

# Term Paper Alternatives

The research paper is one method for students to practice finding, accessing, evaluating and using information. Below are ideas for other assignments that focus on information literacies. These activities may require some instruction or explanation of resource tools, processes and skills.

## **Annotated Letters/Diaries**

Have students examine letters or diaries written by a figure discussed in class. From these texts, students will generate questions and prepare an annotated version of the text that answers or provides speculation on aspects of the text that are unclear. This could be a group project, with a set of letters or diary entries distributed among the class.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

Create an annotated bibliography about a particular subject or by a particular writer. Include a range of sources.

## **Annotated Bibliography, Justified**

Compile 10 sources for a bibliography. Students choose the best, and justify their choices or explain selection criteria. Information resources may be confined to type of source (books, websites, etc.) or be comprehensive.

## **Anthology**

Compile an anthology of readings for a unit of study or with some theme. Select parameters, such as scholarly articles written within the past 10 years, or including book chapters and historical material. Include an introduction with biographical information about the author(s), or critical evaluation, and the rationale for including the works (justify with reviews or critical materials). The assignment could also require a bibliography of items considered for inclusion, as well as copies of items selected.

## **Art Interpretation**

Have the class examine a painting or other graphic image from a time period you are dealing with or which touches on a theme you are discussing in class. Brainstorm questions and theories about the image, then list information sources that might help address those questions. Have groups take a cluster of questions to the library for information-gathering and then pool interpretations.

## **Autobiography & Secondary Sources**

Choose an autobiography of someone related to the course content. Find secondary sources that deal with an idea or event described in the autobiography. Compare and contrast the sources.

## **Bibliography Update**

Update an existing bibliography or review of the literature.

## **Biography**

Select a scholar/researcher in a field of study and explore that person's career and ideas. Besides locating biographical information, students prepare a bibliography of writings and analyze the reaction of the public or scholarly community to the work.

## **Browse the Shelves First**

Journals: Browse the journal shelves (or specific journals) and copy an article relevant to a given topic. Compare this to searching the databases for articles on that topic. Reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches.

Books: Browse the bookshelves and retrieve a particular item. Compare this to searching the catalog for books. Reflect on the advantages and disadvantages.

### **Career Choice**

Describe a career that you envision yourself in and then research the career choice. What are the leading companies in that area? Why? Choose a company and find out its employment policies in regards to flextime, family leave, stock options etc. If the company is traded publicly, what is its net worth? What is the outlook for this occupation? Expected starting salary?

### **Case Study**

Present a real-life discipline-based problem that students must research and remedy. Students design a research project, gather the relevant data, and present the results in a form appropriate for the "client." This assignment may lend itself to group projects.

### **Contradict Your Perspective**

Working in pairs or small groups, take for and against positions on an issue - based on a specific article or resource. Find information sources that disagree or contradict your point of view. Bring this back to the wider group for further discussion.

### **Contrasting Views**

Contrast two journal articles or editorials from recent publications reflecting conservative and liberal tendencies. It might be interesting to carry out this exercise again using publications from the late 1960s.

### **Controversy Coverage**

Examine the treatment of a controversial issue in several sources (newspaper editorial, scholarly journal, journals from different disciplines, etc.), or among different titles of one source type.

### **Convert a Newspaper Article**

Ask students to locate a newspaper article or editorial of interest. Their next task is to convert that newspaper article into a scholarly piece - using other information sources (and writing style). Or vice-versa.

Or, after a discussion of standard statistical sources in your discipline, have students read an editorial you have selected, and find facts and statistics to support it. Examine the source of the statistics using criteria to ascertain its credibility.

### **Cutting Edge Issues**

Have the class generate a list of cutting edge issues in a field by having them survey the current literature and identify topic areas that are especially under debate.

### **Database Analysis**

Select one or more bibliographic databases (e.g. library catalog, journal database) and critically analyze them in relation to the bibliographic record (e.g. record structure, the depth of descriptions, etc.), access points (the searchable fields), and other elements of the user interface (e.g. layout and design, help screens, etc). Include details of literature or searches conducted to help you find information related to this assignment. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your work.

### **Database Search**

Students will provide a precise statement of the search topic, a list of keywords or thesaurus terms (as appropriate), and an outline of search logic. Justify the choice of databases. Carry out the search. Present some representation of the search results and analyze the findings.

### **Databases/Web**

Students conduct a search on a topic on both the web and in an article database. Discuss the results of their search in terms of what kinds of sources they found and the likely quality of those sources. (It would be interesting to do two topics-one that yields poor results on the web and another that provides useful sources.)

