

Libraries – browsing in books

Before you search for sources in an archive or interview an eyewitness, you should read some general background information on your topic. Only then can you ask critical questions of a witness or correctly classify a source. What you need are reference books, from general lexicons to specialist literature. You find such books in libraries.

In larger cities, there are often a variety of libraries, for example:

- School library
- City library
- University library
- Libraries of research institutes
- Libraries of companies and organisations
- Libraries of museums and churches, government agencies and parliaments

Which kind of libraries exist?

The motto of your bibliographical search should be: from the general to the specific. You will find the very first information on a topic in well-known lexicons. In the next stage, overall descriptions give you further details on a particular subject area. And specialised literature can then provide answers to very specific questions. In this way, you approach your individual research subject step by step.

1. The preparation

The following tips will help you navigate libraries. By the way: Before you look for a library, you should speak with your teacher. He or she can certainly name the first important books that you should read. These may even be located in your school library.

Before you go to a library, inquire about the business hours and the use or lending terms. Who can use this library and borrow books? In this way, you might spare yourselves unnecessary trips.

Using lexicons and schoolbooks, collect initial keywords and literature guidelines on your theme.



When you're finally ready to go to a library, you should take along the following objects:

- Pens,
- Index cards or lots of notepaper,
- Coins or a copy card,
- A reading pass.

2. In the library

The following tips can help you further:

- When you know keywords, authors or book titles that you wish to find, use the library catalogue. The latter is either stored in a cabinet or accessible via the computer. On your first visit, ask the library staff how to use the catalogue: Some are alphabetically organised (author names from A to Z) and others thematically organised, where keywords or author names will lead you to book titles.
- All books are provided with a call number composed of a series of letters and numerals. You should write this down along with the title. The call number will allow you or the librarian to find the volume you're seeking.
- When you have found the book in question, don't borrow it "blindly" without at least reading the table of contents (or the index of keywords and proper names) to find out if it is useful for you.
- In so-called reference libraries, you may not borrow books. Here a good method is to photocopy the appropriate pages (when you want to cite something) and to write on the copies what book they came from. You can also summarize the most important information on an index card (don't forget the bibliographical information and call number!).
- If you don't want to borrow a book immediately but think you might need it in the course of your research, then note on an index card the bibliographical information (e.g., Davies, Norman: Heart of Europe. A Short History of Poland. Oxford 1984), the call number under which you found it in the catalogue, and, on an upper corner of the index card, the keyword for which the book provides information.