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Library research skills



- Know the anatomy of your library
- Know how your library works
- Saving time in library research
- Practical exercises

Greg was a final-year high school student who was wanting to pursue a teaching career after completing a university Arts/Education degree. His final year at high school consisted of several major assessable essay tasks plus the Higher School Certificate examination. As the assessable tasks contributed heavily to his final HSC score, it was important to perform well on these assignments.

Greg lived near a large university and he wanted to use the library to extend the research he had done on his essay assignments. When he entered the university library, he was intimidated by the size and apparent complexity of the place. There were numerous service counters, masses of people, a multiplicity of computer terminals, direction signs, stairwells to unknown departments and hallways disappearing into the distance. Greg stood in the centre of this maze feeling very uncertain about where he should start.

Much like a traveller in a foreign country, Greg looked around for a source of help. He felt nervous and conspicuous, thinking he was the only person there who did not know what to do. His apprehension was dispelled after slowly approaching the counter marked 'Readers' Assistance Unit'. The person on duty said in a friendly way, 'You look a bit lost. Can I help?' Greg explained what he wanted to do and the librarian gave him a map and several departments and people to contact. Having some basic information in hand and avenues to pursue, he felt more settled and secure.

Finding the relevant library resources and extracting the necessary information was not exactly easy going, but at least Greg knew help was at hand. He was also consoled by the fact that many students found libraries and their systems to be geographic challenges (the librarian exercised some poetic licence, choosing the term, 'inspirational adventure'). Coming down from lofty poetic expressions to ground-floor reality, the first step towards understanding how the system works is trying it — having a go.

While this brief chapter can not do justice to the very sophisticated and quite complex systems which comprise a contemporary library, it will present several helpful topics for students organising their library research activities. The underlying theme of this chapter will be time management, a constant challenge for most students.

Time traps in your library research

Greg's time for library research was very limited. His time problems were compounded by his lack of knowledge about the complex library system.

Whether at secondary or tertiary level, most students will fall into various types of time traps when conducting their library research. The major traps which warrant discussion are: failure to understand the basic operating procedures of the library; uncertainty about the general layout of the library; and inability to operate the information search equipment.

As only an occasional user of the library, it was not possible for Greg to participate in the orientation tours held earlier that year. However, all students should certainly do this when they start their studies at a school, college or university. The small amount of time spent touring the facilities will pay copious dividends when you begin researching activities in the library.

In place of the orientation tour, Greg was given a leaflet describing the library's layout and various functions. With the map and department descriptions in hand, Greg was able to find his way to the relevant sections and ultimately to the specific stacks. He left the library with far more confidence than when he entered. I should add that most of the confidence came from asking relevant questions of the various staff members.

Ann, a classmate of Greg's, was less courageous. She was initially confused by the size and complexity of the library, but she chose to try to work it out on her own. She spent hours wandering here and there and left with only a few articles relating to her assignment.

Why was Ann's visit so unproductive? Primarily because she advanced her social life at the expense of her project research. Ann found several people she had known previously and her research time became compromised, a very common trap for many students. Perhaps it was the frustration of not immediately finding the books and articles she wanted; or then, maybe it was just her appealing and outgoing personality. Whatever the reason, her wanderings seemed to generate more social conversation than academic inspiration. At the end of her non-productive afternoon, she left the library unfulfilled, but with the offer of a movie date for the following weekend. At least the afternoon was a social success.

From a librarian's viewpoint, the essential difference between the two experiences of Greg and Ann was the willingness to ask questions of the staff. Greg's openness to say to the library staff, 'I'm lost' brought helpful directions and answers to his research

questions. Ann's reticence simply generated frustration and further confusion. The moral of these two experiences: when in doubt or when confused, ask a library staff member.

One final time trap worthy of mention is queuing. At pre-exam time when the library's resources are usually at peak demand, many students will stand for long periods in queues waiting for various services, especially photocopying. There are two principles to mention here. Firstly, queuing is best avoided — try to get to the library at off-peak times. If you must stand in a queue, do so productively — read while standing. The second principle relates to photocopying directly. Resist the temptation to photocopy all articles which you think are relevant, if only tangentially so. You can save yourself money by skimming through the articles when you locate them. Try to summarise them straightaway rather than photocopy them for reading at some other time. The photocopy machine suppliers will not agree, but too much money is spent by students photocopying articles, many of which are never read. Save both time and money by reading the material quickly. Take your notes and move onto the next article. Don't take pictures of papers which might not be relevant.

Getting to know your library's layout

One of the most important orientation activities for incoming students is the library tour. Most campuses conduct an orientation program for new students and the library is generally a featured focus of activity. Trained staff take new students through the library and explain the functions of the various departments. The tour will probably include information about: finding books, articles and other reference materials; how to borrow materials; the use of the open and closed reserve sections; the range of resources in the audio-visual section; how to reserve materials currently out on loan; and how to arrange access to materials held in other libraries through inter-library loans. These are just a few of the many library functions which the serious student will want to know about and be able to use.

Stephen, a university honours student in social sciences, found that his initial trip through the library at the commence-

ment of first year was just an introduction. He actually participated in the tour several times over the following years to refresh his mind and revitalise his skills. At the start of his honours year, the expectations about his research work were much higher. He had to organise a computer search of the relevant literature held in an American database. He found the process to be both challenging, and frankly, amazing. He sat with a staff member and used the computer to interrogate the database half a world away. The process yielded an abundant supply of articles to be analysed for his thesis.

