Building Information Literacy into Your Assignments

One of the components of information literacy is the ability to use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose. Certain types of assignments encourage students to practice and develop information literacy skills. When students have their assignment in mind during a library instruction session, they transform from passive listeners to active learners.

Assignment Examples

1) Scholarly Article Review or Scholarly Book Review

You can familiarize students with the concept of scholarly literature and lay the groundwork for courses in which a full research paper is required.

✓ Require that students use a library database to find a peer-reviewed, scholarly article on a certain topic, or require that students use the library catalog to find a scholarly book related to their topic.

✓ As part of their review, ask students to evaluate some of the sources of information the author is using to support their argument.

✓ Require that students create a citation for the scholarly article (or scholarly book) at the end of their paper and ask them to adhere to a specific citation style (e.g. MLA, APA).

2) Compare & Contrast

Primary Sources vs. Secondary Sources

✓ Have students formulate a research question and locate two primary sources and two secondary sources related to the question.

✓ Contrast the treatment of the topic in the primary sources with the treatment of the topic in the secondary sources.

Reference Sources

✓ Have students pick a topic and compare and contrast the information they find in a general encyclopedia article with the information they find in a subject-specific encyclopedia article.

✓ Ensure that students create citations for both sources that have been formatted according to a specific style.

Scholarly or Popular Articles

There are many variations you could have on this assignment.

✓ Have students compare and contrast two journal articles that present different points of view on the same topic.

✓ Or have students pick a topic and compare/contrast the information they find in a journal article with the information they find in a magazine article.

✓ Or add a time period component to the assignment.

  o For example, you could have students select a controversial topic, and then compare/contrast a recent magazine article on the topic with a magazine article on the topic from the late 1980s.

3) Bibliography or Annotated Bibliography

It’s never too early to introduce your students to the concept of citations. Librarians can help students understand the reasoning behind documentation and how to create citations using a specific style. Citations can be tricky even for seasoned researchers, so it’s important that community college students understand the basics before they are asked to create citations.

✓ Ask students to create a bibliography (or an annotated bibliography) on a specific topic or thesis. Specify the citation style that students will use.
4) Biography

Ask students to select a researcher in a field of study and explore that person’s career and ideas.

- In addition to locating biographical information, students could be asked to analyze the reaction of the scholarly community to the researcher’s work in journal articles/books.
- At the end of the assignment, they would create citations that have been formatted according to a specific style.

5) Understanding Citations

- Ask students to find and look through three of the sources cited in a peer-reviewed journal article.
- Have students explain what purposes each source serves in relation to the article.
- Finally, ask students to evaluate the credibility of each source using a set of criteria.

6) Journals Overview for a Discipline

Students taking lower-level undergraduate courses tend to be unfamiliar with the scholarly publishing process, as well as the scholarly literature in a particular discipline.

- Require that students choose a specific discipline (or subdiscipline) and identify three leading journals in the field to which TCC has access (either via print or library databases).
- Ask students to explain the rationale behind their choices.
- Have students describe an ongoing scholarly debate within the discipline (or sub-discipline), using at least one article from each key journal.
- Require that students create a citation for each article, formatted according to a specific citation style (e.g. APA).

7) Source Analysis

- Give students the instructions for a research paper that they are not going to write.
- Include several sample theses in the instructions.
- Ask students to find three credible websites that they could use to support one of the sample theses. Have students apply specific criteria to determine whether or not a website is credible. (You could even have students fill out a worksheet for each website).

8) Research Log

This assignment also provides students with opportunities to examine the nature of scholarly discourse.

- Ask students to select a topic from a list of options.
- Have students create a research question (or research statement) from the topic, and look for information using library databases and the library catalog.
- Require that students keep a record of their research approach: general methods, resources consulted (e.g. library databases, print books, search engines), and keywords or subject headings searched.
- Ask students to note their search successes and failures. What “worked?” What didn’t “work” so well?

9) Literature Review

This assignment provides a good introduction to how information is organized, and encourages reflection on the decisions researchers must make.
✓ Have students review the literature on a specific topic within a given time period.

✓ Have students create a research question (or research statement) from the topic, and look for information using library databases and the library catalog.

✓ Require that students keep a record of their research approach: general methods, resources consulted (e.g. library databases, print books, search engines), and keywords or subject headings searched.

✓ Ask students to note their search successes and failures. What “worked?” What didn’t “work” so well?

10) Debates/Presentations

✓ Ask students to prepare presentations that are supported by credible information found through research.

✓ Require that students consult a variety of sources and specify these source types in the assignment instructions (e.g. reference books, scholarly articles, etc.)

Adapted from materials developed by the University of Newfoundland, University of Michigan, University of Puget Sound, Gustavus Adolphus College, and the University of California at Berkeley.

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