SAMPLE RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS THAT BUILD STUDENTS’ INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS

The following are examples of library-based assignments that can be adapted and used within many discipline/subject fields. The assignments require students to explore, utilize and evaluate various library resources as well as Internet resources.

Assignments are grouped into two categories – novice and gateway skills. Novice level assignments address basic research skills and are appropriate for 1st and 2nd year students. The gateway level assignments address higher level research skills involving more discipline-specific and scholarly materials. These assignments are more appropriate for 2nd year through graduate level students.

NOVICE LEVEL ASSIGNMENTS

1. Opposing Viewpoints Debate
Select a course-related issue or topic for a classroom debate that offers the opportunity to defend or reject a particular position. Divide the class into two groups (pro or con) and have students gather evidence in support of their assigned position. Students will discuss their findings during an in-class debate.

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Identifies a research topic or information need
- Identifies and select appropriate tool for information need
- Formulates search terms relevant to research topic
- Uses a multi-disciplinary database to locate information
- Organizes gathered information to support position
- Evaluates information sources for their relevance to need, appropriateness/audience, authority, reliability, currency and point of view/bias

2. Poster Presentation
Working in groups of 3 or 4, students select a global issue and create a poster presentation to be presented to class. The poster should include a description of the issue, statistics, profile of countries affected, and citations for all sources.

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Defines a research topic or information need
- Formulates search terms relevant to research topic
- Selects appropriate tool to gather information (books, databases, Internet)
- Organizes gathered information to support position
- Evaluates information sources for their relevance to need, appropriateness/audience, authority, reliability, currency and point of view/bias
- Makes consistent and correct use of a citation style appropriate to the discipline

3. Citation Examination

Provide students with a list of citations from a variety of sources (e.g. books, articles, websites, government reports) with the elements out of their proper order. Have students correct and format the citations in the style appropriate for the class. Students should identify each component of the citation (author, journal title, article title...) for one of the examples. A follow-up quiz might be useful.

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Make consistent and correct use of a citation style appropriate to the discipline

MU Library resources supporting the project:

- Copies of citation manuals available at the reference desk
- MU Writing Center website 
  http://www.monmouth.edu/academics/css/writing/ResourcesForWriters.aspx
- The OWL at Purdue http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/
- Diana Hacker http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/

4. Website Critique

Ask students to compare a number of websites (.com, .gov, .edu, .org) addressing a similar topic or issue. Students should determine if material on the sites has been peer- or editorially reviewed; complete a comparison of the similarities and differences between the sites; and determine whether the accuracy of information presented on the website can be corroborated.

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Searches the internet for websites appropriate for the topic
- Evaluates information included different types of websites
GATEWAY LEVEL ASSIGNMENTS

1. A Letter to the Editor

Assign students to write letters to the editor of the local or regional newspaper on contemporary topics related to the course. In order to write the letter, students must research the issue thoroughly. This assignment demonstrates that research and the use of persuasive evidence is sometimes required for forms of expression other than college papers. It also gives students practice writing concisely and clearly for an audience other than the teacher.

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Identifies a research topic
- Utilizes appropriate information sources
- Evaluates search results to determine relevance to topic and identifies gaps in information needed
- Analyzes the logic and depth of coverage of arguments in the information gathered
- Recognizes various aspects of a source that may impact its value for assignment (e.g. bias and currency)
- Incorporates research effectively into the letter to support viewpoint

2. Political Candidate Campaign

Divide the class into several groups and assign each a candidate participating in an actual campaign. Students must research the candidate’s position on two major platform issues (e.g. healthcare, education, budget). Using a variety of sources to gather facts, students must write a speech, a position paper and prepare briefings for upcoming political debates.

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Identifies information need based on platform issue selected
- Formulates search strategies to gather information
- Utilizes appropriate specialized information sources, such as government documents and professional organizations
- Effectively cites sources of information
- Incorporates information effectively into support materials for the candidate

3. Scholarly vs. Popular Publications

Ask students to find newspaper articles from the New York Times or other major newspaper on a scientific discovery or social issue (LexisNexis database). You should give them some examples (e.g. stem cells, climate change, bullying). Ask students to find a study in a peer-reviewed scientific journal on the
same or a similar topic (ScienceDirect or discipline-specific database). Discuss the reasons for the newspaper coverage. What points does the article emphasize? Was this emphasis replicated in the scientific study? Have students discuss the implications or significance of popular vs. scholarly scientific publication in society.

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Identifies a research topic
- Recognizes differences between general and discipline-specific sources
- Formulate search terms relevant to research topic
- Distinguishes between general and discipline-specific sources

4. Primary vs. Secondary Sources

After a class discussion on the differences between primary and secondary sources, have students get an overview on a historical topic by consulting a subject encyclopedia. Then, have students find five primary sources about the event. Any type of material may be used but only once, (e.g. one newspaper headline of a major event, one quotation, one autobiography, one census figure, one top musical number, one speech, one letter, one interview, one official document). Write a short annotation of each source and include the complete bibliographic citation.

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Identifies a research topic
- Recognizes differences between primary and secondary sources
- Conducts subject search in primary sources
- Uses a variety of technologies to select and access information
- Requests/accesses sources beyond local resources (e.g., Interlibrary loan, special collections)
- Cites sources and compiles a bibliography according to a standard format

5. Research Trail

Have students prepare a one paragraph summary of a chapter in their textbook. Then have students select two footnotes or citations in the chapter and find/read/summarize the cited sources. This exercise provides students with a clearer grasp of how to trace a theme of interest through several sources (as well as gain more familiarity with scholarly literature about the course topic).

Skills addressed by assignment:

- Uses footnotes, bibliographies or citations to find materials
- Uses a variety of technologies to select and access resources
• Identifies similarities and differences among types of information sources (e.g. books, journals, newspapers, Internet, reference materials)
• Distinguishes between scholarly vs popular

6. Annotated Bibliography

Have students find a specified number (and type - books, articles, media, websites) of sources on a topic and write descriptive and/or evaluative annotations.

Skills addressed by assignment:

• Conduct subject searches using appropriate controlled vocabulary
• Recognize differences between general and discipline specific sources
• Evaluate resources for inclusion in the bibliography
• Make consistent and correct use of a citation style appropriate to the discipline

7. Scholarship Changes Over Time

Have students work in small groups to research a particular topic in the literature of the 1970s and 1980s. Research the same topic in the literature of the 1990s and 2000s. Have students discuss the evolution of the field based on this exercise.

Skills addressed by assignment:

• Identifies a research topic
• Utilizes appropriate information sources for current and historical data
• Identifies a source’s main idea and major points
• Distinguishes the differences in coverage of the topic based on date of publication
• Presents the research product effectively using the most appropriate medium for the intended audience (e.g. text, images, audiovisual)