
Research and Writing Assignments That Reduce Fear and Lead to Better Papers and More Confident Students

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Some assignments frighten certain students and will cause them to come to the reference desk before consulting any print or computerized library resources—before attempting any research on their own. Not only a lack of library skills but also the assignment itself often causes the fear.

For these students, the frightened ones, the library is a place of mystery. It's easy to pick them out. One of the clues is that they don't carry any books, or at most, just one notebook. The male of this type carries a few pieces of folded paper torn from a spiral notebook, and he has a pen either in his mouth or behind his ear. The female carries the notebook—it's brightly colored. She holds a pen like a talisman warding off what she perceives as the mysterious, and maybe even evil, books that surround her. Both types try to look relaxed. It strains their bravado.

Here's one now.

Act One:

(Disclaimer: This scenario, while true to life, is, of course, fiction. I chose marketing as an example because there has never been a problem with a marketing assignment.)

She's smiling as she passes the circulation desk. She's clicking the pen—a nice touch.

I think to myself, she's happy because she just got an invitation to visit a high school friend for the weekend.

"Hi, Jody!" she screams happily. "Goin' to Tom's tomorrow night? I'm wicked psyched!"

This is clearly avoidance, I think to myself. I can tell by the way she's looking around for someone else to talk to she doesn't like Jody, but she'll talk to her rather than face this assignment.

She affects a studied coolness as she passes the browsing stacks and stops again to talk to friends.

Yup. Avoidance. This conversation will put the assignment off for ten more minutes, but she's headed this way.

Ten final blissful minutes with her friends. It's like the last request of the condemned—a last meal, a final cigarette.

This'll be a bad one, I think—even worse than the guy with the backwards baseball cap, one of one hundred twenty "Intro" students who were all supposed to read an article in the same issue of a journal that, as it turns out, we don't subscribe to. But this is going to be a different kind of problem. I'll bet it's a big assignment, and I'll bet it's due tomorrow.

The moment arrives. This student approaches the reference desk, as a prisoner might approach the bench. The smile disappears. Her mouth opens wide as she noisily chews her gum. Her head drops slightly. Her shoulders sag. She won't look directly at me. She sighs and stares blankly at the catalog terminal on the desk.

Finally, she says, "I gotta write a paper for marketing."

"Oh," I begin, "for a marketing class?"

"Yeh."

"Could you tell me more about the assignment?"

"I just have to write a fifteen page paper for marketing."

"Do you have a copy of the assignment from your professor?"

"No. She didn't write it out."

"Do you have notes?"

"No. I didn't write anything down. She just said we have to write this twenty-five to thirty page paper for marketing...anything we want. It's half of our grade."

"Any aspect of marketing?"

“Yeh.”

“Well, maybe if you told me of some particular aspect of marketing that interests you, we could begin there?”

“Hmmm, I don’t know...just anything.”

“Do you have your syllabus for this course?”

“Not with me.”

“Do you know what the objective of this paper was?”

“Do I know *what...*?”

“Do you know what you were supposed to be learning by writing this paper?”

“No! I just have to—”

“Okay, okay, okay...”

The guy with the baseball cap is looking better all the time. I check to see if we have a syllabus from this course or a note from the professor about the assignment. Nope.

“Did your professor suggest what kind of sources might be appropriate for this assignment? Did she mention sources like the *Business Periodicals Index*, or *ABI Inform*? Does the *F&S Index* ring a bell?”

“No... I don’t remember.”

“Well, let’s start by looking up ‘Marketing’ in the *Business Periodicals Index*. We’ll start by finding something that looks interesting to you and go from there. Let’s see... Here it is ‘Marketing.’ Look, there are about fifty or sixty ‘see also’ references covering all kinds of things: ‘advertising, college student market, environmental marketing, marketing strategy, product life cycle, pyramid selling operations, women in marketing... marketing ethics...’ Anything sound good?”

“But can I get a forty page paper out of any of these?”

“Sure. Why don’t you take a few minutes and look? See if you can find something you’d like to know more about.”

Intermission:

This, of course, is the turning point. Will she remember the assignment? Will she find something to spark her interest? When it’s completed, will the assignment have taught her something about marketing as well as give her confidence in library skills? Will a by-product

of this assignment be a conviction that for the rest of her academic and professional career she can use libraries to learn about marketing, or any other subject, and add to her knowledge of the field? Or, will she learn that the library is a confusing and frustrating place, a place to avoid completely if possible? Rather than an interesting learning experience, will she look upon this assignment, this course, and the library as obstacles to be overcome on the way to a degree? Will this experience further alienate her from the learning experience? Years from now will she sometimes awaken from nightmares set in the library screaming “Marketing!”?

