You and your library

Part 1 : About libraries

Seek knowledge, find wisdom.

research help on esoteric and eclectic topics

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Welcome!

This is part one of my course on finding materials in libraries.

Here, we'll be covering different kinds of libraries, what libraries offer, and how to learn about a library's services.

Coming up in later sections:

- Part 2 : Finding materials in libraries

- Part 3 : Exploring a collection (finding new things)

- Part 4 : Useful library services (like interlibrary loan)

- Part 5 : Need more help? A troubleshooting guide.

Some additional information about specific challenges using libraries is in part 5 of this course. If you've had bad experiences in the past or are trying to solve a problem you're having, check that out for more details.

Ways to get in touch if you have questions are at the end of this file and each following part. Let's get started discussing libraries!

Chapter 1

Types of libraries

There are many different kinds of libraries, and they have different collections, programs, and resources. Sometimes a different kind of library can help you get access to a particular thing more easily, so it's good to know the options.

Public libraries

Public libraries are the libraries many people think of first. These libraries serve a particular location (a town, city, or sometimes a county) and they're normally funded by local sources like property taxes or fees. They focus on the needs of their particular community.

Common services include:

✦ General collection aimed at personal reading and general interests
   (As opposed to in-depth research or specialised topics.)

✦ Programs for people in the community (including general technology help, book groups, local history, or topics of other community interest.)

✦ Material and programs for children and young people of different ages.

✦ Local history and resources (such as local laws or newspapers)

✦ Online databases and resources (though usually focused on general interests rather than specialised research topics.)

✦ Magazines, newspapers, and other general publications.

Public libraries can also connect you with other resources like books and materials from research libraries (through connections to other libraries or interlibrary loan - discussed later in this file.)

Libraries aren't there to teach you everything or find all the answers for you, but they'll be glad to help you figure out where to look, what materials might be helpful to you, and how to access the materials you're interested in.

To get full access to a public library's services, you will generally get a library card for that library (or library system). They will usually ask you to prove you live in the area, through a driver's license or other photo ID with your address on it, and sometimes a utility bill or other document like that.

If you don't live in the area, you may still be able to access a number of services. Exactly which ones will depend on the library's services and how they're set up. For example, at some libraries, you need a library card to use a computer, but there may be day passes or other options if you need something quick.

You can generally use the physical spaces in the library (as long as you follow the library's rules), and materials even if you don't have a library card there.

Library consortia

> Many libraries are part of a network of libraries
> (Often called a consortium : consortia is the plural.)
>
> Think of it as the libraries hanging out and sharing resources
> and tips with each other. More neat things for everyone!

Public libraries can exist on their own, be a branch in a larger system in the same town or city, or be part of a regional network that allows you to check out and use resources at any library in the system.

For example, I have lived in a city (Minneapolis), in a rural town (in Maine) and now in a suburb near Boston. Minneapolis had a network of city libraries, but was also tied into a consortium that included the entire metro area. While I lived there, the Minneapolis (city) and Hennepin County libraries combined into one larger system.

> Some of those books are fabulous, but a lot of them have significant quality issues in terms of writing skill - too many misspellings, very confusing writing, and so on.

The public library in Maine was a single library, but could get books from other libraries in the state within a week. People in the area could get a community patron card at the state university library where I worked just like they could get a public library card (with proof of identity and local address). The academic library was open more hours than the public library, so we also often had community patrons coming in to use computers, copiers, and research space.

My current town has one main library and one smaller branch, but is in an immediate network with 42 other libraries in the northwest Boston metro, and I can also get a library card for the Boston Public Library and access their collection and electronic resources.

Small library notes

There are a lot of small towns out there, and many of them have libraries. However, the libraries in small towns often have fewer resources than other places.

Sometimes that means a very small staff - maybe just one or two people. Obviously, if one of those people gets sick or has a family crisis, that has a huge impact. They also are going to be limited in the range of services they can offer for budget, staff, and skill reasons.

In many very small libraries, none of these people may have a master's degree in library and information science (the professional degree for librarians - more about that in part 5 if you're curious).

They often provide great service for their particular community, but they may not have much training in dealing with difficult or challenging situations, or helping with questions outside the most common ones in that community. There may not be many resources supporting different religions, cultures, languages, relationship types, or limited materials about sexual orientation and identity.

(Some of this is just because small libraries with small budgets have small collections, and no topic is going to have tons of books. But learning how to build a diverse collection about things a librarian doesn't know about themselves is also a specific skill.)

There are also some particular challenges in very small libraries, where you may know the librarian through social settings, school, family connections, or other ways. This can make it scary to check out books about some topics. There's more about ways to work around this in part 5.

