Designing Effective Library Assignments

If they are designed well, course-related library assignments can be an effective way to introduce students to library research. The following guidelines suggest ways of ensuring students have a positive experience while using the Library as a means of learning.

1. Talk with a reference librarian when designing an assignment that requires Library resources

   Librarians can help you design an effective library assignment to achieve course goals, while helping students acquire library and research skills. Consider, letting a librarian review your assignment for simple things, like the accurate use of library terms and concepts, to more critical issues, like what strategy to use, selecting the appropriate library or information resources, and determining the feasibility of the assignment, given library resources. If librarians at the reference desk are aware of the assignment in advance they will be better prepared to help students who need assistance.

2. Assume your students have minimal library knowledge

   Many students do not understand the intricacies of subject headings, bibliographic records, periodical indexes and abstracts, citations, and scholarly communication and bibliographic systems in general. Some students may never even have been in a research library before.

3. Develop a written library assignment

   Give students a clearly written description of the assignment, outlining the objectives, requirements, what types of sources you want them to use, etc. If you ask them to use specific library books, please give them complete citations (librarians can help) for specific works.

4. Avoid a mob scene

   Dozens (or hundreds) of students trying to use a few select books, or a particular article, usually leads to chaos, as well as loss or mutilation of library materials. A librarian can suggest a variety of tools to spread the number of students over different sources. When possible, use the Library’s growing collection of electronic resources, which allow multiple simultaneous users.

5. Please, no scavenger hunts

   Dozens (or hundreds) of students searching for obscure or library facts can also cause chaos and teaches students nothing useful about research. Scavenger hunts are less instructive than assignments that require problem solving and analysis. Instead, engage students in exercises and assignments that will lead to the acquisition or reinforcement of research skills.
6. Check the UCSB Library’s ACTUAL holdings

Students will be very frustrated if the material they are asked to use does not exist, is checked out, or the library does not own it. When many students need to use the same materials, over a short period, place materials on reserve with Course Reserves. For Course Reserves information, see [http://www.library.ucsb.edu/course-reserves](http://www.library.ucsb.edu/course-reserves).

7. Where did that database Go?

Information is dynamic: a source that the library had at one time may have changed its name, changed its look and functionality, or may no longer be available. Also, new resources are always being added that provide increased access to old content or provide new content. A librarian can help select appropriate and available resources. The Library owns or subscribes to over 200 electronic indexes and abstracts, catalogs, reference books, and digital archives.

8. Teach research strategies when possible

Request a library orientation. Instruction librarians can present research strategies like choosing the appropriate research tool for the project and skill level, keyword vs. subject searching, interpreting bibliographic citations, and distinguishing scholarly journals from other periodicals. With advance notice, librarians can provide bibliographic instruction, database demonstrations and research guides geared specifically to your assignment. For more information, see: [http://www.library.ucsb.edu/form/instruction-request](http://www.library.ucsb.edu/form/instruction-request).