



## Constructing the English 102 Research Assignment

### Define the outcomes of the assignment

- Every assignment should have clearly stated objectives. Students are less confused if they are told what they are expected to learn.
- Consider modifying an assignment if the outcomes don't map to it.
- If there are specific *research* objectives (as opposed to writing objectives), state these.

### Clearly use terms

- Make sure you communicate what you want from students by using the right terms:
  - **Databases** and **search engines**. Many scholarly resources in the Library, including the catalog, are only available online. Please distinguish the Library's subscription databases from the web.
  - **Electronic indexes**. Students have to use an index to find a journal article, whether in paper or not. Our indexes are mostly electronic. It is confusing to a student if they are told they have to find an article in paper when the pdf version may be available online. Paper subscriptions comprise no more than 2% of the total number of periodicals that the Library currently holds, as the vast majority of these are available online full-text.

### Control the research process

- Provide students with reflective time for research. Students who can think critically about the research process will give you better results.
- Break up the research part of an assignment.
  - Students need time to develop a topic, to identify search terms and appropriate sources, to search and retrieve information, and to evaluate what they find. **For the student, each of these is a different step.**
    - Consider incorporating Library worksheets into the assignment.
    - Create an assignment with research components due throughout the quarter.
    - Consider an i-search paper where resources are justified. (A)
- If assigning multiple topic choices, make these parallel. "George W. Bush and the Iraq War" and "The effects of the recent war on Iraqi children" begin the research process at two different places.
- Students are easily overwhelmed by information. Try and theme the class assignment to discourage indifferent researching.

### Identify specific sources

- Consider the type of sources your assignment will require and how you expect students to find these. Are these sources to come from the humanities or the social sciences? Which databases are you expecting students to use? Will you provide instruction in the use of

those? In our experience it is less helpful to allow students at the 102 level to use a variety of databases. They tend to get lost.

- Scholarly v. popular. Some topics can only be answered via popular sources; for example, current events. Some scholarly literature and databases are too advanced for 102 students, even though the journals may be on topic. Insisting on these may encourage indifferent sourcing.
- Consider focusing on a few select resources, such as the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* or one database like Lexis-Nexis, and provide adequate training on their use. (B)
- Do not overlook the many subject encyclopedias available in the Library. Reference literature is designed for the novice researcher.
- Make sure the Library has any resources you expect students to use. Put these on reserve.

### **Schedule library instruction for your class if the assignment requires significant library use**

- Notify us the quarter before instruction is needed.
- Visit the Library when students are ready to begin their research. Students do well coming the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> week of the quarter.
- If bringing them into the Library, make sure that students have already determined their topic. (C)
- A library visit is not necessary if your focus is on writing using a few texts.

### **Make the research portion of a paper part of their grade**

- Require scholarly academic sources where appropriate, and grade students on their selection and evaluation of materials. Consider creating a rubric for sources. (D)

### **Consider alternatives to the traditional research paper**

The following may discourage plagiarism:

- Create an annotated bibliography justifying source selection
- Keep a research diary (E)
- Compare and contrast discussions of the same topic treated in a scholarly and a popular source (F)
- Evaluate a resource based on specific criteria (G)

### **It may help to insist on one citation style**

- Students are confused by the various formats and have difficult reading and tracing citations. It may be more productive to expect the same style from everyone in the class. This way if students have questions your answers benefit everyone in the class.
- The Library holds several APA workshops each quarter, and will begin holding MLA workshops Winter Quarter 2007. Check the Library's home page for times and dates.
- Make sure your own citations are in the format you want from students!

### **Test the assignment**

- **Do the assignment yourself** before giving it to students. Pay special attention to how you search for the information.