10 WAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENT RESEARCH
The following tips for faculty to help students successfully complete research assignments are based on the results of studies conducted by Project Information Literacy (PIL), an ongoing national research project that examines undergraduate student research practices.

PIL’s methodologies have included a survey of over 8,000 students from 25 U.S. college campuses, including Temple; a content analysis of 191 course-related research assignment handouts from 28 campuses; and student discussion groups at 7 campuses.

For more information visit projectinfolit.org.

About Research and Instructional Services

The Research and Instructional Services Department at Temple University Libraries provides in-depth research consultations, quick reference services virtually and in-person, and classroom instruction. Our librarians guide beginning students through finding, evaluating, and citing information. We also partner with faculty and graduate students to delve deeply into the literature of their fields and help them locate the resources required for advanced research. Our librarians also support teaching-developing online resource guides for specific courses and subjects, leading sessions on library research and resources, and working with instructors to incorporate information literacy outcomes into their course design. Temple learners and researchers can ask questions via chat, text, and in-person through our Ask a Librarian service. We also host special workshops and programs for undergraduates, graduate and professional students, and faculty throughout the year.

Contact

215-204-8212
asktulibrary@temple.edu
http://library.temple.edu/asktulibraries

Cover photograph by Ryan Brandenberg for Temple University
ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO CONSULT WITH A LIBRARIAN.

PIL’s content analysis of research assignment handouts found that only 13% recommended consulting with a librarian. In a PIL survey, 80% of students reported rarely, if ever, seeking help from a librarian with course-related research. Yet 63% of students report frustration due to their inability to find resources. Librarians are experts in planning a research strategy, searching for and locating information, and easing frustration with research. Be sure to recommend that students consult a librarian for assistance with their research. Even better, provide them with contact information for reference services and/or a subject specialist.
2. **DIRECT** STUDENTS TOWARDS A VARIETY OF LIBRARY RESOURCES INCLUDING PRINT, ELECTRONIC, AND MULTIMEDIA.

60% of handouts recommended students access materials on the library shelves. However, today’s college students are more Web-focused and an increasing percentage of library materials are available digitally. Direct students towards library resources in a variety of formats and suggest using Summon to discover them.
3. **SUGGEST** SPECIFIC DATABASES OR OTHER LIBRARY RESOURCES BY NAME TO STUDENTS.

Of the handouts that recommended using online library resources, only a minimal number (14%) mentioned specific databases by vendor or name. Temple Libraries have over 650 research databases for all disciplines that can help direct student research, so suggest a few by name to your students.
4. **Discuss** what constitutes plagiarism as well as the consequences.

Only 18% of handouts mentioned plagiarism, focusing primarily on disciplinary actions. Based on faculty interviews, undergraduate students have trouble understanding what plagiarism is. Take time to define plagiarism for your students, show them how to correctly paraphrase and attribute words and ideas, and refer them to Temple Libraries’ research guide on Citing Sources and Temple University Writing Center’s handouts on plagiarism and using sources effectively.
Only 25% of handouts discussed how to evaluate the authority of sources and 49% of students sought their instructor’s help in evaluating sources for research assignments. Review criteria for evaluating sources (e.g. reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and point of view or bias) in the context of your discipline or assignment, so that students learn how and why to select quality sources.
Define Research.

While a majority of the handouts discussed the mechanics of the assignment (e.g. page length, margins etc.), only “16% of the handouts discussed, clarified, defined, or framed what research meant as it applied to the assignments.” Interviewed faculty members stated that undergraduates have little knowledge about the research process. Defining research as it applies to the assignment or discipline gives students the situational context that they lack and that they need. Additionally, 63% of students found in-class discussions about how to conduct research helpful.
7. **Embed** A RESEARCH GUIDE IN BLACKBOARD OR REQUEST ONE FROM YOUR LIBRARIAN.

Interviewed faculty stated that online guides “have the potential to engage students in the research process and allow students to browse as they would in the library.” Check out our research guides and embed one in Blackboard or request a custom guide from your librarian.
8. **BREAK** THE RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT INTO MANAGEABLE PARTS.

College students find many steps of the research process difficult. Getting started is problematic for 84%, defining a topic is troublesome for 66%, and narrowing down a topic is challenging for 62% of students surveyed. So break your research assignment into manageable parts for students (also known as “scaffolding”). Require that students turn in a topic proposal, an annotated bibliography, or a draft along the way to the final product. Students reported that separate deadlines for parts of a paper are helpful (61%), as are instructors’ review of paper drafts (71%).
9. **EXPLAIN** HOW RESEARCH WILL BE EVALUATED.

In an earlier PIL study, 12 of 13 students reported frustration determining their professors’ expectations for a research assignment. Be specific and open about how your research assignments will be evaluated. Provide students with grading rubrics and weight the assignment(s) according to importance of the desired outcome.
10. **COLLABORATE** WITH A LIBRARIAN TO DESIGN A RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT THAT EMPLOY CRITICAL THINKING.

About 50% of faculty interviewed discussed their reliance on librarians. “Faculty turned to librarians for teaching students about finding information and planning a research strategy, especially choosing and using appropriate databases, and for creating custom resources, such as pathfinders [online guides], for their course.” Librarians can also help you design an assignment that will develop your students’ critical thinking and research skills.