Well, it could go either way. Sometimes this story has a happy ending. More often, it does not. Let’s see how it turns out.

Act Two:

Fifteen minutes later she returns to the reference desk holding the latest volume of the *Business Periodicals Index*. I take a deep breath, and brace myself.

“I thought environmental marketing might be interesting—”

“That would be goo—”

“—so I turned to the section under environmental marketing and read some of the titles.”

“Do you think that topic might be a little too—”

“I can’t believe all the claims some of these companies are making! So I thought to myself, this has *got* to be unethical.”

“It might be a good idea to—”

“And then I found some references to articles about the ethics of environmental marketing. They look really good. I’ve decided to write my paper about the ethics of environmental marketing.”

It happens like this sometimes. A connection is made between an issue and an interest, a connection that can’t be forced. The blank look disappears. She looks me straight in the eye. The gum is still there, but at least the mouth is closed. This is the exciting part of the job, to see the birth of twin fledglings, confidence and enthusiasm.

With more interest I respond, “Well, that’s a good idea, but, you know, you might want to narr—”

“The ones that get me the most are the oil companies who talk about all the good they’re doing for the environment. I want to write about ethical issues involved in the marketing strategies of some of the major oil companies.

“Now I need to find these articles. What is this?” she asks, pointing in the index.

“It’s the journal’s volume number.”

“And this?”

“The page.”

“And what’s this?”

“That’s the title of the journal. Do you think you have enough references? If you need help finding those—”

“No thanks. I just needed to get started. I can do it. I’m gonna talk to my professor tomorrow about what I’ve found.”

Her smile returns.

Three weeks later she’s back. “Thanks a lot for your help. I got an ‘A’ on my marketing paper.”

She passes the reference desk quickly. “Hey, Jody! I had such a wicked good time last weekend!”

I like a happy ending, but, as I said, this is fiction. In fact, this scenario usually has an unhappy ending. Usually, such a vague assignment elicits fear, creates frustration, and fosters resentment.

Assignment Goals:

There are some simple practices that might help students overcome their initial fear of research assignments as well as lead them to more positive research experiences. Following these practices will result in better papers and better attitudes. The better papers will also result in happier faculty.

Let’s first consider the possible goals of research and writing assignments in conjunction with the positive outcomes they bring about. Obviously, these are written from a librarian’s point of view. I’m sure you could add more from the subject-content point of view.

Goal One: Teach students to use the basic resources for research in

the field such as indexes, specialized reference books, bibliographies, and catalogs.

Goal Two: Teach the library research process, and thereby develop students' confidence in their ability to add to their knowledge.

Goal Three: Acquaint students with the important journals and reference sources necessary to stay current.

Goal Four: Teach students to evaluate information critically and to make informed choices about what sources are important.

Goal Five: Teach students the appropriate writing and publication style for the discipline.

If these goals aren't spelled out in the assignment they aren't part of the assignment. The assumption that these goals will be natural by-products of a vague unwritten assignment which gives students no focus, such as "Write a paper about Marketing," is unrealistic. As is the assumption that they already know how to do research. If you ask students if they know how to use the library they will say they do, either because they're embarrassed by what they don't know and don't want to admit it, or because they can't imagine there is anything they need to add to their high school understanding of libraries. If you quiz them about it you'll find the truth. After all, what does a question like "Do you know how to use the library?" prove? If you ask students if they can ski, many would say yes. Would you want to be responsible for forcing them onto a chairlift to the top of the mountain without knowing for sure? They'll probably make it to the bottom, but what will they break on the way?

Fear-Inducing Assignments That Don't Work:

The assignments that don't work can be grouped in three categories: (1) assignments for which there are insufficient resources for the number of students who will want them, or which include impossible

time restraints, (2) scavenger hunts which aren't linked to specific information needs, and (3) vague assignments such as the one in the scenario beginning this article. Usually, these assignments can be adjusted slightly to make them possible, instructive, and maybe even enjoyable for the student.

An actual recurring nightmare, for both students and librarians, is this assignment typically given in "Intro" classes: "Find a journal that relates to this subject and summarize any article that relates to what we've been talking about in class. Only use journals from the past two months." From the library's point of view things were going well up until the time restriction. The indexes aren't useful in such a recent time frame; they are usually two months behind the publication of the articles. So, learning any library or research skills is not a possibility. Goals one, two, and three are not possible with this assignment.