School libraries:

School libraries are pretty easy to explain: they're libraries in schools (public schools, private schools, whatever.)

They mostly focus on providing the materials needed in that specific school, so their collections have a lot about the topics that come up a lot in classes, but not necessarily much about other topics.

Some school libraries encourage kids to be in the library when they don't need to be somewhere else, others have strict schedules (often because the library space is used for lots of classes, or because there's limited staff.)

You generally can't get access to a given school library unless you're associated with that school (for the safety of the kids.)

Some school libraries have professional library staff (this is the ideal). Others rely on part time help from other staff or volunteers. Sometimes these mean that kids may be discouraged from freely exploring the library, have limited time there, or that resources may be very limited. If this is true for any schools you know, advocating for better library services is a great project to get behind.

Academic libraries:

Academic libraries are those at colleges, universities, and other places of higher learning. Like school libraries, the collection is going to focus on what's taught in that school, but the topics will usually cover a much wider range.

Academic libraries still have a lot of books, but these days, most academic libraries spend half their budget on electronic resources like databases and ebooks. Many academic libraries offer some additional resources, whether that's some lighter reading, programs and lectures on topics of general interest, or workshops to learn how to use technology.Academic library services are obviously most available to people associated with that institution, but there are sometimes other ways to get access. Many public university libraries allow access to resources on site by residents of that state, and a lot of other academic libraries allow access to people who live in that town or nearby area (especially in more rural areas where there aren't a lot of libraries, like the one where I worked in Maine.)

Other schools have an option to pay a fee (I've most commonly seen something in the $50-100 range for a year) for access, usually by joining a 'friends of the library' or similar group. Finally, if the school offers extension courses or allows enrollment in a single course at a time, that often comes with library access.

If you're near a college or university campus, there are likely to be lectures, concerts, and other programs that are free or very inexpensive for the public to attend.

Special libraries:

Special libraries are the category that covers everything else – these are libraries in hospitals, law offices, large businesses, federal and armed forces libraries, libraries for state-level departments, all sorts of other places. It also includes places like archives and state libraries.

Usually these focus very heavily on a particular topic, and they serve a limited range of questions and patrons. Access depends on the library, and on whether you have particular reason to use their resources. However, for people doing research into a particular topic, they can be invaluable resources.

Subscription libraries:

These were one of the ways people got books before the spread of public libraries in the late 1800s, and there are some of them still around.

In this kind of library, you pay a fee each year to have access to the collection, that fee pays for items and staff. Some subscription libraries are huge (like the Boston Athenaeum), others are very small, or focused on a particular field.

Some allow access in the building for free, and require a membership to check items out. A few subscription libraries have extensive database collections, and membership can let you access them, even if you're not local to that library.

Library staff

Too many people have stories about dealing with a disapproving librarian. Those always make me cringe because they turn people away from using great resources that they should be able to access.

People working in libraries often have different kinds of education, background, experience, and training. (Part 5 talks about this more in detail.) Whatever their experience and education, library staff should treat you politely and help with your questions without making you feel bad or ashamed or stupid.

(If someone breaks library rules, they may have to leave, or have other consequences, but that's different.)

If you think a library staff member has treated you badly (or outside the library's policies), you should let someone higher up in the library know. Check out part 5 for more help and ideas.

Chapter 2
What do libraries offer?

In this section, I'm focusing on materials you can find in public libraries, since they are so widely available. Part 4 talks about some additional services and resources, too.

Books and print materials

Books are the first thing most people think of when you mention libraries, and libraries usually have plenty of books!

Most public libraries will have a variety of books: fiction, non-fiction, children's books, young adult titles, reference titles, graphic novels, and many others. They also have subscriptions to magazines, newspapers, and other publications.

Checking out books:
Library loan policies are set by the individual library, so check their website or visit and ask for more information to find out the details. Typically you can check out books for at least a few weeks, and you can often renew them.

If you're like me, and have a hard time remembering to take books back to the library, many libraries now have tools that can email you with a reminder, or let you renew (or pay fines) online.

Ebooks and audio books:
Not all books are in print! Many public libraries offer ebooks and audio books. The most common system right now is called Overdrive, but your local library can tell you what they offer and help you get set up.

Can't use print?

If you have trouble using print materials (because of visual impairment, dyslexia, or physical needs that make it hard to hold or use print books), your library can probably connect you to services that can provide materials in other formats. In the United States, this is the [National Library Service](#) and there are libraries that serve each state.

Databases

Many libraries also offer access to databases. Databases collect articles from multiple publications. Some focus on things like newspapers or magazines about a topic, but others collect material from academic journals.

Usually libraries will list how to access any databases they offer on their website. Look for links that say things like "Online resources" or "Databases" or "Research."

