ALTERNATIVES TO THE RESEARCH PAPER

Contact the Library Instruction Coordinator, Jen Jarson (jarson@muhlenberg.edu / 484-664-3552) or your Subject Specialist Librarian to discuss these and other assignment ideas.

Abstract

Write a condensed version of a longer piece of writing that highlights the major points covered, concisely describes the content and scope of the writing, and reviews the writing's contents in abbreviated form.

Anatomy of a research paper

Conduct the research for a term paper. Do everything except write it. At various stages, students submit: 1) topic clearly defined; 2) annotated bibliography of useful sources; 3) outline of paper; 4) thesis statement; 5) opening paragraph and summary

Annotated bibliography

Find a specified number of sources on a topic (or on an author's writings) and write descriptive or evaluative annotations. Include commentary on why the item was chosen or how it contributes to the knowledge base.

Bibliographic essay

In writing a bibliographic essay, students introduce a topic and evaluate resources related to that topic. In reviewing the resources in the essay, students can: consider a topic's significance; identify major themes, perspectives, people, organizations relevant to the topic; compare/contrast relevant resources and discuss their utility in understanding the topic.

Bibliography or literature review update

Select (or assign) a topic on which a review article was written a number of years ago and update that review, analyzing, synthesizing, and integrating the ideas they find, demonstrating the evolution of a particular topic and the scholarly communication surrounding it.

Book review

Review a book relevant to the discipline/course. Consider the author, the value of the text to the discipline, and the context of related research. Peruse relevant scholarly journals to explore format, content, and approach of typical book reviews.

Case study analysis

Provide case studies for students (e.g., demonstrating sexual harassment). Students can analyze case, applying concepts, data, and theory from the course.

Compare book reviews

Locate, read and compare the [three, four, etc.] reviews of a work, exploring the importance of critical reception.

Compare internet and database searches
Provide a precise statement of the search topic. Run the search on the Web (try more than one search engine) and on a database (Academic Search Premier, LexisNexis, PsycINFO, MLA, etc.). Present some representation of the search results and compare the findings. How did results vary? Was one source better than the other? If so, why and how? Justify the choice of databases.

Contradict your perspective
Working in pairs or small groups, take for and against 'positions' on an issue - based on a specific journal article. Find a range of resources to support your position. Share the resources with the class for further discussion.

Contrast journal articles
Use an index to locate two articles that present differing viewpoints on the same topic: scholarly/popular; conservative/liberal; primary/secondary; popular/scholarly article from which popular quoted. Compare content, style, tone, audience, purpose, authority, currency, accuracy.
OR
Read several articles that appear to address the same question but reach different conclusions. Account for the differences by examining the methods used, the experimental design, and the interpretation of results. (Professor would select the articles.)

Convert a newspaper article to a scholarly article
Select a newspaper article on a topic related to the course. Students will then convert the newspaper article into a scholarly article complete with a bibliography and written using a scholarly style.

Corporate event
Identify a corporate event (IPO, spin-off, merger, major new product introduction, etc.) and examine the stock price reaction to the published disclosure of the event. Students must provide an accurate assessment of the consequences of the transaction on the company's common stock. Students produce a report which incorporates graphs/charts pertaining to the assigned company, as well as research from five or more firms that undertook the same corporate event and examine the market reaction to the public announcement.

Current scholarly discussions
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.

Different accounts of same event
Locate and compare different accounts of the same event in bibliographic databases and in search engines.

Dissecting a scholarly article
Select an article from a scholarly journal (pertaining to a specific discipline). Get the instructor's approval. Prepare a 4 to 6 page article review, providing an introduction to the topic of the article, the issue being discussed, the hypothesis being studied, the sample (random/non-random and size), the methods used, major findings, and conclusions (adding opinions, views, clarifications, or claims regarding the research). Attach article to critique.

Double-entry journal
Students draw a line down the middle of each journal page and record data (a line of text, a useful explanation) in the left-hand column and their response to the information in the right-hand column. This separation of data and responses requires students to assess, form

opinions, and make judgments about information they read or hear about. Students should reread their journals from time to time, reanalyzing and refining their initial responses.

Editorial vs. scholarly article
Students examine an editorial and discuss what evidence would need to be provided to turn it into an academic argument for a scholarly audience. Have the class locate and analyze evidence and write a response to the editorial based on their new knowledge.

Encyclopedia entry
Students create an online encyclopedia for the course. Each student can write an encyclopedia entry on a specific topic.
OR
See *Wikipedia*, below.

Examine coverage of a controversial issue
Examine the treatment of a controversial issue in several sources (newspaper editorial, scholarly journal, journals from different disciplines, etc.), examine, scrutinizing bias and the variety of perspective.

