

Alternative Research Assignments

<http://infodome.sdsu.edu/about/depts/instruction/altresch.shtml>

Research papers are a common reason for students to use the library and research tools. However, alternative assignments will also encourage students to utilize knowledge-based resources, think critically, and acquire research knowledge. Feel free to discuss any assignment with a librarian before adapting it to your discipline and course. You may find the following list helpful:

1. Examine the treatment of a controversial issue in several sources. For example, a newspaper editorial, scholarly journal, periodicals from different disciplines, or association websites.
2. Locate a topic in an online news website, database or newspaper index. The topic can be current or controversial or on a specific event. Then, search a periodical database and identify two scholarly journal articles on that topic in roughly the same time period as the news to read and compare.
3. Search for a recent scholarly article on a given topic. Compare the article content to that of a textbook.
4. What does "the literature" of a particular discipline look like? What comprises it? Investigate the production and dissemination of information in a given discipline. How and by whom is the knowledge produced? How and in which media or format is it presented or communicated? What is the publishing cycle? How important is informal communication in the field? How important is grey literature? How do people keep abreast of new information in this field?
5. Identify an article on a given topic using a periodical database. Read the article and write an abstract of it. Compare it to the published/provided abstract.
6. Create an annotated bibliography (descriptive or evaluative) of a specified number of sources.
7. Update and annotate a bibliography from a chapter of a book that is 10-50 years old individually or in small groups. Perhaps identify new terms or subjects which appear connected with the topic.
8. Working in groups or alone, prepare a print or web-based guide to introduces others to the various information sources in a discipline or on a specific topic.
9. Find out more about the people and issues involved in a significant event or a classic publication in a given discipline.
10. Locate two articles in a periodical database presenting differing viewpoints, such as scholarly vs. popular or conservative vs. liberal.
11. Analyze the content, tone, style and audience of three journals and/or websites central to your discipline. Examine the instructions for authors for each journal. [Instructions for authors are frequently available on the Web.]
12. Compare how a topic is treated in several various print and electronic reference sources. Note any apparent standards in layout of the various sources, including textbook chapters, research articles, newspaper articles, news releases, factsheets, handbooks, and/or government reports.

13. Working through the research cycle for a term paper, do everything except write it. At various stages, submit the following: * clearly defined topic * annotated bibliography of useful sources * outline of paper * thesis statement * opening paragraph and summary
14. Research a topic and present it as a poster or webpage.
15. Maintain a research log by recording the methodology, sources consulted, and keywords or subject headings searched. Note both successes and failures. How did the results affect their thinking on the topic? [Forms may assist students understand how to structure their approach.]
16. Provide a precise statement of the search topic and an outline of the search logic to search the Internet. Run the search on two or three different search engines. Compare the results.
17. Provide a precise statement of a search topic, a list of keywords and synonyms and comparable thesaurus terms as appropriate, and an outline of search logic to search a periodicals database. Justify the choice of database. Perform the search. Analyze the results, revise search strategy and perform the more effective search.
18. Compare Internet search engine and periodical database searches using identical search statements. Print or email the initial search results and compare the findings. Revise and appropriately search each source again. Compare the final results.
19. Read and update an older review article.
20. Using book reviews, biographical information, and citation indexes, explore how and why a work becomes a "classic." What effect can a classical work have on a discipline?
21. Trace an important paper through a citation index such as Science Citation Index. What does it mean to be "cited"? How important is it that a scholar be cited?
22. Explore a scholar or researcher's career and ideas by locating biographical information, preparing a bibliography of writings, and analyzing the reaction of the scholarly community to the researcher's work.
23. Compare primary and secondary sources on the same topic. When are either used in a given discipline?
24. Identify and examine the assumptions implicit in an article. Identify the author's thesis and outline the theoretical framework used to account for the results. [Specific questions may assist the students in focusing on various aspects of the article.]
25. Examine the experimental design, data, and interpretation of the data in a research paper for adequacy and consistency. [Again, selected questions may assist students to focus on specific aspects.]
26. Read several articles which appear to address the same question but reach different conclusions. Account for the differences by examining methodology, experimental design, and the interpretation of results.
27. Working in groups or alone, examine a small number of items such as books, articles, or websites. Establish indicators of quality, where these indicators are found, and the appropriate use for each item. Report findings to the class.

28. Review a book or film. Discuss the author's credentials. Compare the book or film to similar works in the field. Evaluate the film to its source book or play.
29. Read selected articles from various sources and indicate who's voice is being represented in a particular passage or argument. Is it the author who is a reporter or researcher? Or is it a geography professor at SDSU, a pediatrician, the CEO of Home Depot, or a politician?
30. Read the articles cited in a research paper. Explain how each is related to the paper. When is it appropriate to cite other papers? What different purposes do the citations serve?
31. Compare the reference lists of two published articles on the same topic. Evaluate the choice of materials cited by the authors. What clues do the citations indicate about the article?
32. Critique an article. Locate two webpages supporting your response to the topic. Cite the URLs in an appropriate format and highlight the points indicating this support.
33. Examine the format of various abstracts. Note that some abstracts do not reflect the article title or content. Write an abstract for a published paper. Compare your abstract to that provided at the beginning of the article and/or in a periodical database.
34. Find and evaluate a website. Cite the website in a specific citation format and write a brief evaluation (2-3 paragraphs). Note reasons why these pages are, or are not appropriate for university level student research or for in-class use. Due to the evolving nature of the WWW, attach a printout of the first page of the website.
35. Examine an original work from Special Collections and contrast it to current works in a given discipline. If you have additional suggestions for this list, please send them to the individual listed below.