a particular item or a vague subject area and expect the student or the library staff to find what you had in mind.*
3. *Refer students to specific journals to find articles on their topics unless browsing will serve a purpose.* Browsing is not the best approach to most research. Students will generally have more success if they are referred to the indexes which cover the subject field to identify articles in a variety of journals.
4. *Limit research to a particular index.* Other indexes may be available which would be equally useful. A specific index designated for an entire class may not be the most appropriate for a particular student's topic.
5. *Limit research to a particular format, such as journals or books.* That particular type of source may not be readily available for a given student's topic. It is more useful to require a minimum of each type or a ratio of types in order to provide options.
6. *Ask for materials too current to access.* It generally takes at least three months to one year before materials are listed in secondary sources, i.e., indexes, bibliographies, etc., and browsing in current periodicals is often an exercise in frustration.
7. *Send an entire class in search of the same item or the same information.* This creates a "run" on materials which is sheer frustration for both students and library staff.

Working together, instructors and librarians can develop assignments and provide assistance that will promote effective and satisfying library research.