

A truly effective research assignment has a specific, understood purpose that relates to some aspect of the course subject matter or learning objectives. It is structured and managed in such a way that leads the students to increased understanding of both the subject and also the actual process of locating information. To increase the effectiveness of your research assignments, keep these principles in mind.

FIRST, HELP YOUR STUDENTS DETERMINE THEIR INFORMATION NEEDS Many college students struggle with identifying an appropriate scope for their research and with matching their research strategies to the needs of their work or project. By spending time on determining their information needs, students can begin to see both when a focus is too broad or too narrow, and how to target their research efforts toward relevant information, rather than whatever appears first. As expert researchers, we often determine our needs without necessarily writing them down. Through our training, we make decisions and choices through an implicit process. By guiding students through this process—sharing what may be implied in a more explicit, transparent way— you can help them improve their own research process, gain insight into their thought process, and provide targeted feedback as needed. Students are eager to hear how experts do their work and sharing your methods can serve as a model for students to use as they develop their own expertise.

NEXT, FACILITATE YOUR STUDENTS' ABILITY TO LEARN FROM THE SOURCES THEY ARE USING Locating relevant sources is only one step of the research process, but for many students, it's the end goal. By shifting the focus away from sources as merely containers of information, the act of locating sources is reframed as one step in a process that changes constantly as more information is gathered and as you learn more about what you are writing. To the seasoned researcher, a source of information will provide details about the context in which the source was created, the process through which it was created, and whether the source is relevant to their work. In the eyes of students, however, most sources are created alike, and their relevance is determined only by whether or not they are academic or scholarly. Although the process of learning from sources will vary from person to person and from situation to situation, situating a source of information within a certain context and disciplinary practice can provide the student a lens through which they'll be able to see their own research. By focusing on learning from sources, rather than on just finding them, you can help encourage your students to think critically about which sources they are incorporating into their work and why those particular sources matter to their project.

FINALLY, ENCOURAGE STRONG RESEARCH HABITS When talking about locating sources for an assignment, students often remain task-oriented and focus on “finding” rather than on learning. Students may already know how to search for information but are unable to apply what they already know into a new context. In other words, students need guidance with framing research questions, seeing patterns in the literature, weighing the relevance of evidence, and identifying the gaps in their research. Similarly, assignments may sometimes fall into a similar trap. When we ask students to find a certain number of sources, we are signaling that what matters is the number of sources. Focusing on the process (learning from their sources, for example) rather than on the outputs or products will help shift the focus of the assignment and align it closer to the learning outcomes of a course or program. These three principles can be applied to your class assignments through small, incremental changes. For example, you can use phrases like “exploring resources” instead of “finding sources” to emphasize that research is iterative and not something that happens immediately before writing an essay. Small changes like that are easy to apply but can have a big impact on your students' information literacy development. To learn more, please visit lib.uncw.edu/assignments.