Evaluate websites
Visit two, or more, websites and evaluate the contents. (The sites could be assigned.) Critically compare and contrast the format, structure, content, target audience, and purpose of each site. Who is the site intended for, how well does it do its job, what can you tell about the owner of the site? Sites could represent a range of authors (e.g., academic, corporate, personal), treatment of issues, etc. Submit the URL and front page of each.

Follow the publication trail using a timeline
Track publications regarding a controversial issue by creating a timeline of articles in local newspapers, national newspapers, popular magazines, scholarly journals, websites, encyclopedias and other sources found. Provide a brief report comparing and contrasting the information with regard to changes or differences in information, bias and focus in addition to the timeline and the evolution of information. Avoid adding daily newspaper entries that do not change in tone, content, focus, or perspective to the timeline.

Forecasting in retrospect
What did articles written in the [1960s] predict about the future of [computers]. Did the forecasts come true or not? Why?

Historical video assignment
Compare and contrast the film version of an event to the actual event in history. Students will write a short paper on the historical accuracy of the film and the accurate portrayal of plot, main characters, settings, events, etc. They will differentiate elements based on facts and those based on interpretation.
Variation: Can be tailored to non-historical topics as well, such as movies about person, works of literature, social movements, etc.
Possible addition: Locate at least two lengthy reviews of the film. Compare the two reviews and discuss any biases displayed by the reviewers, as well as any misrepresentations or inaccuracies you find in the review.

Identifying major journals
Identify (with professor's help) major journals in the discipline. Compare and contrast them. Analyze their content, tone, audience, and impact.

Images
Students 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. Assign groups to a cluster of questions for information-gathering and then pool interpretations.

Information ethics
Students look at headlines on the same day from three different newspapers (e.g., online/print, local/national/international). Students must analyze the headlines, language, story content.

Information evolution
Research a topic using information from different decades. Discuss changes that have occurred in societal or scientific attitudes, perspectives, research interest, or theories.

Interview
Students prepare an interview--either one to be actually carried out or one that they can't because the subject is long dead or otherwise unavailable. To generate useful questions students would have to become familiar with the person's life and work and understand its significance. They could either write up results of a real interview or write their own imaginary responses based on available evidence.

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

Lesson plan
Students prepare a lesson plan on a particular topic for teaching in the higher education, high school, elementary, or other setting. A variety of sources (scholarly, popular, audio-visual, etc.) need to be consulted to prepare and teach the unit. Consider major scholars in the area, significant unresolved questions about the subject, "who's doing what where," etc. *Option:* Students must actually teach the plan (to their classmates or partner with a local school for other grade options).

Letter to government
Write a letter to a government official (or organization leader or any "decision maker") about an issue in your state/region. Justify your arguments using a range of sources, including statistical sources and evidence in government reports. Send letter (or allow students option to not send).

Letters or diaries
Students examine texts written by a figure discussed in class, generate questions from those primary sources, 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.

Literature review
Review the literature on a specific topic for a given time period examining the evolution of research.

Look behind the book
Examine the credibility of the course textbook or a major book in the discipline. Examine the author, publisher, credentials, and reviews. Consider the value of this book to the course at hand.

Memo writing
Write a memo that convincingly summarizes recommendations to colleagues. Memo topics could range from explanations and reinforcements of good company accounting practices to upcoming policy decisions. This exercise gives students practice in summarizing, providing evidence, and arguing persuasively.

Point of view
Students study the ways different disciplines treat the same subject or the ways different audiences (e.g., popular v. scholarly) shape the presentation of information by locating and analyzing materials that approach the same topic from different directions.

Policy analysis
Students follow a particular [foreign, domestic, educational, social] policy situation as it develops. Who are the organizations involved? What is the history of the issue? What are the ideological conflicts?

Poster session
Research a topic and present it as a poster that other students will use to learn about the topic. Students should create a bibliography of sources used.

Primary vs. secondary (historical event)
Provide the class with primary sources that recount an event that is open to more than one interpretation. Then students locate and critique secondary source explanations of that event. Have students examine differences in secondary sources and relate these to their own interpretation of the available evidence. (Students are often surprised to find secondary sources tell the same story differently.)

Political rhetoric
Choose a political speech given to the people of [United States, other country of interest] and argue the ways in which the speaker attempts to manipulate or influence his or her audience and why. Research the context of the speech as well as views on the speech. Analyze the speech, looking at what issues are addressed and how the speaker addresses them. Consider why the speaker would take such an approach.

