CHAPTER 3

Understanding Libraries and Librarians

With the Internet, information has become available virtually anytime, anywhere. As a result, people can easily access information on their own. Still, it is a rare researcher who doesn't need help with some aspect of research. Whether it's picking a topic or sifting through the sheer volume of information, libraries and librarians provide assistance with these and virtually every other aspect of the research process.

What Is a Library?

When people think of libraries, all sorts of images come to mind. Some of these images are accurate, many are not or are seriously outdated, and most fall somewhere in between. So what exactly is a library? Big or small, specialized or general, academic or public—at its core, a library is essentially any collection of recorded information.

- The word *library* is derived from the Latin word *liber* meaning "book."
- Libraries have existed for thousands of years.
- The first libraries were used primarily to store business, historical, religious, and other records of a person, town, country, or civilization.
- Because early books had to be handwritten, copies were very scarce and very valuable; they were generally inaccessible to all but the wealthy.
• By the late Middle Ages, with the invention of paper and the printing press, books began to be more affordable and more commonplace; the modern library began to emerge.
• As the quantity and variety of books grew, new ways of storing and organizing them had to be developed. Shelving books by subject continues to be the most common.
• The focus of today’s library is increasingly on access to information rather than on ownership of it.

Reasons Students Do Not Go to the Library

Many first-time researchers overlook the library as a starting point when beginning the research process. Some students still think of libraries as little more than book warehouses and don’t realize the wealth of other information sources that libraries provide. Lingering stereotypes of taciturn, unapproachable, “shushing” librarians still abound, intimidating would-be library users. Other reasons that some students question or otherwise overlook the value of using the library to conduct research include the following:

• “I’ve never had to use a library before.”
• “I can get everything I need off the Internet.”
• “I won’t ask librarians for help because I don’t really know what they do or what type of assistance they can provide.”
• “I don’t even know where to begin.”

Reasons Students Should Go to the Library

Most of the myths just outlined contain a certain degree of truth. That said, today’s modern library is more than just a huge collection of books and a staff intent on making sure no one speaks above a whisper. Libraries are active, vibrant places reflecting the changing information needs and the collaborative viewpoint of today’s learner. Vast collections of printed books and journals, for example, are being replaced with electronic access to the same material, and “shushing” librarians are being replaced with librarians who provide open, common areas where groups are encouraged to work
together and share ideas—verbally and via technology. Here are a few of the many reasons that going to the library and speaking with a librarian should be high on your research agenda:

- Libraries provide access to information and resources not available elsewhere, particularly to old, rare, or out-of-print resources but also to newer content.
- Libraries offer a breadth and depth of services, including circulation, reference, and interlibrary loan, as well as resources beyond simply books and magazines, such as movies, music, artwork, and even snack bars.
- If your library doesn't provide direct access to the resource you want—especially an article or a book—a librarian can typically get it from another library for you.
- Libraries provide study space, equipment, technology, and other resources and services to assist you in your research and academic pursuits. Examples of these auxiliary services include writing centers and tutoring.
- Librarians are trained in the use of information resources and have vast experience with the research process and finding information.

It is important to note at this point that perhaps the most important reason for going to the library is the librarians. One of a librarian's primary jobs is to help you find and use relevant information. In fact, for some librarians, this is their main, and sometimes only, duty. They can help you understand and navigate through your assignment. A librarian can direct you to the best resources, suggest search strategies, and do a whole lot more. When you encounter a challenge in the research process—and you will—a librarian will typically be able to help you or at least offer some suggestions for working through it.

**Library Types**

There are many types of libraries. All libraries can loosely be grouped into one of four broad categories: academic, public, school, and special. The library at your college or university is an academic library. You may need to
use the resources and services of multiple libraries or library types to complete your research.

**Academic**
Because it supports the curriculum, research, teaching, and information needs of a college or university, an academic library focuses primarily on academic, scholarly sorts of books, journals, and other resources. Items such as best sellers and popular music may be part of the collection but only minimally unless the school offers courses that involve those elements. Larger universities may have more than one library to serve specific needs, such as a medical library for a medical school. Many academic libraries are open long after other departments and buildings on campus have closed, providing an ideal venue for studying and for completing academic work.

**Public**
A public library serves the community in which it is located. The emphasis is on leisure reading and other items of interest to the general population. Best sellers and self-help books are good examples. Many public libraries have specialized departments that focus on a specific population (e.g., children, teens) or interest (e.g., genealogy).

**School**
A school library is associated with K–12 schools or school districts. School libraries are learner-centered and focus on ensuring that all students have access to information. They typically contain books, periodicals, and various media for both educational and entertainment purposes.

