

# Fear Not: Advice for Freshly Minted Academic Librarians

**Mark Robison**

University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN

**Abstract:** A reference and instruction librarian offers advice to colleagues entering new academic library positions about how to start researching and writing, how to engage with the profession, and how to grow in their librarianship practice.

**Author Bio:** Mark Robison is Political Science Librarian at the University of Notre Dame.

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For all its merits, library school is often lacking in how well it trains students for the actual issues they will face as librarians in the field. This fact is perhaps nowhere more evident than in academic libraries. Walking across the stage in their lemon yellow hoods, beaming as they clutch their master's diplomas, young library school grads imagine themselves seated behind reference desks in busy university learning commons across the country, helping beleaguered, grateful students find sources for their papers. In recognition of their efforts, these noble library servants will soon be hoisted high upon shoulders, celebrated as campus heroes. But woe to these dreamers. For upon starting their new positions, freshly minted academic librarians soon realize that the daily realities of their work are far from their hero's dream. Instead, they find themselves navigating organizational bureaucracy, assigned to aimless "task forces," and being pressured to research and publish as soon as possible. Despondent, they wonder what connection these new work responsibilities have to the philosophies of information access and public service they were so eager to put into action.

Fear not, freshly minted academic librarians. Your job is not so far from the dream after all. You simply need some help learning the ropes. Once you've done this, the clouds will part, and you will find that your jobs are full of rewarding opportunities to make meaningful differences in the lives of students. Here I offer five pieces of advice for brand-new academic librarians. While these points are most relevant to librarians in tenure-track (or tenure-track equivalent) positions, I hope anyone new to an academic library position will find some guidance in these words.

1. **Embrace your role as a teacher.** In today's library landscape, teaching is inseparable from librarianship. Gone are the days when bookish recluses could hide in their offices, selecting materials for the collection. Today, most academic libraries use a subject liaison model, in

which one librarian serves as the point-person for all of an academic department's needs: instruction, reference, collection development, outreach, and more. Even librarians in technical services positions, such as gurus in metadata and web design, will not be able to avoid giving the occasional public presentation. So, the first time you have to teach a library instruction session, you might pray for the floor to open up and swallow you whole. This is normal. But the second time you stand in front of a class, it gets easier. By the eighty-fourth time you do it, you will be amazed at how calm you are. Fortunately, there is much you can do to expedite your metamorphosis into a teacher. If you can't yet hold your own in a conversation about information literacy (IL), stop reading this column right now and go read the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2016) in its entirety. Additionally, *C&RL News* (<http://crln.acrl.org>) publishes a monthly column, "Perspectives on the Framework," which offers insights into how librarians are applying the Framework in their everyday work. Learn to recognize opportunities for infusing IL into any teaching you do. When planning lessons, consult models of instructional design and learning, such as the ADDIE model (Molenda, 2003) or Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002). Design learning objectives first, before you even consider which databases to demonstrate or which search examples you'll use. Most importantly, remember that the best learning happens when students are actively engaged in solving a problem. They will be bored to tears if you just stand in front of them and click on databases. If, however, you can get them to walk through the steps of a research process, to interact with actual information sources, and to do the work of information literacy themselves, you can help your students develop lifelong skills.

2. **Read library science journal articles.** It is likely you are already feeling pressured to find a research project. In conversations that are otherwise perfectly friendly, colleagues are probably sending shivers down your spine by mentioning the minimum number of publications you'll need for tenure and/or promotion and how that time goes faster than you think. Finding a research project can feel daunting, but fear not: you can do it. Start by regularly reading articles from library science journals. Think of any topic that interests you, and begin poking around in databases like *Library Literature and Information Science Index* to see what articles are out there. Or simply pull up a recent issue of *College & Research Libraries*, or another leading journal, and browse the table of contents. Reading the literature is easy and noncommittal. You can even do it on the job and consider it part of work! When it comes time to find a research project, your knowledge of the library literature will make it easier for you to find a unique research question and conduct your lit review. Even if you aren't expected to do research, keeping your pulse on the library literature helps you stay current on new developments in the field, which will give you ideas for how to do your own job better.
  
