Connecting Students with the Library using Assignment/Project Design

Connecting students to library resources through course-based assignments is critical for helping them understand the research process and develop best practices in information-seeking and the evaluation of resources. Library instruction services are broadly focused on helping learners develop information literacy skills, which the Association of College and Research Libraries defines as:

> "The set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning."

The Library is here to help as you prepare to teach, design new courses, and explore diverse ways of engaging students in the research process. To support your teaching, we offer:

Course-integrated Information Literacy
- Library instruction sessions at your request that are tailored to subject content and/or specific assignments, which often include a hands-on research lab.
- Research assignment/project consultations to help you design or revise assignments that connect students with library resources and services.

Visual & Media Literacies
- Support for media projects like videos, podcasts, posters, large-format printing, and 3D printing from the Digital Design Studio (DDS).

Data Literacy
- Support for assignments that involve finding, analyzing, or visualizing data, in partnership with the Tufts Data Lab.
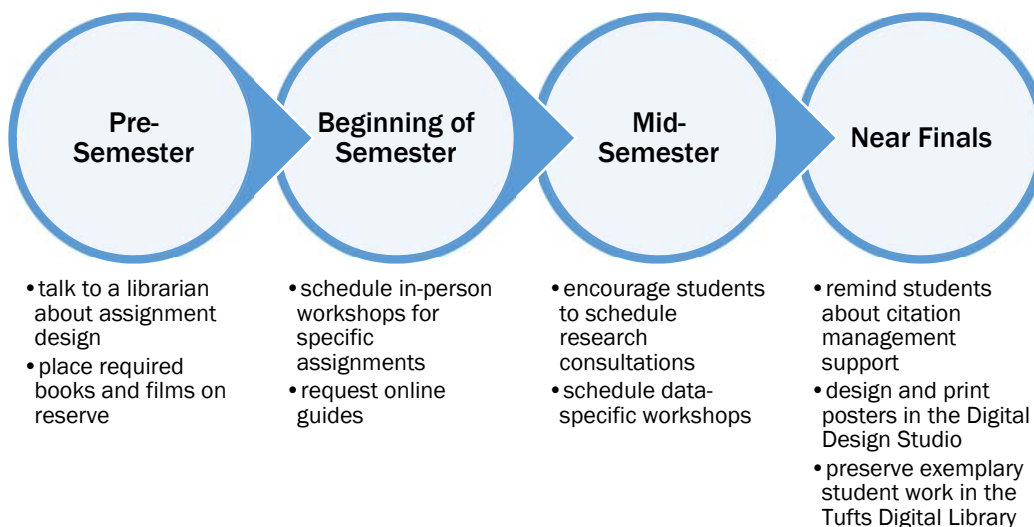
Primary Source Literacy
- Support for assignments that involve finding and contextualizing primary source material, in partnership with Tisch Special Collections and Tufts Digital Collections & Archives.

Point-of-need Student Support
- Online course guides accessible via Canvas for students to efficiently access the best resources for a course or assignment.
- Research consultations beyond the classroom where individuals and project teams meet with subject experts to refine topics, find resources, and develop proposals

An Ideal Timeline

Pre-Semester
- talk to a librarian about assignment design
- place required books and films on reserve

Beginning of Semester
- schedule in-person workshops for specific assignments
- request online guides

Mid-Semester
- encourage students to schedule research consultations
- schedule data-specific workshops

Near Finals
- remind students about citation management support
- design and print posters in the Digital Design Studio
- preserve exemplary student work in the Tufts Digital Library

Designing Effective Research Assignments

Collegiate writing is very different from the types of writing students do in high school, and writing a research paper can be very intimidating, particularly for first- and second-year students. Librarians support students in non-evaluative ways at all levels, across all disciplines, primarily around research. This means that we have seen a wide range of research paper assignments. Here are suggestions for helping ensure that your research assignment provides your students with scaffolding for success:

Communicate your expectations

- While you want your students to be engaged with their research, choosing a topic they are interested in can be daunting, especially for first- and second-year students. Providing guidance around topic selection by asking for proposals, requiring check-in meetings before students get too far along in their research, or providing lists of sample topics can help students balance their interests with your expectations. For upper-level students, making clear connections between how the paper should dovetail with/expand upon what has been covered in class can help them select a relevant, scalable topic.
- We often receive questions about how many sources are appropriate for a research paper, or which sources are "okay to use" and which aren't. While your upper-level students should have a better sense of how many sources they need for a set number of written pages, your first- and second-year students may need more explicit instructions. Are YouTube videos, tweets, and newspaper articles okay?
- Since many scholarly sources are available online, it can be confusing for students when "internet" or "web" sources are forbidden. It's helpful to describe why certain sources (such as Wikipedia) may not be allowed.
- What is the goal of using research in the assignment? Is it to form the basis of an original argument? A literature review? A persuasive essay?
- Which citation style should your students use? If Chicago, would you prefer notes/bibliography or author/date?

Design and test your assignment

Effective research assignments target specific skills such as, for example, the ability to trace a scholarly argument through the literature or the ability to organize consulted resources into a bibliography.

- Test the assignment yourself. Can you find the types of sources required? Are you required to evaluate the sources you find?
- Ask students for feedback on the assignment. Are they having difficulty finding relevant materials? Do they understand your expectations?
- If the assignment is particularly demanding, consider dividing a single research project into multiple assignments (outline, draft, final draft), each one focusing on a different aspect of the research process.
- Make sure the resources and software required by the assignment are available to your students in the library or in library databases. Contact your subject librarian for assistance.

Ideas for alternative research assignments

- Assign an annotated bibliography in which students identify primary and secondary sources, popular and scholarly publications, and detect and comment on forms of bias.
- Ask for students to document the search tools they use (library catalog, article databases, Google, etc.) for a research paper and to reflect on the kinds of information they find in each.
- Assign students to analyze and update a Wikipedia article on a given topic.
- Have students find, analyze and visualize datasets like the Census.