GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE LIBRARY ASSIGNMENTS

Southern California Instruction Librarians (SCIL, a CARL Interest Group)

Well-designed course-related library assignments are an effective way to introduce students to library research. The following guidelines are meant to ensure students a positive library experience, and reinforce library use as a means of learning.

1. CONSULT WITH A REFERENCE LIBRARIAN BEFORE THE ASSIGNMENT

Librarians will work with you to design an appropriate assignment that will achieve your course goals/objectives. Sending a copy to the Reference Librarian will insure that the staff is ready to help your students when needed.

2. ASSUME MINIMAL LIBRARY KNOWLEDGE

Although many students will be familiar with using some library tools (e.g., dictionaries, thesauri, the author/title portion of the catalog), few really understand the intricacies of subject headings or periodical indexes/abstracts; most have never used research journals, but only Time, Newsweek, and the like.

3. EXPLAIN THE ASSIGNMENT CLEARLY, PREFERABLY IN WRITING

Give students a clear idea of what the assignment involves, suggesting types of sources to be used. Give complete citations for specific works.

4. ALWAYS BE SURE THE LIBRARY HOLDS THE NEEDED INFORMATION

There are few experiences more frustrating that looking for what does not exist, has been discarded or has been checked out. Use the library's Reserve Service for materials that many students need to use. Send an advance copy of the assignment and its due date to the Reference Librarian.

5. AVOID THE MOB SCENE

Dozens of students using just one book, article or index, or looking for the same information usually leads to misplacement, loss or mutilation of materials. Give students a variety of topics and sources. Use the Reserve Service as needed; use photocopies of "classic" articles if you can conform to fair-use practice.

6. AVOID SCAVENGER HUNTS

Searching for obscure facts frustrates students, can cause chaos in the stacks, and teaches students nothing useful about research. If planning a library exercise, talk to the librarian about designing one appropriate to the class, and to the library.

7. TEACH RESEARCH STRATEGY WHEN APPROPRIATE

Include a list of steps involved in the research assigned. Invite a librarian to review strategies for the assignment with the class, and discuss appropriate tools or types of material.

8. AVOID ASSIGNMENTS THAT PROMOTE VANDALISM OR THEFT OF LIBRARY MATERIALS

Requiring or requesting that students collect or turn in original materials (color illustrations, printed advertisements, magazine articles, etc.) usually leads to at least some students taking the "easy way out". Instead, make it clear that ONLY photocopies, printouts, or forwarded digitized images will be accepted for such assignments.

9. PRESENT A REALISTIC PICTURE OF WHAT IS, AND WHAT IS NOT, ON THE WEB

In general, refrain from encouraging students to use the Web as the only source for information. Students need to know that those expensive databases to which libraries subscribe usually provide quality information that is much easier to find than the kind of hit-or-miss Web searching students often do. When the Web is the best or sole source for the kind of information you require, recommend specific sites, specific expert lists of links, or specific directories to help them find authoritative, timely and useful information.

With sufficient lead time, librarians can provide library instruction lectures, workshops, and written materials geared specifically to your course and assignment, as well as general orientations for more inexperienced students. PLEASE ASK!

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