

10 Things First-Year Students Should Know About Using College Libraries



10. **College libraries are big.** High school libraries may have thousands of books. Public libraries can have hundreds of thousands. But university libraries can have millions, often housed in large, tall buildings. But don't let this phase you. College libraries are big because they need to support numerous lines of study. After you get oriented to our big libraries, they'll seem less intimidating.
9. **Research is a process.** Research involves looking in several places, taking careful notes, asking questions, and sometimes some false starts. No kidding, research can be hard work. But the information you find can be everything from that small detail that makes your paper perfect to an exciting opportunity in a field that eventually leads to your choice of career. You never know; the information you find today could change your life tomorrow.
8. **Know your ABCs and 123s.** That's all you need to understand the Library of Congress (LC) classification system used to organize materials in college libraries. LC numbers can seem confusing at first because they begin with letters instead of numbers, a big difference from the Dewey system of school and public libraries.
7. **Ask questions.** As mentioned above, university libraries can be big places with millions of items and thousands of resources, many of these online. Don't be afraid to ask questions. No one can be expected to navigate the complexity of the library on his or her own. Librarians are available in person, on the phone, via email, and on the web through live chat.
6. **Become familiar with citations.** A citation is a listing of the key pieces of information about a work that make it possible to locate it. The elements of a citation normally include author, title, and date of publication, and depending on the type of material (book, article, video, etc.) other elements will be present, such as volume, issue, and page numbers for journal articles. Citations represent a basic element of scholarly research. You will use citations to locate information and also to give credit to the works of others when you write about them.

5. **Evaluation is key!** Your ability to evaluate the information you use is more important than ever, especially since the rise of the World Wide Web, where anyone can post information. So turn a critical eye to the information you find and use. Ask questions like who wrote this? What are their credentials? How old is this information? Are there any errors of fact or logic in the information? Does the author display bias in anyway? You probably already know how to do these types of evaluations. What questions do you ask when you shop for music or for a car?
4. **Learn to avoid plagiarism.** Plagiarism is intellectual theft, and your professors take it very seriously. Simply stated, to plagiarize is to use another person's ideas or expressions in your writing without giving credit. Turning in another person's paper as your own is a blatant example of plagiarism, but something accidental like failing to correctly cite a source because it isn't clear from your sloppy notes is also plagiarism. So be careful and be aware of the rules.
3. **Get an early start.** With all the technology available today, you might think that getting an early start on your research wouldn't be that important, but it is. Some library services like Interlibrary Loan can take several days to retrieve the information you need. But perhaps more importantly, by starting early you can avoid the frustrations that can arise when you hit bumps in the road, like the book you need is checked out or your first few searches don't turn up as much information as you hoped.
2. **Everything is not on Google.** Many students have the misperception that they can find everything with search engines like Google. But the truth is search engines cannot access the most reliable sources. Take the library's web site for example. Its resources contain licensed information that has been reviewed by publishers, editors, and librarians and only students and faculty of the university can access this information. Not only will search engines not help you find this more authoritative information, but they also do not have editors or librarians reviewing their information.
1. **Focus on scholarly literature.** *Newsweek* and *Sports Illustrated* are not considered scholarly journals. Scholarly journals report research, and your professors will expect you to focus your investigations on these types of sources. Some characteristics of scholarly journals include a list of works cited at the end of articles, the authors are professors, and a lack of the colorful graphics and advertising of popular magazines.

This article builds on information in Suzanne Smith's article "The Top 10 Things High School Seniors Need to Know about College Libraries," which appeared in The Book Report, March/April 2002, p.42.