Videos and music

Some libraries also give you the chance to check out videos (on DVDs or other media) or music (on CDs) and some even make these available through online downloads. The library website or the librarians can tell you more.

Librarians to help you

Librarians are a huge benefit of libraries. They can help you find resources, direct you to tools you had no idea about, and save you a lot of time and money. Don't worry about bothering a librarian at the information or reference desk (so long as they're not in the middle of helping someone else). That's what they're there for.

I promise, if you're asking anything more interesting than "Where's the bathroom?" or "Where's the printer?" they'll likely be thrilled. If you've got a really complicated question, they may ask for contact info so a librarian can follow up with you or so they can refer you to a better library for that question.

Programs

Libraries offer a huge variety of programs. Depending on the library, these can include story time for young children, activities for pre-teens, teens, and young adults, book groups for adults, and lectures or presentations.

In many places, you can also get help from volunteers - many libraries host homework help programs, computer courses, or help preparing your taxes. Some places have groups for people learning new languages or a specific skill.

Items

Some libraries even lend out items. This depends a lot on the library, but they often include things people use occasionally but not often - special cake pans, devices to measure electrical draw, board games, and other similar things.

Many libraries offer passes for museums in their area or other access to events.

Groups of libraries (consortia)

These days, many libraries group together to provide more resources to all of the library users. This can have all sorts of benefits.

✦ You can check out materials from any library in the consortium (handy if you work near a different library than your home one).

✦ Libraries can pool their resources. Instead of buying 12 copies of a book for 12 libraries, maybe they buy 6 copies, and share them, and buy 6 copies of a second title. More options in the collection!

✦ Groups of libraries can often provide more access to online resources like databases (they're in a better position to negotiate with vendors).

✦ Different libraries in the same general region may have very diverse communities they serve. Consortia agreements mean a much richer and broader range of materials for everyone.

✦ Consortia can allow for more specialised staff - allowing the library to offer additional tools (because there's a developer working for the system as a whole) or an expert in a particular area to help all the libraries.

Chapter 3
Learning about a library

How do you figure out what your library offers? That's going to take a little exploration.

In person

One great option is just to head over there and take a look around. If your local library is open to the public and somewhere you can get to easily, this is a fast way to learn a lot.

Libraries have busy times.

Public libraries tend to be extra busy after school lets out until about an hour before they close (often about 3:30pm to 7ish).

If you want a bit more peace and quiet, try a different time. The first hour on weekend mornings, the last hour they're open on a given day, or the middle of the day usually are quieter at many public libraries.

Want to explore on your own?

It's usually fine to go wander around without talking to anyone, but people may ask if you need help. If you'd feel uncomfortable with this, consider checking the library out online first.

What to bring:

If you think you want to get a library card, check on what's needed and bring that with you. The library website can tell you, or you can call and check in advance (for some libraries, you can also ask this through a web form or social media page.)

Remember that the library may have rules about whether any food or drink is allowed. Often they aren't allowed, or only water in bottles that can be fully closed. This helps protect all the materials.

You may want a bag to help you carry things home, or a notebook and pen to take notes about things you want later. I often use my cell phone camera to snap photos of covers of books I want to learn more about later.

Online options

These days, most libraries have some sort of online presence. Sometimes it's really small, sometimes it's overwhelmingly large.

Specific pages you might want to check out:

✦ Hours (usually listed clearly or prominently linked on the front page)

✦ How to get a library card and borrowing items

✦ Technology options

✦ If there's a library blog or social media presence (great for timely info)

✦ Maps of the library

✦ Information about accessibility, programs, available spaces as they apply to you and your needs or interests.

✦ Details about unusual collections or materials.

You'll usually find a link to the catalog (books and other materials) prominently featured. Sometimes this is the center of the home page. Other times there will be a link that says "catalog" or something like "books and more". Some libraries have help guide - look for a link that says "Get help finding books, DVDs, CDS, and more" or something similar.

The same is true for online resources - different libraries list them differently. Online resources might be listed as "research and learning", "online resources", "eresources", "e-resources", "databases", "databases and journals", or related terms. In academic libraries, you may find references to subject and course guides: these point to specific resources for those topics.

More information

Congratulations! You've finished part 1 of "You and your library".

Part 2 focuses on how materials are arranged in libraries. It has three documents. One talks about some general useful background, and the others focus on the Dewey Decimal system and the Library of Congress system, the two most common systems used for materials in English around the world.

You can pick the one that makes the most sense for the libraries you use, or check them both out.

Have questions?

Please let me know if you have questions about something in this section or in the other sections in this course.

You can reach me at jenett@seekknowledgefindwisdom.com or use the contact form at http://seekknowledgefindwisdom.com/contact.