Some Alternatives to the Traditional Research Paper

All but the Paper Research Paper

- Assignment: Conduct the research for a term paper. Do everything except write it. At various points, students may submit:
  - Topic with several good questions to explore
  - Annotated bibliography of useful sources which explore those questions
  - Outline of paper
  - Thesis statement
  - Opening paragraph and summary
- Objective: Focuses on the process of research and topic exploration without being distracted with research paper mechanics

Research Log

- Assignment: While doing research on a topic, students keep a record of their actions: methodology, resources consulted (books, databases, Web searches), keywords or subject headings searched, noting both successes and failures.
- Objective: Encourages reflection on searching decisions and promotes persistence and intentionality in searching.

Review Update

- Assignment: Using a non-current review article, update the topic with current sources
- Objective: Introduces students to the purpose review articles (meta-analysis, literature review, systematic review) in their discipline and primary sources. Demonstrates the evolution of a particular topic and the scholarly communication surrounding it. Also requires students to analyze, synthesize, and integrate the ideas they find.

Track a “Classic” Paper through a Citation Index

- Assignment: Choose a classic article by well-respected scholar and follow its trail into future publications. Trace the paper through Google Scholar back through the article’s references and forward in time to the works, which cite the article.
- Objective: Teaches the mechanics of using a citation index and introduces students to the web of scholarly communication. Shows how ideas are introduced, distributed, integrated, refined, and developed over time.

Trace a Scholar’s Career

- Assignment: Explore a scholar/researcher’s career and ideas by locating biographical information, preparing a bibliography of his/her writings, analyzing the reaction of the scholarly community to the researcher’s work, and examining the scholarly network in which s/he works.
- Objective: Introduces students to the use of biographical and bibliographical tools, and exposes them to examples of scholarly dialogue.
Identify a Discipline’s Journals

- Assignment: How many journals are published in a given field? Identify journals “core” to the discipline. Analyze their subject focus, tone, audience, and impact.
- Objective: Encourages intellectual exploration, widens the range of possible resources, and demonstrates the importance of journal literature within certain disciplines. Students differentiate between similar journals.

Understand Primary Sources

- Assignment: Compare primary and secondary sources on the same topic. Have the students find a study in a popular or trade publication and then have them find the actual study. How well did the information transfer between sources? What was left out? How well did the popular/trade publication writer capture the essence of the primary source?
- Objective: Students differentiate between primary and secondary sources in a discipline. Shows when and why to use each.

Read the References

- Assignment: Acquire and read the articles cited in a research paper. Explain how each is related to the paper. In what circumstances is it appropriate to cite other papers? What different purposes do the citations serve?
- Objective: Shows when it is appropriate to recognize the contributions of previous authors in the development of new work.

Simulations of Real-Life Projects

- Assignment: Prepare a grant or research proposal, marketing or business plan, or solution to a tax, accounting or financial problem. State the specific problem to be solved or task to be accomplished. Provide background on the problem. How have these issues been dealt with in the past? What is the current thinking on this issue? How do you propose to solve the problem or what are the questions you need to ask to solve the problem? What support can you offer for your solution?
- Objective: Simulates for students how they will apply their information skills in the context of problems they will encounter in their discipline or career.

How Scholarship is Reported in the News

- Assignment: Pair a popular news article on a research study with the research study itself. Have students compare how the information is presented differently depending on the audience and decide whether the news articles accurately presented the research. Bonus: Give students a popular news article and have them track down the scholarly one.
- Objective: Illustrates how research studies can be summarized and presented to different audiences as well as introduces the information lifecycle.
Information Lifecycle of a Topic

- Assignment: Create a physical timeline of when an event happens through the publication cycle of when information is published and what types of sources are published.
- Objective: Students will conceptualize the information cycle as evolving and will evaluate the relationship between source type and use.

Other ideas

- Annotate an article for a novice reader.
- Write or create a piece of music, art, or creative writing in a particular style or genre
- Create an anthology of readings complete with an introduction and reading summaries
- Create an infographic using researched statistics to highlight an issue
- Write a letter to the editor on a particular issue
- Edit a Wikipedia page on a topic related to the course

Some items adapted from http://lib.uconn.edu/teach-learn/instruction/alternatives-to-research-papers/ with permission.