**Special**
A special library encompasses everything else. Special libraries gear their resources and services to a specific topic or population. For example, a business library focuses on books and other items pertaining specifically to business and business-related topics. Similarly, a library for the blind provides items such as books in braille and devices for converting text to speech to better serve those with visual difficulties. Special libraries can have large collections or small ones. They may be open to the public or may restrict access to individuals associated with their parent business,
school, or organization. Examples of where you might find a special library include hospitals, medical schools, law schools, seminaries, museums, government agencies, and many large corporations and businesses.

**Anatomy of an Academic Library**

Academic libraries can be intimidating. They often occupy one of the largest buildings on campus, and large campuses often have more than one library. In addition, they contain a number of departments, operations, and services that can further overwhelm a first-time researcher. However, most academic libraries have at least four areas in common and with which you’ll likely be working at some point during your research journey.

**Circulation**

Usually located at or near the entrance to a library, the *circulation desk* is where you go to check out, return, and renew books and other items, pay fines, get general information, and more. It is typically the first department to open in the morning and the last to close at night. If members of the circulation staff can’t help you directly, they should be able to point you to the person or office that can.

**Reference**

The *reference, or information, desk* is staffed by librarians specially trained in the use of information resources. They can help you with virtually every step of the research process. Most libraries now have some form of virtual presence, enabling you to chat, e-mail, and otherwise work directly with a librarian via the Internet. Many reference librarians have advanced subject degrees, enabling them to provide deeper insight into a given topic or discipline. Some librarians are even assigned to work with specific assignments, classes, and departments, giving them excellent insights into what’s expected and what’s needed to do a good job. The best thing? All the assistance they provide is free!

**Interlibrary Loan**

It is impossible for any library to have every source of information. But don’t overlook potential sources of information simply because your library
does not provide direct access to them. As the name suggests, if your library doesn’t have the item you want, it may be available to you via inter-library loan (ILL). ILL enables you to acquire books and articles from other libraries. Delivery times are increasingly fast. So, in the end, although it may take a while longer to get the items you want through ILL, you may save yourself hours of research by having those sources available to you.

**Instruction**

Most libraries offer some form of instruction in the use of library and other information resources and services. Many times instructors will ask a librarian to speak with their students about resources they might use to complete assignments for the course. Other times librarians offer workshops or one-on-one sessions in which they teach you about some aspect of the research process. If there is no formal instruction at your library, most reference librarians are more than happy to teach you how to search for and use information more effectively. As noted, you can simply approach a librarian for assistance at the reference desk or schedule a one-on-one appointment to discuss your specific needs.

**What Is a Librarian?**

It is a common misconception that everyone who works in a library is a librarian. Many of the people you see working in a library are student workers or support staff. A librarian is an individual trained in the use of information and other technologies. Traditionally, this training involves completion of a one- to two-year program of study resulting in a master’s degree in library science. However, the explosion of technology has necessitated changes to many curricula. As a result, many library science programs are embedded into, have merged with, or have completely evolved into information science programs. As noted, many academic librarians also have a master’s degree (or higher) in a field of interest. As a result, they may be the library’s specialists on particular topics.

There are many types of librarians. At small libraries, librarians often have multiple duties, whereas at large libraries, librarians may be more specialized. A reference librarian is specifically trained to assist you with virtually every aspect of the research process. In this respect, he or she
is perhaps the most valuable asset your library has to offer you. Reference librarians typically staff a reference desk where they answer questions posed by library users. Most librarians are intellectually curious and have a genuine and sincere desire to help you if they can.

How Can a Reference Librarian Help?

Research is challenging. It can be frustrating. Struggling to find the best resources can take time, effort, and lots of patience. Learning how to acquire the right information can require even more. Reference librarians can help. They work with information and information resources every day. Many work directly with faculty members to create meaningful research assignments, and as a result, they typically know what’s expected for your assignment. Whether you need help developing your topic, have questions about a citation style, or are looking for suggestions about possible resources and search strategies, reference librarians are there to assist. Although research might be new for you, it is what librarians are trained to do.

Librarians are uniquely qualified to help because they know the questions, they know what’s available, and they know what search strategies work.

Librarians Know the Questions

Picture yourself in an introductory psychology class of thirty students. It’s likely that a good number of those students have concerns and questions about research similar to yours. Now, imagine ten sections of that course being taught each semester. Further, imagine a librarian working with that course for ten years. If even just two students per class per semester ask the same question, that means the librarian has answered it two hundred times! In short, librarians know what instructors expect, and they work all the time to resolve student research crises.

