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Fostering Critical Thinking through Effective Assignment Design

Information literacy is the ability to effectively navigate information resources in order to identify credible sources relevant to a research question and use those sources to inform and engage one's own thinking. The skills necessary to become information literate are analogous to those skills required of someone who employs critical thinking.

The "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," created by the Association of College and Research Libraries, define information literacy as the ability to:

1. determine the nature and extent of the information needed,
2. access needed information effectively and efficiently,
3. evaluate information and its sources critically,
4. use information effectively, and
5. understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information (e.g. copyright, plagiarism, fair use, intellectual property, author's rights).

Information Literacy Sample Assignments

These assignments draw upon elements of critical thinking. They are easily adapted to many subjects. Find more examples and detailed assignment outlines here: booth.eiu.edu/stjohn-il
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1. Outline a Research Paper. Students plan and perform research without actually writing a paper. Tasks include developing a research question, providing an annotated bibliography of sources and writing an introduction, thesis statement and conclusion. May be used as a stand-alone assignment or as preparation for a research project.

2. Compare Search Results Between a Free Search Engine and a Library Database. Helps students appreciate the differences between the information found on the "free" Web, available through search engines such as Google, and information found in subscription periodical databases, such as EBSCO's Academic Search Complete.

3. Critique Wikipedia. Requires students to provide in-depth criticism and analysis of a Wikipedia article. Students examine the bibliography of a Wikipedia entry to see how well it supports the entry itself, and then perform their own research to see if other sources either corroborate or dispute the claims made in the Wikipedia entry. This assignment addresses students' research and critical analysis skills.

4. Examine Bias. Raises awareness of media bias and employs database research skills. Students locate and cite one article from a conservative publication and another on the same topic from a liberal publication. Students compare, contrast and evaluate the two articles.

5. Evaluate Scholarly Research. Students find two journal articles on the same topic, and, in a short paper, compare, contrast and evaluate the two articles according to the quality of their research. This assignment helps sharpen students' skills of critical evaluation and helps them appreciate the importance of good research.

6. Write a Letter to the Editor. Teaches writing, critical thinking and research skills. Without doing any research, students write a letter in which they take a position on a contemporary issue. Students then share letters with their classmates, with whom they give and receive feedback on ways that the letter could be substantiated and improved. Students then develop a short research paper from the letter.

Guidelines for Creating Effective Assignments

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When designing an assignment, it is worthwhile to review these criteria to avoid common pitfalls and help ensure the usefulness of your assignment.

Do

- Communicate specific learning objectives (e.g. using Bloom's taxonomy).
- Try the assignment yourself to see where students might get hung-up.
- Take advantage of the library's research services (e.g. instruction, research consultations).
- Emphasize the research process and tools for conducting research in addition to the research topic itself.
- Teach database research strategies, like using key terms and synonyms, using subject-specific databases to find credible sources, evaluating credibility and citing references appropriately.
- Collaborate with your reference librarians to design assignments that best utilize the library's collections and services.

Don't

- The Mob Scene** -- Sending the entire class to look for the same information, book, or article: use a variety of resources, give students different assignments.
- The Shot in the Dark** -- Inadvertently giving incomplete or incorrect information.
- The Scavenger Hunt** -- Sending students to search for information without a defined set of possible sources.
- The Old Curiosity Shop** -- Assigning use of outdated reference sources: make sure your links are current and the library has recent editions.
- The Elusive Topic** -- Assuming students will be able to select a manageable topic without faculty or librarian assistance.
- Lost in Space** -- Sending students off to begin their research without demonstrating how to approach the assignment: provide some hands-on time to try the assignment when you are available for consultation.

Assessment: Have students learned what you set out to teach?

Accompanying each of the *Standards* listed on the front of this handout are performance indicators and outcomes to facilitate assessment of assignments. Align your assignment objectives with the *Standards*, available here: booth.eiu.edu/acrl-il

Booth librarians are available to help you in this process. Call 581-6072 or visit library.eiu.edu/requests.