

Center for Instructional Development and Research

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Information for People who Teach
at the University of Washington

Planning Research Assignments

Many classes include some kind of research assignment or literature review that requires students to seek out evidence in support of an argument or thesis. A well-designed evidence-based assignment can help students develop research skills, critical thinking, and subject knowledge; however, without some guidance from instructors, students often limit their exploration to a small number of familiar sources and approaches. In this issue of the Bulletin, we discuss ways that instructors can help students develop effective research skills.

TYPICAL CHALLENGES THAT STUDENTS ENCOUNTER

- *Terminology fluency:* Students may have difficulty understanding what instructors mean by “literature review”, “primary sources”, “peer-reviewed”, “empirical studies”, and other academic language.
- *Search strategy know-how:* Students need to know which databases or print resources might be helpful, how to search them effectively, and when it would be appropriate to use them.
- *Summarization skills:* Students may find it challenging to recognize an author’s thesis or summarize the content of a source.
- *Evaluative abilities:* Students may have difficulty judging the quality, authority, or currency of sources.
- *Documentation proficiency:* Students often need help with properly citing sources, documenting their research via notes, selecting quotes, and managing their references.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

- What skills and experiences do my students already have?
- What skills and experiences do I want my students to gain from the research process?
- What sort of research-based assignment will best develop these skills and experiences?
- How will I introduce, explain, and demonstrate the research process?
- How will I evaluate the quality of sources selected by students?
- How will I recognize when students have difficulties?
- How can partners on campus, such as libraries and writing centers, support my students’ needs?

GUIDING STUDENTS THROUGH THE RESEARCH PROCESS

- Scaffold assignments to keep track of student progress at each stage of development (e.g., literature review, annotated bibliography, paper outline, preliminary drafts).
- Offer and model examples of effective research practices.

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- Design assignments that involve peer work at the library or online that allow students to explore resources (e.g., have students research a specific problem in small groups or build a collaborative annotated bibliography online).
- Describe the specifics of the assignment – length, citation format, acceptable types of sources – in writing and orally. Let your students know the purpose of the assignment and your evaluation criteria. Define any potentially unfamiliar terminology.
- Consider scheduling a workshop with your subject librarian. The workshop can be tailored to your class and introduce students to research strategies and tools needed for the assignment.
- Direct students to other sources of support: office hours, writing centers, drop-in library workshops, online tutorials, and library research help (available in person, via email, and 24/7 via online chat).

HOW CAN CIDR HELP?

If you would like to consult with CIDR as you develop your course or assignments, call 543-6588 or send a message to info@cidr.washington.edu.



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CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu, or visit our web site:

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