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## Creative alternatives to traditional research papers: Undergrads and Scholarly Communication

The ability to write a finely crafted, well documented, and thought provoking research paper is a hallmark of a fine liberal arts education. Understanding how knowledge is created, how thoughts build upon previous thoughts, how the written language has given rise and perpetuates cultures, how all of these can be found in the scholarly communication housed in their fine research libraries, these are a few of the noble ends of undergraduate education and are the building blocks of **information literacy**.

Putting thoughts to paper, supporting them with evidence, or contradicting them without bias, push students to new intellectual levels. The skills needed to get to that point are myriad. By sequencing research assignments, faculty can provide feedback throughout the writing process prior to the final assessment. Students appreciate this.

In courses where research papers are not appropriate or applicable, assigning one or two gems from Indra's "research" net allows students to practice the craft in small developmental increments. Students will need to actively engage in and ultimately master those individual skills or thought processes thereby building their confidence. Future faculty will be in receipt of these gifts.

Here are some ideas which provide practice in segments of the research process. They require students to become familiar with scholarly research tools and techniques. Please contact your liaison librarian for library instruction sessions, if desired.

### All but the paper Research Paper

- Assignment: Conduct the research for a term paper. Do everything except write it. At various points, students may submit:
  - Topic with several good questions to explore
  - Annotated bibliography of useful sources which explore those questions
  - Outline of paper
  - Thesis statement
  - Opening paragraph and summary
- Objective: Focuses on the process of research and the elements of a paper.

### Research Log

- Assignment: While doing topic research, students keep a record of their actions: methodology, resources consulted (books, databases, Web searches), keywords or subject headings searched, noting both successes and failures.
- Objective: Provides a good introduction to how information and scholarly communication are organized. Encourages reflection on the decisions researchers must make. Focuses on the importance of terminology.

### Literature Review

- Assignment: Review the literature on a specific topic for a given time period.
- Objective: Reveals the purpose of a literature review. Provides students with opportunities to engage in the discipline's printed matter.

### Review Update

- Assignment: Using a non-current review article, update the topic with current sources.
- Objective: Introduces students to literature reviews, subject indexes, and reference sources. Demonstrates the evolution of a particular topic and the scholarly communication surrounding it. Also requires students to analyze, synthesize, and integrate the ideas they find. Students will utilize printed and electronic resources to identify pertinent information

### **Poster Session**

- Assignment: Research a topic and present it as a poster which other students will use to learn about the topic.
- Objective: Requires use of scholarly resources, research skills, concise communication, and synthesis of ideas.

### **Track a "Classic" Paper through a Citation Index**

- Assignment: Choose a classic article by well-respected scholar and follow its trail into future publications. Trace the paper through ISI's Web of Science (Social Science or Humanities) Citation Index.
- Objective: Teaches the mechanics of using a citation index and introduces students to the web of scholarly communication. Shows how ideas are introduced, distributed, integrated, refined, and developed over time.

### **Trace a Scholar's Career**

- Assignment: Explore a scholar/researcher's career and ideas by locating biographical information, preparing a bibliography of his/her writings, analyzing the reaction of the scholarly community to the researcher's work, and examining the scholarly network in which s/he works.
- Objective: Introduces students to the use of biographical and bibliographical tools, and exposes them to examples of scholarly dialogue.

### **Identify a Discipline's Journals**

- Assignment: How many journals are published in a given field? Identify journals "basic" to the discipline. Locate those held locally in print and online. Compare and contrast peer reviewed and popular or trade publications in the field. Analyze their subject focus, tone, audience, and impact.
- Objective: Encourages intellectual exploration, widens the range of possible resources, and demonstrates the importance of journal literature within disciplines. Students differentiate between similar journals.

### **Understand Primary Sources**

- Assignment: Compare primary and secondary sources on the same topic. Have the students find a study in a popular or trade publication and then have them find the actual study. How well did the information transfer between sources? What was left out? How well did the popular/trade publication writer capture the essence of the primary source?
- Objective: Students differentiate between primary and secondary sources in a discipline. Shows when and why to use each.

### **Read the References**

- Assignment: Acquire and read the articles cited in a research paper. Explain how each is related to the paper. In what circumstances is it appropriate to cite other papers? What different purposes do the citations serve?
- Objective: Shows when it is appropriate to recognize the contributions of previous authors in the development of new work.

### **Simulations of Real-Life Projects**

- Assignment: Prepare a grant or research proposal, marketing or business plan, or solution to a tax, accounting or financial problem. State the specific problem to be solved or task to be accomplished. Provide background on the problem. How have these issues been dealt with in the past? What is the current thinking on this issue? How do you propose to solve the problem or what are the questions you need to ask to solve the problem? What support can you offer for your solution?
- Objective: Simulates for students how they will apply their information skills in the context of problems they will encounter in their discipline or career.

### **Narrowing a topic**

- Assignment: Given a topic that is much too broad to handle in a short paper, find several sources (magazine, newspaper, or journal articles, chapters in books or reference books) to assist in refining the focus. For example, refine the topic Ethics in Sports down to Drug use in Track and Field and further down to doping in the 2004 Olympics Track and Field events.
- Objective: Teach students how to narrow a topic as well as what types of sources they might find useful in doing so.

### **Other ideas**

- Annotate an article for a novice reader.
- Write or create a piece of music, art, or creative writing in a particular style or genre
- Put on a conference complete with poster sessions, panels, papers, etc.
- Create an anthology of readings complete with an introduction and reading summaries
- Create a pathfinder or website of different types of information sources on a topic