In one actual case relating to this same type of assignment, the library subscribes to the six most important journals in the particular discipline. They're monthlies. This means that only twelve actual physical items will fit the requirement of the assignment, and one hundred and twenty students want them—the day before the assignment is due. When a student is lucky enough to find an appropriate journal, the useful articles have often been torn out by students who have not been taught the value or the considerable cost of journals, or who aren't aware that defacing library materials is a matter of academic dishonesty carrying serious consequences. Since students are usually unable to find even one of the relevant journals, comparing journals becomes impossible. In effect, goal four also becomes impossible, not to mention the damage to materials that will inconvenience other students and faculty.

If the assignment truly requires current articles, the journals should be put on reserve. The students can then invest their time in reading, writing, and comparing, rather than searching for the journals.

Of course, the same problem of limited resources applies to books. Giving an entire class exactly the same assignment leads to a great deal of frustration. The first few students check out the most useful sources. The others may want to do a good job on the assignment, they simply can't.

Scavenger hunts are also often assignments in futility. Every library

I've worked in has faced the problem of the scavenger hunt. For some reason the faculty members who use them are very enthusiastic about them. They mistakenly believe students will be forced to examine many different sources to find the answers, and in the process they will become enthusiastic about the quest for information.

Students don't see the value of answering a question such as: "How many pounds of butter does the average American consume in a year?" when there is no context for the information. It would be more useful to give the students a bibliography of statistical reference works, explain their use and value, and then ask questions these sources would address—questions that are, perhaps, related to a current classroom discussion. Students then know where to look, and they will look on their own rather than merely surrendering themselves to the reference librarian. They will also develop confidence in their own ability to find information. (By the way, according to the 1991 *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, per capita butter consumption in the U.S. was 4.3 pounds in 1989, down from 5.4 pounds in 1970.)

To show how librarians view scavenger hunts, let me tell you how one library I worked in addressed the problem: the first librarian to find a scavenger hunt assignment was required to make a copy, answer all the questions, and make the answers available at the reference desk.

The third category of assignments that don't work, the vague assignment, is the most prevalent. It doesn't need any more attention here except to add that it is probably the very prevalence of vague assignments that causes students to groan, aloud or to themselves, when they are asked to go to the library and "write a paper." Somehow the assignments are completed, but the price paid in the currency of frustration and resentment is high. It doesn't have to be that way.

Considerations for More Effective Research and Writing Assignments:

Fear is no longer touted as a technique of great pedagogical worth. Most of the faculty members I speak to want to impart not only a collection of facts, but also the desire and ability to learn about and

analyze a particular subject with some level of sophistication. They also hope their students will become enthusiastic about the subject. I think they are happy if students can achieve all this without too much difficulty. I believe, in most cases, the faculty are very successful. It is not, of course, the librarians' role to teach the subject, nor do librarians want to take on that role. Librarians want students to know that information is available and accessible; that they can develop skill, confidence, and competence in locating information; and that a librarian is willing to help them throughout the process.

Our campus is not rife with terrible assignments. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Truly innovative and entertaining assignments surface frequently. However, if you feel some assignments aren't working, or might be scaring your students, then perhaps the ideas presented here might be worth trying. A faculty and librarian partnership would benefit students and would go a long way toward achieving the goals of both faculty and librarians. These assignment considerations are the foundation of that partnership:

Consideration One: Check to see that the library has a sufficient quantity of relevant resources so all students can accomplish the assignment.

Consideration Two: Place items on reserve if the library doesn't have sufficient resources for the potential demand.

Consideration Three: Discuss the assignment with a librarian so that we can steer students in the direction you want them to go while they are working on your assignment.

Consideration Four: Ask a librarian to speak to your class, if you think this would be helpful, about how to find the materials needed to complete the assignment. With enough lead time we can prepare an appropriate bibliography.

Consideration Five: Send a written copy of the assignment to the

library reference desk. A copy of your syllabus will also help us introduce students to sources that might be informative in other areas of the course.

Consideration Six: Notify the library about problems and successes after the assignment has been completed. The next time the assignment is given we can try to come closer to achieving your goals.

If students understand the assignment, they can almost always ask intelligent and relevant questions to get themselves started. If they don't, they're lost before they begin; if this is the case, the librarians won't be able to help them find their way. Clear possible assignments with written instructions and definite goals will help alleviate student fear and encourage student success and satisfaction with the learning process.

I'm still hoping to hear, "Hey, Jody! I had such a wicked good time doing my marketing paper here in the library last weekend!" It could happen.