Guide to Creating Effective Research Assignments

From the Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library's Teaching and Learning Committee

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Library Services

a. **Consult with a librarian** as you are creating your assignment

When you're thinking about new or interesting ways of using sources in your class, you may find it useful to talk with your subject liaison librarian. For instance, they can tell you:

- Which new resources have recently become available
- Which old resources are no longer available, or have been recently updated
- What difficulties students have run into with prior assignments
- Interesting strategies for approaching a research problem which may not have occurred to you.

See our list of [Subject Specialists](#) to find your subject liaison.

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b. **Why you might schedule a library instruction session**

If your course involves a significant research component, consider scheduling a library instruction session.

Some courses, including English 110 and some courses that are key to certain majors, require a library session. If your course requires a library session, your department should let you know through the introductory materials you receive and may also send out other reminders. Library sessions are available for all other courses on demand; see below. Library sessions for advanced classes build on what students learned in earlier courses.

In lower-division courses, librarians can walk your students through the research process, help them to understand the resources that are available through the Library, and encourage them to evaluate their sources carefully.

In upper-division courses, librarians can point your students to discipline-specific resources, suggest advanced search strategies, and fill in the gaps in students' experience as researchers.

To schedule a library instruction session, please contact Christine Marrero or your subject specialist. For more information, please see our page about scheduling a library session.

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c. **Making the most of a library instruction session**

We recommend scheduling your library instruction session for a class period after students have started thinking about the assignment, but well before the assignment is due, so that students will be able to make the most of the strategies they learn in the session. Please request the session at least two weeks before the date you want.

It's important to communicate with the librarian who will be giving the session ahead of time. Most will ask for your syllabus and assignment sheet; you should also mention anything specific you want them to cover. It's also useful to provide information about the strengths and weaknesses of your students as a group.

Make the library session a positive and required attendance part of students' course experience. Make sure to frame it in terms of the assignment, so that students understand its relevance to their research.

These sessions often work best when the instructor is involved and can point out connections to the work the students are doing in class.

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d. **Refer students to library reference services and one-on-one help**

Many students may not realize that the library provides reference service to help students with their research assignments. You may want to remind your students that we have regularly scheduled reference hours every day in BRL 344. Check our library calendar for our reference hours.

For more specialized courses, your students may benefit from consulting with the subject specialist for your department. Of course, you should talk with your subject librarian before sending students to him or her! If you're not sure who the appropriate subject specialist is, please check our list for contact information.

Finally, if you are encouraging students to avail themselves of library reference services, consider providing information about the service in your syllabus. You may also want to point your students to our library research guides as another good place to start their research assignments.

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e. **Use our online instructional materials**

The library provides many online instructional materials you may want to consider making available to your students. These are of two types:

- Our general online tutorials, intended to introduce students to the library
- Our library research guides, geared toward particular subjects or classes

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f. **Include links to the libraries' web pages and electronic resources in Blackboard or another CMS.**

Examples include:
1. Direct links to the online tutorials and library research guides
2. Full-text articles, books or other resources available through the libraries
3. Works in the public domain
4. Works for which you own copyright or have obtained copyright permission to post online

For a detailed explanation on how to set-up links, including how to ensure your students can access linked resources off-campus, see the Linking to Queens College Libraries from Blackboard from the Center for Teaching and Learning.

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a. **Know what students already know (or don't know!)**

Have a conversation with your students about the library and its resources from the very beginning. Ascertain the skill level of your students to see whether they can perform the research you require. You may find it useful to ask about their prior research experience. Have they used the library in the past? Has their library use been for classes at a similar level, in a similar subject area? What did they find frustrating or confusing? Pay attention to their vocabulary and expectations about the research process.

Although students may be comfortable with accessing information in everyday life, they are often unfamiliar with the requirements of academic research and writing, especially where these become very specialized.

Most beginning students do not know the specifics regarding information retrieval and few know what is available to them physically and virtually via our particular library. Many students are coming to the library for the first time with your class. Some may be transfer students with no experience using our library.

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b. **Set clear goals.**

Be clear on what the assignments are meant to accomplish and the skills you expect students to have or learn, and its relevance to the scholarly practice in that discipline. How and why will students be using research in your class? Students are much more successful in their research when they have a good understanding of what they can do with sources and what sorts of sources are best for meeting those needs.

If you have specific expectations about the type and number of sources that students should use in their papers, please describe them to your students explicitly. Do you want them to use books, book chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles, news sources,

or something else? Use the terms they may encounter when they are actually using the library.

c. **Explicitly discuss the library in class.**

Some classes, including English 110, are required to schedule library sessions, while for others, instructors might choose to have one. Whether or not you schedule a library session for your class, it is a good idea to talk with your students about the role that the library plays in their research.

Of course, the students' relationship with the library does not begin and end with a library session. It's important to follow up on the session by referring back to the concepts it introduced. Furthermore, make sure students know that librarians are there to help them, and that they can meet with a librarian in the library's Research Office without an appointment. Research has found that students are often intimidated by academic libraries, so please remind them that the librarians are not only available, but happy to help them.