In summary, whether you are a first or latter year student, you will want to know the geography of your library. Be certain to participate in the orientation program and take at least one tour of your library. Your goal is to be able to walk into the library with specific research questions and to find the answers quickly and efficiently. Knowing the various departments and their functions will help you to fulfil these tasks.

Saving time in the library

As suggested earlier, the library can absorb a lot of student time. Students who are not sufficiently familiar with the geography and functions of the various sections are most vulnerable to wasting time in fruitless searches. Here are some pointers to help make your library visits more efficient and effective.

- List your specific research goals for each trip to the library plus an expected completion time. Aim to complete your search by the prescribed time.
- Try to use the library facilities at off-peak times to minimise waiting in queues.
- Prior to arriving at the library, make a comprehensive list of topics which need researching. Try to minimise return trips just to tie up loose ends.
- If you are unfamiliar with the research topic, ask a librarian for advice about general resources, such as annual reviews or topical yearbooks.
- Avoid garrulous classmates while conducting your library research. Socialising is best left to your leisure time.
- Before going to the bookshelves to look for your reference

sources, check the loan list to see which books are unavailable.

- For books you deem to be crucial and which are out on loan, place an urgent recall request with the circulation librarian.
- When queues are long at the photocopier or circulation desk, come back later or start reading the reference material while standing and waiting.
- Use efficient reading techniques to skim and scan for pertinent resource material. Ask yourself while scanning whether this is useful. If so, how?
- Be sparing in your note-taking as notes are time-consuming. When taking notes, be brief and concise — get the important nouns, forget prepositions and articles.
- When recording a note, be sure to indicate where you think the note can be used in your assignment. Students are frequently mystified when they later read some library research notes, wondering why they ever took the notes in the first place.
- Get to know your classmates so that you can share resources. It is far more economical on everyone's time if you can arrange to work as a syndicate on major projects. One person can make the trip to the library and photocopy relevant material for distribution to syndicate members.
- When searching for books and materials which are hard to get, contact other local libraries or consider arranging an inter-library loan.
- Use the telephone before making a trip to the library to enquire about the availability of resources difficult to find.

As you see from the above list of pointers, some of them involve working with classmates to achieve a positive group result. Generally, several heads are better than one. This is particularly so when time is at a premium and resources are scarce. So, band together and work towards mutually beneficial and positive results.

If a group cannot be formed, then an alternative approach may help. James was a third-year engineering student who had previously been doing his course part-time. In order to complete his degree more quickly, he returned to university full-time for his third year. However, he occasionally worked for his previous

employer, a civil engineering/management consultancy firm, on a casual basis during holiday periods.

Prior to the mid-year break, James requested the syllabus for the research subject he would be doing in second semester. He noted the suggested topics and discussed the possibilities with two of the firm's engineers. Based on their advice and the availability of the firm's research resources, he chose a project topic which could be pursued at the office before and after work. He found the consultants at the firm to be very helpful and he had access to the computer equipment to search various databases and library holdings. When James returned to university for the second semester, he was already well on his way with the research project.

The message in the preceding case study is: use all available resources to pursue your goals. By looking ahead and planning wisely, James was able to reduce some of the academic pressure during second semester. He was also able to benefit from the alternative information sources available through his firm.

General principles for efficient assignment research

Most students will have many research assignments to complete during their academic years. While the library will be the central focus for much of your work, there are some planning principles which will make you more efficient and your research more effective.

- As soon as you receive the assignment, get started straight-away. Don't procrastinate!
- When in doubt about the interpretation of the research topic, clarify it with your instructor.
- Set up a chart and assign weekly goals for researching and writing.
- Establish a preliminary outline so that your early reading and note-taking is targeted to a specific section of the project.
- List your research goals before entering the library.
- Use the library at off-peak times to avoid crowds and queues.
- If you are uncertain about where to start your library research, ask a librarian.

- Be certain you keep abreast of new research equipment at the library. Learn new researching skills when the opportunity arises.
- Share resources with other students.
- Be certain to set firm deadlines for completing your library research.
- Accept the fact that you will never know everything about the topic you are researching, unless it happens to be an autobiographical project. Resist the temptation to put off starting your writing until you know 'just a little more'.
- Start writing your first draft on the predetermined date. To complete your drafting and rewriting, you will need plenty of time.

Summary

Using your library well and keeping up to date with your researching skills will save you time and increase the quality of your research papers. The prime secrets are to be disciplined and determined. Get to work straightaway and work to predetermined weekly goals. The most important goal to respect is 'Start Writing Day!' If at any time along the way confusion arises, be certain to get help. Librarians are very helpful people. Asking a few specific questions can often clarify confusion and produce relevant research information.

Practical exercises

- 1 Approach your teaching staff and the Readers' Assistance Librarian at your library and suggest the possibility of structuring several simulated research exercises which you and your classmates could carry out. The exercises could be planned so that you have to use most of the common research tools available in your library to complete the project.
- 2 In conjunction with several classmates and perhaps a teaching staff member, construct a list of relevant research databases or other information sources which might be tapped by students in your subject area.

- 3 Volunteer for appropriate training so you can help the library staff conduct the library tours at the beginning of the academic year. As the saying goes, the best way to learn a subject is to teach it.