



**For Immediate Release**  
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## **Handouts for college research assignments are often poor roadmaps**

When it comes to research assignment handouts, many college students get an ample dose of instructions about presenting their finished work, but little guidance about actually developing and applying a viable research strategy.

“Many handouts in our sample felt like city road maps with no street names,” said Alison J. Head, a research scientist at the UW Information School. “Research is being conveyed successive and formulaic steps, not as an organic, iterative process that requires critical thought, curiosity, ongoing discovery, and tenacity.”

Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, dean emeritus and professor in the Information School, studied 191 course-related assignments distributed to undergraduates at 28 college campuses across the U.S., finding that many handouts place far more attention on mechanics than ways to conduct research in today’s data-drenched world.

“Handouts were chock-full of formulaic details such as page length and style of citations, but few had specific details about finding, evaluating and ethically using sources,” Head said.

“And despite seismic changes in the way information is now created and delivered,” says a report Head has co-authored, “few requested other formats such as oral or multimedia presentations.”

Head and Eisenberg are co-directors of Project Information Literacy, an ongoing research study about how college students find information for course work and solve information problems in their everyday lives.

Other major findings from the PIL study of research assignments:

- Six in 10 handouts recommended searches of library shelves – place-based sources – more than research databases, the library catalog, the Web or any other resources.
- Forty-three percent of handouts recommended students use the library’s online research databases but only 14 percent suggested which ones to use.
- Three-quarters of handouts failed to mention the Internet for research – even though most students inevitably use Web sites and search engines.

- Plagiarism was covered in only 18 percent of handouts – and consequences, such as failing the course, appeared far more often than details about preventive strategies.
- Only 13 percent of handouts recommended consulting a librarian.
- Instructors who had taught between 11 and 20 years provided more written guidance about the library and/or Internet sources than those who had taught five years or less.
- Overall, instructors had few, if any, assumptions about their students' abilities to conduct research.

"I can tell you I've only had a handful of students who really can do all this stuff without much direction. I'd say 95 percent of my students really don't have much of a clue about completing research assignments," said one humanities instructor interviewed during the study. In follow up interviews, instructors also said they offer guidance by other means beyond handouts – classroom discussions, ancillary handouts, and librarian demonstrations, for example.

But getting students to venture beyond the first page of a Google search is an ongoing challenge, the instructors said.

Overall, handouts from arts and humanities courses were more likely than those in social sciences or engineering to provide direction about resources but only 27 percent of the arts and humanities handouts guided toward the library, course readings, primary sources or the Internet.

Slightly more than one third of handouts included grading criteria. Yet, in a survey the researchers conducted this spring, they found 96 percent of students considered the grade they received of omnipotent importance—second only to passing the course and finishing the research assignment.

Based on their study, Head and Eisenberg recommend that instructors explain the whys behind research, perhaps comparing it to detective work driven by intellectual curiosity.

"Handouts need to peel back the layers so students have more context about what the research process means and entails and why they are doing it in the first place. Then they can practice research from one class to another, as it applies," Head said.

Head and Eisenberg also recommend that research assignments require students to consult multiple and diverse research formats, from collaborative wikis and blogs to video, books, scholarly journals and primary sources.

"Using diverse formats hits a pedagogical sweet spot," Head said. "Students get hands-on practice with the nature and extent of information needed and also get better at processing information in all forms. It is what today's graduates need to be lifelong learners."

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