Deciphering Your Research Assignment – English Transcript

You've just been given a research assignment. And now you have to figure out what to do with it. How well you understand the assignment will affect the quality and outcome of your project. This tutorial will give you a set of basic components to look for, as well as a few tips to help you succeed in completing your assignment without any surprises.

The first step is to look for logistical information. When reading the assignment, circle or make notes in the margin as you read, and use these notes as a checklist later. The basics are -- Due date -- This will give you an idea of how to organize your time to finish the assignment. Length -- If your first draft is much longer or shorter than the assignment states, speak to your teacher. Style -- Is this a writing and citation style you've used before? If not, factor in some time to learn it. Formatting -- What are the requirements for double or single spacing, margins, title page, heading, font and size, or page numbers? Sources -- How many and what types of sources are required?

Many assignments set the stage with some context or background information. In this example, the assignment begins with a brief summary of the class lecture about the endangered species status of the Lesser Antillean Iguana Take a moment to read this example. "Biology-- as discussed in class, the Lesser Antillean Iguana is in great danger of extinction through deforestation, feral cats and dogs, and the introduction of other iguana species, the Green Iguana, which competes for the same resources."

Since assignments are generally based on concepts or information introduced in class, it's important to clearly identify the assignment topic and then look through your notes for related information and begin your research from there. Other common parts of an assignment sheet include prompts from your instructor to focus your writing and specific questions to be answered. Take a moment to read through this example. "What systems are currently in place to address this problem? Are they successful? Look at the various systems and solutions and choose one. Use this to build a well-researched and compelling argument to reallocate funding to save the Lesser Antillean Iguana using what you believe to be the most effective model."

In this example, the first two questions are not intended to be directly answered in your research paper. They provide a framework for the overall theme of the assignment. The third sentence, the assignment itself, is to build a well-researched and compelling argument. This indicates that the paper must be argumentative and use quality resources.

It is important to understand the assignment and your role in completing it. If your friend were to ask you, "What's this assignment about?", could you tell them? If you cannot easily give a basic description of the task, review the assignment sheet or ask your teacher for clarification.

Try to fill in the blanks to this prompt. "The purpose of my paper is to blank in order to blank." If you applied this to our example, you might say, "The purpose of my paper is to build a strong and convincing argument for the best solution to save the Lesser Antillean Iguana in order to receive the largest amount of available funding." Now read through the assignment sheet once more to make sure you're on the right track.

Let's take a look at the major parts of the research and writing process. Each blue block represents a chunk of that process. The larger the chunk, the more time it will usually take. The smaller the chunk, the less time it will take.

These are not exact proportions but a visualization of how this process works for many people. Some parts of this process are recursive, meaning you'll move back and forth between one or more steps several times. As an example, when reflecting on your first draft, you may notice the need for an additional source to support a specific argument, so you will move back to the finding sources stage.

In planning for this assignment, look closely at what types of resources you'll need to use, such as a computer, software, books, databases, and people. Look at places you'll need to go to use them, such as libraries, archives, or quiet time at home. And look at what time constraints may be in place.

Besides your school library, you may want to visit a public, university, or other library, so check when they're open. Library resources can often be accessed from home. Ask the library staff how to log in.

Finally, do you know the best way to find the sources you need? Speak to a librarian for help to formulate a search strategy and to identify appropriate resources for your search. Always bring your assignment sheet with you when asking for help. And remember -- revisit your assignment periodically to make sure you're covering all the requirements.

For specific examples, and for more information about this topic and the entire research process, explore OSLIS. Thank you to the Oregon CLIP project for allowing the OSLIS Committee to adapt their tutorials. OSLIS -- Learn to Research. Research to Learn.