### **Different Accounts of Same Event**

Locate and compare different accounts of the same event in the current news, in past sources or international sources.

### **Double Entry Journal**

Keep a journal throughout the term that shows how and what information you collected for an assignment or project. In a parallel column to this information, include reflective comments about your experience of gathering and using information.

### **Discipline Literature**

Students will browse the library stacks shelving the books in the discipline. They will consult a volume of a relevant specialized encyclopedia and its index. They also examine the contents of several journals in the discipline. Students write an essay in response to these questions: What is (discipline)? i.e., define the discipline. How would you use these information sources in other courses, especially in other disciplines? From this exercise, what have students learned about the scope of the discipline?

### **Discipline Tour**

Students will develop a regional 5 day tour based on a course-relevant theme (e.g. authors of the Lake District, Georgia's Cherokee history sites), providing background readings, literature, photos and other information to create a brochure or a guide's script.

### **Encyclopedia Entry**

Analyze encyclopedia articles on a course topic from a general encyclopedia, a subject specific encyclopedia, and Wikipedia. The class will create a checklist of information items included in an encyclopedia article. Using textbook, notes and other assigned readings, students will devise a brief encyclopedia entry on another topic. OR....consider editing a current Wikipedia article, or writing an article for Wikipedia.

### **Evaluation of Own Work**

Using evaluation criteria for information resources, apply this to a recent class writing assignment (either yours or a peer's). Assess this assignment, based on the evaluation criteria.

### **Evaluation of Source**

Use small groups to explore a resource (e.g. database, subject encyclopedia). Give a presentation to the wider group on its use, and advantages / disadvantages.

### **Gather & Sort**

Students generate as comprehensive a list of books and/or articles about a topic as possible in a class period. Students spend the next class period "weeding" the selections, discussing signs of quality from a disciplinary perspective. Have each student use those qualities to select one worthwhile article and write an annotation; compile the annotations for the class.

### **Interview**

Students research a key historical figure and create an "interview" with that person, demonstrating a

grasp of the contexts of the time and place in which that person lived. Grading rubric will include credit for name-dropping.

### **Journal Analysis**

Analyze the characteristics (e.g. content, style and audience) of three disciplinary journals (popular, trade and scholarly) identified by the professor. This helps to clarify the differences between popular, trade and scholarly journals.

### **Keyword Dictionary**

Have the class generate a list of "key words" which are important concepts for the course. Have them locate uses of these key words in a variety of contexts and/or disciplines and write an analysis of the words' multiple meanings.

### **Keywords**

Explore the differences between everyday English, discipline terminology, and library jargon when searching for information. From a list of everyday terms (on a topic), develop a concept map/search strategy for each term (identifying broader, narrower and related terms), appropriate for searching on the catalog/journal databases/www. Use these terms in these sources, and comment on the success of each term.

### **Keyword Multiplication**

From a thesis statement provided by student or professor, students will select the keywords for initiating a literature search. Students will find and copy a general or specialized encyclopedia article, highlighting additional keywords, places and names that may aid in their search. After performing a database search, add more terms to the list found in assigned subject headings and abstracts (attach copies of helpful database records). This sequence can be used to initiate a research paper.

### **Legislation Progression**

Follow a piece of legislation through Congress. Use the exercise to help understand the process of government, or following the politics of a critical issue.

### **Letter to Government**

Write a letter to the Commissioner of \_\_\_, protesting the lack of \_\_\_ in your region/state. Give economic and social arguments; emphasize statistical sources and evidence in government reports.

### **Literature of the Discipline**

What does "the literature" of a discipline look like? What comprises it? Investigate the production and dissemination of information in a given discipline. How is the knowledge produced? By whom? In which media is it presented or communicated? What is the publishing cycle? How important is informal communication in the field?

### **News Report**

Follow a current news topic and write a background paper. Keep up with current literature and submit periodic updates. Finish with a final report summarizing changes.

### **Newspaper Article**

Write a newspaper article describing an event - political, social, cultural, or whatever suits the objectives - based on research. This is a good exercise in critical reading and in summarizing. The assignment gains interest if several people research the same event in different sources and compare the newspaper articles that result.

### **Nobel Prize**

Nominate someone for one of the Nobel prizes. Learn about the prize, selection criteria and jury for that particular prize.

### **Novel Fact**

Find published information supporting or disputing the truth of an historic event, scientific, legal or other piece of information that appeared in a novel read or movie viewed by the class.

