Improve Student Research

The following tips for instructors are designed to help students succeed in research assignments. The tips are based on the results of a summative report conducted by Project Information Literacy (PIL), a national research project that examines undergraduate research practices and assignment design.

- **Define Research**

  76% of students surveyed found it important to “find answers I can insert into my paper to prove I’ve done the research” when completing research projects. This means that many students see course-related research as being “answer-driven,” rather than an iterative process of investigation and inquiry (33).

- **Explain how the assignment will be evaluated**

  PIL found that even though many students consider themselves proficient at finding information, they felt hobbled by determine the nature and scope of a research assignment and what is required of them (36).

- **Scaffold the assignment into manageable parts**

  College students struggle with developing a research routine. Simply getting started—taking the first step—was the most difficult for more than 8 out of 10 survey respondents (28). Breaking a complex research assignment into smaller, more manageable parts gives the student the opportunity to focus on and master key research skills.

- **Discuss criteria for evaluating sources**

  Two-thirds of students interviewed considered evaluation a necessary winnowing process for scaffolding assignments and information they presented in their assignments. However, students find evaluation time-consuming and difficult. 49% of students sought their instructor’s help in evaluating sources for assignments (13).

- **Encourage students to consult with a librarian**

  70% of students reported rarely, if ever, seeking help from a librarian with course-related research (7). Yet students report frustration due to their inability to begin a research project (84%), find relevant sources (61%), and correctly citing sources (41%) (25). Librarians are experts in planning a research strategy, searching for and locating information, and correctly attributing sources. Notably,
students interviewed in PIL who had a full grasp of research as an iterative process had had a library instruction session or sought help from a librarian for course-related research (22).

- **Direct students to a variety of research sources**

  PIL found six out of 10 research assignment handouts recommend that students consult library shelves more than online library sources and the web, even though most students use these sources most often (40), meaning that today’s students’ systems for finding and using information are outside the academy. By promoting a variety of information sources instructors can acknowledge and engage with the contemporary information economy while introducing traditional knowledge production.

- **Outline plagiarism as well as the consequences**

  When completing course-related assignments, 35% of survey participants reported it was difficult to figure out if their use of a source constituted plagiarism. Even more reported difficulties knowing how to cite sources (41%) (26). Librarians can help clarify what honest work means at University of Chicago through instruction, which can include correctly citing sources and demonstrating citation management tools like Zotero and Endnote.

- **Collaborate with a librarian**

  An effective research assignment introduces students to new information sources while helping students develop and hone a research strategy. Librarians are experts at guiding students towards effect research processes to adapt as information landscapes change and grow. To learn more how a librarian can help develop and refine your research assignments, Contact the Library.

### Reference