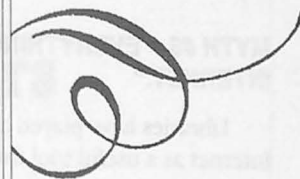# MYTHS ABOUT LIBRARIES & LIBRARY RESEARCH

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ith all the technology pouring into libraries over the last ten years, bibliographic instruction has been virtually transformed into database instruction. We no longer teach students how to find books in the card catalog or use **Humanities Index** to find journal articles. Instead we show them how do keyword searches with Boolean operators in the OPAC, and we introduce them to general and specialized databases to find articles. So when I was asked to talk about the library to a first year study skills class in a classroom that had no computer access, I momentarily found myself at a loss. I certainly didn't want to bore them with statistics, floor plans, and a detailed explanation of the Dewey Decimal System. Instead, I asked myself what kind of basic information might benefit students coming to the library to do research for the first time? And perhaps more importantly, what misinformation might be damaging their efforts and increasing their frustration? In answer to these questions, I came up with five myths about libraries and library services which can cause students to form attitudes and expectations that sabotage their library experiences.

MYTH #1: THE MCLIBRARY

We live in a fast food society that wants everything to be quick, easy, and cheap. What a lot of students don't realize is that good research takes time. It takes patience. You don't always find exactly what you want on the first try, and sometimes you have to follow a winding path, picking up different clues from resources along the way, before you finally reach your destination. Even those of us with training and experience can find research exasperating at times, so students shouldn't be surprised when they can't just run into the library, grab something and go.

Research also involves critical thinking and evaluation of resources. I often see students come to the library, do a database search, and print off the first couple full text articles they find. I wonder how many of them get back to their rooms and sit down to read an article, only to find that it isn't really helpful for their paper after all. Perhaps we need to break the word

down for them, pointing out that re-search implies searching again and again, trying to find not just any information, but the best, most pertinent information.

As for cheap, library services are in a sense "free." But in an academic setting, students are paying tuition, which covers not only their classes, but also materials to support those classes. These would include books, journals, multimedia, and ever expanding electronic resources. Of course, all those databases and electronic journals are not cheap. A lot of students aren't aware that the full text they are accessing is not available to everyone on the internet for free. It's important to point out to them that most of what they find through the databases is evaluated content, and much more reliable than what they can find doing a Yahoo! search.

MYTH #2: "THERE'S NOTHING ON MY TOPIC!"

We've probably all heard a student exclaim in frustration that the library has NOTHING on their topic. The fastest way to dispel this second myth about libraries is to tell them about some simple research strategies. Keyword searching is supposed to make searching an online catalog or database easier, but sometimes our students focus so intently on that "key" word, that they lose sight of the big picture. If their topic is too focused, they may need to broaden it by finding books on the history of labor and checking the tables of contents and indexes to find out about sweatshops. It is also important to learn to brainstorm for synonyms and phrases that apply to their topic. A search for "working conditions," "child labor" and "factory labor" may prove more fruitful than just searching for "sweatshops." Finally, I like to tell them about finding one good book or article and using the subject headings to expand their search.

Another way to combat the big NOTHING myth is to send students to encyclopedias and other reference sources in order to get an overview of their topic. In the sweatshops example, the Britannica Micropaedia provided valuable information on the origin of the term, the social and economic conditions that contributed to their development, and the associated practices of homework and contracting. Although the article itself

was only three paragraphs long, it was a good source for some basic information and for finding more keywords to use in a database search.

MYTH #3: "EVERYTHING I NEED IS ON THE INTERNET."

Libraries have played a large part in promoting the internet as a useful tool for finding information. As a result, many students come into the library (or DON'T come into the library), thinking that everything they need is on the net. However, there is a big difference between doing research in a library and doing it on the internet. In a library, books, journals, videos and CDs are carefully cataloged, labeled and shelved according to certain organizational principles. The internet, despite the efforts of commercial search engines, is essentially unorganized and unreliable. Roger Ebert described it best when he said that "Doing research on the Web is like using a library assembled piecemeal by packrats and vandalized nightly."1

Students also need to know another important distinction between books and journals in a library and web sites on the internet. While print media is subjected to certain screening processes like editorial review and fact checking, anyone with a computer, an internet connection and a little bit of design knowledge can "publish" a web site. As librarians, we often evaluate books based on the credentials of the author and the reputation of the publisher, but when the publisher is the author, determining the quality of the information becomes a more difficult task. In order that this discussion of the drawbacks of the internet won't discourage students completely, take this opportunity to tell them about the library web pages where they can find links to more reliable subject guides and collections of reviewed sites.

MYTH #4: "LIBRARIANS ARE TOO BUSY TO HELP ME."

Far too many students do not take advantage of one of the best resources in the library: the librarian. We live here among all these books, journals and computer databases, and we can help students find their way through what often seems like a perilous maze. We might show them how to use the online catalog, suggest an appropriate database for their topic, or explain how to read a journal citation. Even if we're sitting at our desks absorbed in some task, it is also part of our job to help students. Perhaps they would be surprised to find out that we enjoy it!

MYTH #5: LIBRARIANS ARE THERE TO DO MY WORK FOR ME."

At the other extreme are students who don't really want help. They want service. They want to bypass the research process and have what they need handed to them. While this may be appropriate in a public or special library setting, college students are expected to do their own research as part of the learning experience. I have shown students how to do a database search, only to have them ask me if a particular article is "good." I usually handle this by asking questions that will lead them to their own conclusion. I am proud to be part of a profession that puts such value on being helpful, but in an educational setting, we need to know where to draw the line, and students need to be aware of exactly where that line is.

College students come to us having had a variety of experiences with libraries. Perhaps their parents have been taking them since they were little and they love to wander the stacks looking for treasure. Others may only have gone when forced to in school, so the library is forever associated with homework and drudgery. None of them have had to do research at the level that is expected in college, and for many, it can be a rude awakening. By defining and then dispelling these five myths, we give students a greater understanding of the research process, as well as a few hints to help them navigate the increasingly overwhelming world of electronic resources available at their fingertips.

(Endnotes)

1 Roger Ebert, "Critical Eye Column," *Yahoo! Internet Life* 4 (September 1998): 66.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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