### **Personal Research**

Students must find research articles to back up or explain their experience in one particular aspect of their lives (e.g. child of single parent, health or socio-economic issues).

### **Policy Progression**

Follow a particular policy situation as it develops. Who are the organizations involved, what is the history of the issue, what are the ideological conflicts?

### **Political Cartoons as Text**

Using the Baldy Editorial Cartoons or cartoons from other sources, have students locate a cartoon about a political event relevant to the course and put it in historical context, explaining its referents and meaning.

### **Popular Magazine Article Sources**

Examine a popular magazine article for the sources of information that were used (typically none). Find sources that could be used to make it a more academic paper.

### **Popular vs. Scholarly**

Locate a popular and scholarly article on the same topic. Using a prepared checklist, compare the two articles for content, style, bias, audience etc.

### **Poster Presentation**

Research a topic, and present it in poster form. Prepare support materials as well, to provide to fellow students.

### **Primary Sources**

Locate primary sources about the date of your birth i.e. one newspaper headline of a major event, one quotation, one biography, one census figure, one campus event etc. Use a minimum of six different sources. Write a short annotation of each source and include the complete bibliographic citation.

### **Primary & Secondary Sources**

Use bibliographies, guides to the literature and the web to find primary sources on an issue or historical event. Compare and contrast the treatment in primary sources with the treatment in secondary sources.

### **Provocative Question**

Ask a provocative question in class to which students must briefly respond. Students should include invented facts, statistics or other information intended to persuade their reader. The next assignment will be to rewrite the response replacing false information with true and cited information.

### **Read the References**

Read the articles cited in a research paper. Explain how each relates to the original paper. Explore the circumstances in which it is appropriate to cite other papers. Discuss the different purposes served by those citations.

### **Research Paper Skeleton**

Conduct the process of writing a research paper except for writing the final draft. At various times students are required to turn in 1) their choice of topic, 2) an annotated bibliography, 3) an outline, 4) a thesis statement, 5) an introduction and conclusion.

### **Research Popularized**

With a research announcement made in the popular press, locate the original research on which the popular article was based. Evaluate the accuracy of the announcement.

### **Review**

Write a review of a book or website. Discuss the purpose of the work; the author's credentials; the accuracy, objectivity and currency of the information. Compare and contrast to similar works.

### **Same Article/Different Journals**

Examine characteristics of popular and scholarly journals in the field. Select one article from a scholarly journal to rewrite for the popular. Include a reflective/evaluative component as well.

### **Scrapbook**

During the semester collect a newspaper/journal article each week. Create a written response to it. Each week's response needs to be of a different 'type' based on a provided list e.g. letter to editor, theoretical analysis of topic ...

### **Search Strategy**

As part of an activity that requires searching an electronic database for information, include the search strategy developed/used for that search, and analyze how it was refined and what made it more (or less) successful.

### **Search Strategy Paraphrase**

Ask students to paraphrase what they have learned about search strategies for a younger sibling who has asked for help with a school assignment.

### **Snapshot**

Have the class develop a snapshot of a year that is significant for your course. Starting with a chronology (such as Timetables of History) have groups report on politics, the arts, science and technology, or whatever categories make sense for your course.

### **Statistics**

Based on a selection of articles that contain or use statistics, ask students to locate the primary source of those statistics. Examine the use of statistics in the article. Were they interpreted correctly? Can the students find other statistics to support or refute the arguments used?

### **Synthesis Assignment**

Have the class develop a collaborative lecture. Rather than present material in lecture form, have students gather information and during class compile it. (Works best with topics that have a natural organizing principle such as chronology in order to process the information brought to class.)

### **Time Travel**

Have students examine an issue across time by looking at how it is currently treated and comparing it with treatment 25, 50, or 75 years ago. Analyze both the different approaches to the issue and the ways in which the issue was framed in ways that reflect the values and assumptions of the time.

## **Topic by Discipline**

Compare the way the literature of two or more different disciplines handle the same topic (e.g. advertising by marketing, art, communication or child development disciplines).

## **Web Evaluation**

Formulate criteria to evaluate a website with the class. Individuals evaluate a website based on those criteria. Work must include a proper web citation.

Or have students develop personal assessment criteria (and hints) for web sites. Apply these criteria to finding and assessing a website for a specific topic. Adjust criteria as needed. Or with criteria for evaluation in-hand, ask students to find the best web page and the worst they can find about a topic. They must justify their opinions in an essay.

## **Adapted from and Permission Granted by:**

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