Overall, it is a good idea to encourage questions and discussion throughout the research process.

d. **Be aware of your terminology.**

Library research has a large and specific vocabulary which students may find intimidating! Additionally, there are many terms that may seem clear to you but have taken on additional meanings in a digital environment. When using this vocabulary to talk about the work students are doing, make sure that you clarify your meaning with students.

Here are some examples of language that students often find confusing:

- "Website," particularly when told to avoid them.
    - Many students consider library databases and any other resources they access online to be websites, so when they hear instructions like this,

they believe they should not use electronic journal articles, for instance.
- "Peer review"
  - Many students, especially early on, are unfamiliar with this concept.
- "Journal article"
  - The difference between scholarly journal articles and magazine articles is one that students often don't understand.
- "Book"
  - Do e-books count? There are a lot of them in the library!

Additionally, students are often unaware of library services such as Interlibrary Loan, CLICS, reference services, Ask a Librarian, and so on, which they may need to use to finish their research.

e. **Specifying sources for your students**

For upper-division classes, let your students know which resources are most important in your field! Students are often exposed to general databases early in their college career and may not know about more advanced resources. Specialized resources for particular disciplines may be very different from databases like Academic Search Complete or Lexis-Nexis, which students tend to encounter early in their college career.

Statistically, once a resource has been recommended to students, they tend to return to it, even if it is not appropriate for their new assignments. Thus, they may not explore the resources most important to your discipline unless explicitly instructed to do so.

It is not recommended that you tell your students to stay within certain journal titles; rather, try to help students understand the search process available in your discipline and the choices they have among the materials they may encounter.

Depending on the topic students choose, resources may be available electronically, in print, or both. Normally, both print and electronic resources are needed to research a topic thoroughly. Please encourage the use of both print and electronic sources of information. There is usually no difference in the content of books, journal articles, government documents or other materials in paper over their electronic equivalents

Constructing Good Research Assignments

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a. Explicitly connect the research to the assignment and course goals.

Students need to understand why they are doing research and what role research plays in their success in the course. Explain why you are asking them to look at other sources and how sources are used in your discipline. Show them how research connects with the other requirements of the assignment. This helps to make research meaningful.

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b. Discuss the role of research in student writing.

It is helpful to articulate in class the different ways that students might deploy research in their writing. There are many possible reasons an author might cite a source—to show prior research in a field, to lay a theoretical groundwork for his or her arguments, to verify factual information, to disagree with or extend the work of another scholar, or simply to show that they are familiar with the work in this area. This conversation can help your students to more accurately imagine the types of sources they need, which will in turn help them decide where to look for sources and to make better choices about which sources to use.

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c. **Consider requiring a rough draft and/or an annotated bibliography.**

Aside from reinforcing the cyclical nature of the writing process, this helps to pace your students by guaranteeing that they will begin the research process early. One major reason that research is difficult for students is that they do not leave themselves enough time! An early start enables them to make informed decisions about the sources they wish to use, rather than selecting their sources at the last minute.

Furthermore, students who start their research early can more easily use library services such as CLICS and Interlibrary Loan which are services that help students obtain material that is not owned by the Queens College Libraries.

Finally, requiring a draft allows you to evaluate your students' research abilities and offer them advice before the final draft.

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d. **Give students models for good source use**

If you're requiring research in your class, include some readings that use sources in ways that you'd like modeled for your students. This helps them to understand, not only how to write with sources, but also what kinds of sources they need.

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e. **Test your assignment by checking the availability of resources you ask your students to use.**

Before sending your students to use a particular resource, be sure you test it to make sure that it works the way you think it does. Always verify the availability of the resources you will be assigning in class. Library resources change over time, so an assignment you wrote years ago may not work in the library today. A librarian can help you to identify replacements for resources that are no longer available.

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f. **Provide guidance about citation requirements.**

Be explicit about your expectations with regard to citations. Specify your preferred citation style, and suggest a guide for students to use. If you would like them to use the official style guide for a specific format, or if you are fine with them using abbreviated guides such as the Purdue OWL, please let them know.

For upper-division classes, we recommend encouraging your students to become familiar with the official handbook for the citation style appropriate to your discipline.

These days, many automated citation tools, such as RefWorks, Zotero or Mendeley, are available to help students and others manage citations and create bibliographies. These tools can save time and help students organize their research.

Automated citation tools are most appropriate for upper-division or graduate students, who already understand the pertinent citation style works. If students come to rely on these tools too soon, they may not learn how to read and track down the citations they find in other bibliographies. However, tools like this can be invaluable students who already understand the principles behind them.

g. **Encourage academic integrity**

Explicitly discussing the purpose of the research paper and your expectations concerning the use of sources can help to discourage plagiarism. Providing information about good citation practices is also helpful. Much more information about encouraging academic integrity in your students' work is available on the Writing at Queens website.

h. **Provide and receive feedback.**

Check in with your students throughout the research process. As noted above, a rough draft or annotated bibliography provides an excellent opportunity to evaluate and offer assistance. Students often need help defining the scope of their research projects, identifying the most appropriate databases, and evaluating resources. It is also a good idea to check with students as to whether your instructions have been useful.