3. **Get on a committee.** Even if you are not in a tenure-track position, you should join a committee of a professional organization. Professional library organizations of all stripes (state-level, regional, national, etc.) have committees that need volunteers. Serving on a committee immediately expands your professional network, allowing you to meet other amazing, service-minded librarians from other institutions. Committee work also allows you to contribute meaningfully to the library profession. And, to be honest, in these times of technological, budgetary, and social change, the library profession needs you and the diversity and

perspective you bring. Other benefits of joining a committee include: having a good reason to attend conferences, giving you important leadership experience, and boosting the hell out of your CV. Joining a committee might sound intimidating, but it's actually remarkably easy, even at the national level. When you join or renew your ALA membership, simply fork over the extra \$15–\$63 to join a roundtable or division (e.g., ACRL, RUSA) that interests you. Once you're a roundtable or division member, explore their committees. For example, ALA's Library Instruction Round Table (LIRT) has ten sub-committees, which do everything from planning LIRT's conference programs to offering webinars about instructional technology. The roundtable or division's website will have information about how to join a committee, but there should also be an annual email call to all members asking for committee volunteers. That's your chance! Roundtables and divisions are often desperate for volunteers, especially for volunteers who are reliable and responsive. Similarly, don't forget about state-level library organizations. These organizations are likely less expensive to join, and are in even greater need of good volunteers. Hopefully, you will find a committee that matches your interests and does important work. But if you find yourself on a committee that is unproductive or poorly organized, finish out your term and then give it another shot with a different group. And who knows? Maybe you'll stick around the committee long enough to be elected to an executive office, and then you'll really be helping shape the library profession of the future!

4. **Say “yes” to small writing opportunities.** Not everything you write needs to be a peer-reviewed research article. If you are expected to publish as part of your job, don't overlook smaller, gateway opportunities. Many journals publish book reviews and product reviews, which are

intended to keep readers informed about new resources. Other journals publish literature reviews and even article reviews, which summarize recent scholarship on a topic. If you need to get some publications on your CV, these smaller writing opportunities can help you gain some experience with writing and publishing in the library literature. These writing opportunities are often advertised on library listservs, such as ILI-L, RSS-L, or COLLIB-L. (For more library listservs, visit <http://lists.ala.org/sympa>.) When people are looking for writing contributors, they usually add the phrases “Call for Contributors” or “Call for Publications” (often abbreviated “CFP”) in the subject line. You also can find library-related writing opportunities on websites dedicated solely to that purpose, such as Corey Seeman’s A Library Writer’s Blog (<http://librarywriting.blogspot.com>) or Helen Fallon’s Academic Writing Librarians (<http://academicwritinglibrarian.blogspot.com>). Sometimes, these smaller writing assignments can lead to bigger opportunities. By establishing a reputation for yourself as someone who writes well and meets deadlines, editors might pass your name along for other research and writing opportunities.

5. **Break down barriers in your library.** Maybe you’re already discovering the various hierarchies and red tape that govern your library. Some library employees work hourly, while others are salaried. Some are staff, others are faculty. Some faculty are tenure-track, others are on annual contracts. Maybe your library even has rules that restrict you from collaborating with librarians in other departments, or other such nonsense meant to keep employees in line. Do whatever you can to break down these barriers. To be an effective librarian, and to provide your patrons with exceptional services, programs, instruction, and collections, you will need to partner with

and unleash the powers of your various colleagues. Get to know library employees in other departments and, if your campus has multiple branch libraries, other buildings. Speak to them, learn their names, and learn what their jobs entail. Fostering these relationships will expand your knowledge of all aspects of librarianship, and it will lead to amazing opportunities to collaborate on programs, instruction, research, or other projects. Besides opening the doors for collaboration, breaking down barriers also will improve workplace morale for everyone involved. As a freshly minted academic librarian, you might not yet recognize the many ways in which your administration privileges you above your hourly staff colleagues. These hourly staff members earn less. They have fewer vacation days. They are scrutinized more closely with regard to when they show up and when they take breaks and what counts as “work” for them. Simply treating all your colleagues as equals will make your workplace a more pleasant place to be day in and day out.

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