

# Designing Effective Research Assignments: The Library Can Help!

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## We've all been there— At the reference desk, trying to help a student cope with a poorly designed research assignment

Motivated by a series of problematic assignments that we encountered while helping students, we created a set of Research Assignment Guidelines for faculty.

We came up with three main suggestions to help faculty design effective, doable research assignments:

### 1. Test the Assignment

Before assigning a research topic to the class, faculty should try the assignment themselves!

- **Example:** The class is required to find detailed financial information for X company. If the professor tested the assignment first, they might discover that X is a privately held company with little available financial info.
- **Additionally:** If a student proposes their own topic for research, the professor should do a quick database search before approving the topic, enlisting the help of a librarian if needed.

### 2. Build in Effective Instructions

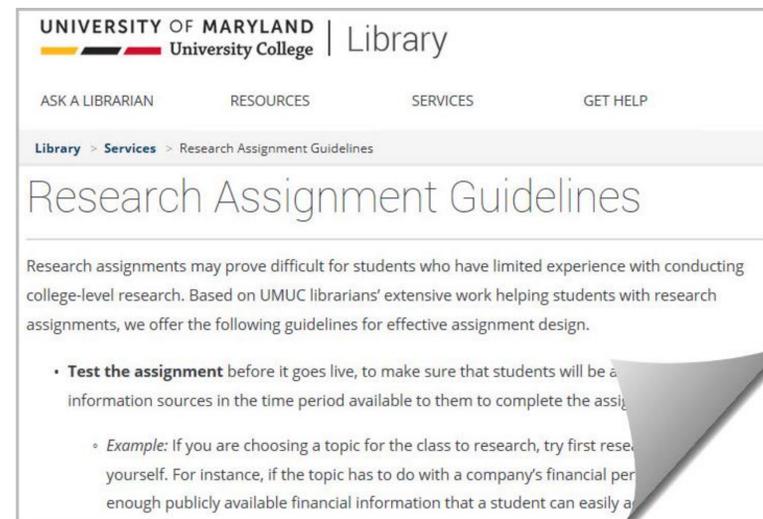
Faculty should consult with a librarian to add useful instructions to the assignment, including:

- links to relevant databases and other resources
- suggested keyword searches
- definitions of unfamiliar terms (e.g., *peer-reviewed*, *primary source*)

### 3. Require the Use of Appropriate Sources

There's life beyond peer-reviewed journal articles! Faculty should consider the assignment topic (and the class's level of research experience). For many assignments, students should be encouraged to use websites, trade journals, and other "non-academic" sources — not just peer-reviewed articles.

## Our Guidelines live on our library's "For Faculty" webpage. See the full document at <https://bit.ly/2Cyg71c>



## Other tips in our guidelines

Besides the three main suggestions at left, our guidelines also contain general advice.

Faculty should:

- encourage students to ask questions
  - tell students it's not a sign of weakness to seek help — in fact, it's a sign of an effective learner
- solicit feedback about the assignment
  - adjust the assignment to remove unproductive hurdles that students identify

Our guidelines don't include many general pedagogical considerations, such as the use of rubrics. We wanted to focus primarily on helping faculty design the research portion of an assignment, since that's the area in which we're the most qualified to be of assistance.

## Writing your own guidelines will benefit you!

- It will clarify your thinking about what makes a good research assignment.
- You will have a document that you can share with university stakeholders, proving your expertise in assignment design.
- A set of guidelines will serve as a checklist when you are asked to consult on the design of an assignment.

## How to deal with a bad assignment

- **At the reference desk, be honest (but diplomatic) with students. Tell them that this is a particularly challenging assignment and there's no perfect way to accomplish the research. Offer strategies that will help as much as possible.**
- **Communicate with reference staff colleagues so that everyone is aware of the problematic assignment.**
- **Create a LibGuide or FAQ, if only for internal use among reference staff, containing tips for dealing with the assignment.**
- **If possible, approach the professor who created the assignment. Offer some facts: "X number of students have come to the reference desk seeking help. They are having trouble with these parts of the assignment . . ."**
  - Offer to help the professor adjust the assignment from an information literacy perspective, including building research instructions into the assignment.

## Additional sources

We consulted these excellent guides when designing our own:

- Seneca Libraries  
<https://seneca.libguides.com/c.php?g=20903&p=119983>
- Carnegie Mellon University Eberly Center  
<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html>
- Gettysburg College Musselman Library  
<http://www.gettysburg.edu/library/service/faculty/integration>