Librarians Know What’s Available

Many libraries provide access to dozens or even hundreds of electronic information resources and search tools. Names like Agricola and JSTOR, though, typically mean little to a researcher unless she has used such tools before. Librarians will work with you to find the most appropriate
information resource(s) for your need. Moreover, if they can't find it locally, they have ways of acquiring books and articles from other libraries.

**Librarians Know What Search Strategies Work**

Let's say you are looking for books on the First World War. If your search produces no matching results, will you assume you need to adjust your search, or will you simply think that your library doesn't have any books on World War I? The former, it is hoped. Because every resource is different, what works in one search may or may not work in another. Librarians can help you discover what went wrong and can suggest various search strategies to address the problem.

**Librarians Can't Know Everything**

Just because librarians work with information and technology every day doesn't mean they are always able to help. Libraries are increasingly seen as access points to information, productivity software, and course software. Naturally everyone is different, and some librarians will know more about some resources than others. Just because a piece of software is loaded or a resource is available in the library doesn't mean every librarian will be familiar with it or know how to use it. Many types and varieties of information and information resources exist, and it is impossible for any one person to be aware of and know how to use all of them. When a librarian can't answer your question, he or she should be able to refer you to a colleague or other resource that can.

**Selecting a Librarian**

Essentially any librarian should be able to assist you with an introductory research assignment. That said, when approaching a librarian for assistance, many students select the one who has helped them in the past, the one with whom they feel most comfortable, or the **subject specialist**—the librarian with specific knowledge of the subject being researched. Unfortunately, as a new researcher, you won't know which librarian is best suited to your needs. Also, you often may not have a choice. For example, there may simply be only one librarian at your library or only one librarian available.
at the time you need assistance. In instances where you don’t have a choice or your preferred librarian isn’t available, you need to find a way to establish some form of working relationship.

When you do have a choice, here are some suggestions:

- Try coming to the library at different times. This gives you the chance to work with more than one librarian in order to determine which one you like working with the best.

- Communication is not a one-way street. Select a librarian who listens to you but who answers your questions in a way you understand and can apply.

- Although it’s not always possible, selecting a librarian with knowledge matching your research needs and interests or one who has worked with students on the same assignment in the past can be an incredible advantage. Many times this will be the librarian who provides instruction to your class or who serves as liaison to the class or department. If you’re not sure who is the most appropriate librarian to help you, explain your needs and ask who might be the best librarian to help you.

- Don’t feel uncomfortable going to more than one librarian for help. Some librarians are better qualified in some areas or have more experience answering certain questions than others. Others are simply easier to communicate with. You need to find the one with whom you are most likely to experience success and with whom you’re most comfortable working.

- Once you find a librarian you like working with, you can always schedule an appointment to meet with him or her individually.

**A Note about Virtual Reference Services**

As noted earlier in this chapter, libraries provide a growing amount and variety of virtual assistance. The forms such assistance can take are as many and as varied as the technologies that make it available. Some of the more
common forms include recorded instruction sessions and online answers to frequently asked questions.

An increasingly common service is **virtual reference**, enabling students to get assistance with their research by working with a librarian online. Though this service is often geared toward students enrolled in online courses or who otherwise have difficulty getting to campus, many on-campus students use it as well. At the low end, you type a question and the librarian responds. At the high end, you may be able to engage a librarian directly via chat using text, voice, or some combination thereof. Too, many libraries provide live video so you can actually see whom you’re chatting with.

However, providing assistance virtually poses a number of unique challenges for librarians and students alike. Not the least of these is that everyone has different technologies, operating systems, and software. As a result, the screens and functionalities of any two individuals’ technologies often make it difficult to communicate meaningfully. For example, a librarian using a desktop system may have difficulty explaining how to use a resource to a student using a smartphone. Because of its smaller screen and other limitations, the smartphone may lack many of the features seen by the librarian. When speaking on the phone or via chat (and even more so with text), it’s easy to misunderstand or misinterpret what’s said. Slow typists, typographical errors, and the use of online jargon familiar to one person (e.g., TTYL) and not to the other only compound the difficulty.

Bottom line? If you live close enough to your institution, an in-person consultation is always preferred as it will generally be more productive and far less time-consuming in the long run than a virtual experience. Still, if a one-on-one visit isn’t possible, be patient when using virtual services.

**Reflections**

- Make a visit to the library. If you are at a large institution that has multiple libraries, start with the general undergraduate library. Spend time walking around and try to determine what you don’t know about the library and the research process.

- Before asking specific questions, though, consider the following:
  - Find out if your library offers tours, workshops, or other types of orientation sessions. If so, sign up for