How to use a library

By James A. Michener

Who knows what your library can open up for you?
My first suggestion for making the most of your library is to do what I did: read and read and read. For pleasure—and for understanding.

How to kick the TV habit
If it's TV that keeps you from cultivating this delicious habit, I can offer a sure remedy. Take home from the library a stack of books that might look interesting.
Pile them on the TV set. Next time you are tempted to turn on a program you really don't want to see, reach for a book instead.
Over the years, some people collect a mental list of books they mean to read. If you don't have such a list, here is a suggestion. Take from the library some of the books you might have enjoyed dramatized on TV, like Remarque's "All Quiet on the Western Front," Clavell's "Shogun," Tolkien's "The Hobbit," or Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables."
If you like what you read, you can follow up with other satisfying books by the same authors.
How do you find these or any other books you're looking for? It's easy—with the card catalog.

Learn to use the card catalog
Every time I go to the library—and I go more than once a week—I invariably make a beeline to the card catalog before anything else. It's the nucleus of any public library.
The card catalog lists every book in the library by:
1. author; 2. title; 3. subject.
Let's pick an interesting subject to look up. I have always been fascinated by astronomy.
You'll be surprised at the wealth of material you will find under "astronomy" to draw upon. And the absorbing books you didn't know existed on it.
CAUTION: Always have a pencil and paper when you use the card catalog. Once you jot down the numbers of the books you are interested in, you are ready to find them on the shelves.

Learn to use the stacks
Libraries call the shelves "the stacks." In many smaller libraries which you'll be using, the stacks will be open for you to browse.
To me there is a special thrill in tracking down the books I want in the stacks! For invariably, I find books about which I knew nothing, and
these often turn out to be the very ones I need. You will find the same thing happening to you when you start to browse in the stacks.

"A learned mind is the end product of browsing."

"Every time I go to the library, I make a beeline to the card catalog. Learn to use it. It's easy."

CAUTION: If you take a book from the stacks to your work desk, do not try to return it to its proper place. That's work for the experts. If you replace it incorrectly, the next seeker won't be able to find it.

Learn to know the reference librarian

Some of the brightest and best informed men and women in America are the librarians who specialize in providing reference help. Introduce yourself. State your problem. And be amazed at how much help you will receive.

CAUTION: Don't waste the time of this expert by asking silly questions you ought to solve yourself. Save the reference librarian for the really big ones.

Learn to use The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature

This green-bound index is one of the most useful items in any library. It indexes all the articles in the major magazines, including newspaper magazine supplements. Thus it provides a guide to the very latest expert information on any subject that interests you.

So if you want to do a really first-class job, find out which magazines your library subscribes to, then consult The Reader's Guide and track down recent articles on your subject. When you use this wonderful tool effectively, you show the mark of a real scholar.

Four personal hints

Since you can take most books home, but not magazines, take full notes when using the latter.

Many libraries today provide a reprographic machine that can quickly copy pages you need from magazines and books. Ask about it.

If you are working on a project of some size which will require repeated library visits, keep a small notebook in which you record the identification numbers of the books you will be using frequently. This will save you valuable time, because you won't have to consult the card catalog or search aimlessly through the stacks each time you visit for material you seek.

Some of the very best books in any library are the reference books, which may not be taken home. Learn what topics they cover and how best to use them, for these books are wonderful repositories of human knowledge.

Your business and legal advisor

Your library can give you help on any subject. It can even be your business and legal advisor.

How many times have you scratched your head over how to get a tax rebate on your summer job? You'll find answers in tax guides at the library. Thinking of buying or renting a house? You'll find guides to that. Want to defend yourself in traffic court? Find out how in legal books at the library.

Library projects can be fun—and rewarding

Here are a few ideas:

1. What are your roots? Trace your ancestors. Many libraries specialize in genealogy.

J. A. Michner

"I discover all kinds of interesting books just by browsing in the stacks. I encourage you to browse."

Pennsylvania, and the huge research library located at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. And I like libraries so much that I married a librarian.

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