Propaganda
Students choose any issue that has been the subject of protest or propaganda at any time in the past 500 years in any part of the world (limits or direction may be applied). Write a paper detailing the issues of the protest/propaganda, putting the issues in the context of a text/object (e.g., film, literary/musical work, poster, pamphlet, sculpture, painting, building, historical event, etc.). What historical forces—technological, political, cultural—brought this protested issue or point of propaganda to a critical point at the moment you are looking at it?

Psychological tests
Review a psychological test based on the literature about the test, discussing the test's adequacy and effectiveness.

Read the references
Read the articles cited in a research paper. Explain how each is related to the paper. In what circumstances is it appropriate to cite other papers? What different purposes do the citations serve?

Research design/proposal
Students are asked to design an experiment or other type of research. They must identify a need (state a problem), select an appropriate funding agency, estimate costs involved, and submit a proposal with a supportive annotated bibliography. Consider how this issue has been addressed in the past, what current thinking is, and how proposal can address the problem. Proposals could be reviewed by groups of students.

Research narrative
Assign a "research narrative" (beyond a log) that describes and reflects metacognitively on all steps of the writing and research process. Try this as an occasional in-class writing exercise, especially to open up discussion, or ask students to hand in a summative version at the end of the course along with the paper/annotated bibliography/other project. It's also a plagiarism-buster.

Research trends
Look at a periodical index (or yearbook, handbook, etc.) at 10 year intervals. Discuss the explosion of research, and how its issues, content and methods change.

Review
Write a review of a journal article and a website on the same topic. Consider the purpose of each, author's credentials, accuracy, objectivity and currency of the information.

Social movement (primary text analysis)
Students write a research paper that analyzes primary texts from a social movement that organized to achieve some social change. The focus of the paper should be to analyze primary sources from the movement and make an argument about these sources and their relevance to the movement. The paper should also provide adequate background to understand these sources (social, cultural, historical contexts relevant to focus). The paper could identify an appropriate focus and attempt to persuade the reader to the point of view taken.

Textbook analysis
Students trace a "fact" from textbook to its original discovery and dissemination. Have them analyze the contemporary reception of the "fact"--was it challenged, debated, hailed, or reviled? Was it recognized as significant? Was it newsworthy enough to be covered by the popular press? (Requires careful groundwork to make sure it is workable and that the materials are available.)

Topic by discipline
Compare the way that scholarly publications in different disciplines handle the same topic.

Tracking an author or a "classic" paper
Trace an important paper through a citation index. What does it mean to be "cited"? How important is it that a scholar be cited?

Tracing a scholar's career
Students choose (or are assigned) a scholar/researcher. Explore that person's career and ideas by locating biographical information, preparing a bibliography of his/her writings,

analyzing the reaction of the scholarly community to the researcher's work, and examining the scholarly network in which s/he works.

Understanding "the literature" of a discipline
What does "the literature" of a discipline look like? What comprises it? How is it produced, disseminated, and accessed in a given discipline? How is the knowledge produced? By whom? In which media is it presented? What is the publishing cycle? How important is informal communication in the field?

Wikipedia
Students create/edit entries in the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, allowing them to discuss and consider authority, bias, accuracy, etc., as well as participate in a larger knowledge community. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects for examples of how others have used Wikipedia.

Write your own exam
Write an exam on one area; answer some or all of the questions (depending on professor's preference). Submit an annotated bibliography of source material and rationale for questions.

Writing about problem sets
Rather than asking students to provide the formulas or answers, ask them to describe how they might go about solving a problem. This can demonstrate their true understanding of the process.

This list has been adapted and compiled, in large part, from the following resources:
- http://www.lrc.macewan.ca/pdf/faculty/altrespap04.pdf
- http://www.nova.edu/library/dils/teachinghandouts/faculty/Ideas%20for%20information.doc
- http://www.library.queensu.ca/webisi/alternative.htm
- Term Paper Alternatives: Ideas for Information-Based Assignments, King's College (handout)
- http://library.ups.edu/instruct/assign.htm
- http://www.clark.edu/Library/Faculty/assignment_ideas.html
- http://www.acr.losrios.edu/~library/flex /altassign.htm
- http://teaching.berkeley.edu/docs/encouraging.pdf
- http://www.uni.edu/~drbill/professional/teaching/dr/assignments/bibliographic_essays.pdf

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Information Literacy for Teaching and Learning: A Workshop for Faculty and Librarians
http://www.lib.jmu.edu/instruction/2006assignments.aspx
JMU faculty from a wide variety of departments developed information literacy assignments as part of a workshop. This site compiles their assignments, as well as their evaluation of the assignments after their implementation.