

Transitioning to College: Helping You Succeed

<http://www.transitioning2college.org>

Brian's Top 10 Things First-Year Students Should Know about Using College Libraries to Do Research

10. College libraries are big.

High school libraries may have thousands of books. Public libraries can have hundreds of thousands. University libraries can have millions. They are often housed in large, tall buildings, but don't be concerned. College libraries are big because they need to support students and faculty doing work in many different areas 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 dealing with a few false starts. No kidding, research can be hard work. It involves a lot of small steps. The information you find might range from one small detail that makes your paper perfect to the discovery of new information that eventually helps you with a career choice. You never know; the information you find today could change your life tomorrow.

8. Know your ABCs and 123s.

That's all you will need in order to understand the Library of Congress (LC) classification system that is used to organize materials in most college libraries. LC numbers can seem confusing at first because they begin with letters instead of numbers. Just take it one letter and number at a time. And you never know – your college library might use the same Dewey system as your school and public libraries.

7. Ask questions.

It's already been mentioned that university libraries can be big places with millions of items and thousands of resources. Library catalogs will lead you to items that are physically on the shelf and online. Don't be afraid to ask questions about how to find what you need. No one can be expected to navigate the complexity of the library on his or her own. Librarians are available to help you 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. Different disciplines use different citation styles – become familiar with the one used in your subject area.

5. Evaluation is key!

Your ability to evaluate the information you use is more important than ever, especially because the Web has become so popular. Since anyone can post information on the Web, it is important that you turn a critical eye to the information you find and use. Ask questions such as, “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 any way?” You probably already know how to do these types of evaluations. Think about the questions you ask when you shop for a car. Many of the questions you ask are probably the same.

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. Sometimes it might take several days for you to get the information you need delivered from another library. Sometimes you expect to be able to find information on your topic and find that it is more difficult than you thought. By starting early you can avoid the frustrations that can arise when you hit unexpected bumps in the road. You’ve been hearing this throughout high school, but getting an early start really will make things go more smoothly.

2. Everything is not on Google.

Many students have the misperception that they can find everything with search engines like *Google* or *Ask Jeeves*. But the truth is -- search engines have certain limitations. Using library resources will give you access to licensed information that has been reviewed by publishers, editors, and librarians and that is **not** freely available on the Web. A librarian is often your best search engine – he or she can point you to the best databases for your topic as well as reputable Web sites.

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. Most scholarly articles include an abstract (summary) of the article, are written by faculty members and/or researchers, have charts or graphs but not colorful graphics or ads, and include the citations for their research. Scholarly journals are also known as peer-reviewed journals.

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.