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# Surviving your first library job search, or, an explanation of what I had to learn the hard way, re-produced here, for you, so that you are not driven to drink as well

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## Surviving Your First Library Job Search

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### or, What I Had To Learn the Hard Way, Reproduced Here, for You, So That You Are Not Driven To Drink as Well

By Steven Hoover -- *Library Journal*, 09/15/2009

Searching for a library job can be a life-changing ordeal, but try not to let that bother you. The scars that it will leave on your psyche are likely to heal in time. When I was starting the job search process, I found that the professional literature had a lot to say about writing good cover letters and developing solid interview skills but not a lot of information about what searching for a job was really like on a daily basis. Hopefully, after reading this article, you have a little better sense of what to expect during your search, pick up a few tips, and generate ideas for coping strategies that might help you survive long enough to find a job.

#### Find a mentor

First and foremost, you need a mentor. Have more than one if you like, but you need at least one. Without a mentor, your chances of finding a job and maintaining your sanity during the search are dangerously close to zero. Your mentor will probably not be someone assigned to you. The librarian equivalent of Obi-Wan Kenobi will not appear before you in your darkest hour and direct you to the person who will be your Yoda.

Mentors can be elusive creatures initially but often take the form of professors, instructors, bosses, coworkers, or people you stumble upon completely by accident. You may not recognize a mentor right away. Some of them do not reveal their true nature until you have known them for a while. That being said, it won't be hard to know when you have found the right person. Your mentor should have a thorough understanding of your strengths, weaknesses, and the whole truth about what you're looking for in a job. One thing to remember is that your mentor is not necessarily your cheerleader. Mine was, and I wouldn't have had it any other way, but the ability to keep your spirits up is not the only quality that's necessary. Your mentor should be someone who can talk you down when you are inflating a problem or obstacle out of proportion. He/she will let you know when you are moving in the wrong direction or taking the wrong approach. Basically, your mentor must be someone you can trust who genuinely cares about your success and always has your best interest in mind.

#### Dedicate time

Applying for jobs takes time, a lot of time. If you think that you will be able to excel in three graduate-level classes, hold down two part-time jobs, apply for full-time jobs, go on interviews, and avoid some degree of mental collapse, you are a finer human being than I. Notice that I didn't include things such as free time, fun, or relationships in the preceding list. If your life includes any of these latter elements, please hire an assistant to deal with them before starting your job search.

During the period when I was trying to accomplish all of these things at once, classmates would often see me in the hallway and ask how I was doing, only to be met with a grunt. Many of them, wisely, stopped asking. Applications have deadlines, and new job announcements appear daily. The best thing to do is to try to schedule a little bit of time each day to work on them and to stick to that allotted amount of time. Filling out applications is a potentially endless time-suck, so don't let yourself get overwhelmed.

#### Prepare your paperwork

One of the jobs I considered applying for asked that I submit an application, a résumé/CV, a cover letter, three letters of recommendation, a diversity statement, and an essay that explains my understanding of the value of the community college in the higher education system of America. A paragraph into the essay, I realized that applying for this particular library was a waste of time. Most of the libraries I applied to only required a résumé /CV, cover letter, and contact information for three references. One might expect that larger institutions would want more effort and paperwork, but my experience was that the opposite is usually true. Small institutions asked for the most, and the large ones asked for the least. For almost any job, be ready to submit, at a minimum, a cover letter, résumé/CV, and a list of contact information for three references.

#### Be strategic about cover letters and CVs

All of the literature on library job searches will tell you that it's important to tailor your cover letter to the job for which you are applying. This is certainly true. Does it mean that you need to start fresh and write a new cover letter for every job? Some people do, and, for that, I give them a lot of credit. The

reality is that most students don't have the time. I'm not saying that it's a good idea to have a template set up that only requires you to plug in the name of the job for and library to which you are applying. This will result in impersonal cover letters that probably won't get you offers, but it's not a bad idea to reuse some parts of your cover letter. I found that the easiest parts to reuse are the sections that outline my work and education experience. I would always take the time to tailor the language and remove/add sections that were specific to the job in question, but it would have been a waste of time to rewrite completely those parts over and over again.

Many libraries now employ online applications. Believe me when I tell you that filling out an online application can be a time-consuming and mind-numbing process, but, on the upside, it does save paper. Typically, online applications require all of the information that would normally be found on your résumé/CV, so the best thing to do is have electronic copies of said documents open while filling out the application so that you can cut and paste as much as possible. If you're worried about formatting issues, be sure to save in rich or plain text format. It's also a great idea to make a webpage version of your résumé/CV. It doesn't have to be fancy. An online résumé/CV can be linked to a portfolio of papers and projects and also shows employers that you have web programming and design experience.

All of the usual tips about applying for jobs are relevant to finding work at a library. Have others critique your résumé/CV and cover letters, develop a portfolio to show to prospective employers (and make it accessible online if possible), practice your interview skills whenever you get a chance, and do your best to anticipate the kinds of questions you're likely to be asked.

#### **Get a job while in school**

The first class that I had in library school was reference. One of the first things that the professor did was to let us know that we would be learning many important things over the course of the semester, but that the most important thing we could do to prepare ourselves for a career as a librarian was to go out and find a job in a library as soon as humanly possible. He was right. This is something that every library student should be told on the first day of class. Nothing can set you up for success as much as having previous experience working in a library. The classes you took and projects that you worked on in school will certainly be good talking points in an interview, but your interviewers will almost certainly be most interested in your part-time or full-time library experience.

My faculty advisor gave me good advice on choosing the right jobs while in library school. He told me that if I knew exactly what career path I wanted to take when I graduated, I needed to start looking for work along similar lines. He went on to say that if I wasn't completely sure—and I wasn't—that I should try a variety of jobs until I figured out what I liked. That's exactly what I did. After working for a semester in technical services, I discovered that it really wasn't for me. I jumped at the chance to start working in reference and found that I liked it. Later on, the opportunity to work in instruction came up, and I got involved there as well. Working in a variety of positions in the library will probably never hurt your chances of getting a specific job. Having experience in all aspects of the library makes you a better librarian.

The jobs that you have while you are in school are going to be the source of your best recommendations. Potential employers don't mind seeing letters from your professors, but one from your supervisor will probably carry more weight. Your supervisors know how you perform in a day-to-day work environment, can speak to your qualities as an employee, and, therefore, write a recommendation that means more to a prospective employer.

#### **Be realistic about student groups and professional organizations**

Some people will tell you that it is absolutely essential to participate in student chapters and hold an office in some sort of library-related student organization while you are in school. My experience is that this is both true and false. I found a very good job without doing so, but some of my classmates were able to get quite a bit of mileage out of the opportunities and experiences these activities and positions provided. Participating certainly adds to your résumé/CV and helps to project an aura of service and leadership, but being heavily involved in these organizations can take a lot of effort and time. If you feel that studying, writing, working, or other activities are a better fit, then you're probably right. Joining an organization or group simply to put it on your résumé is a mistake, and it doesn't really benefit anyone in the long run.

#### **Use rejection**

Unless you are the most exceptional library student in the whole world, and I'm sure one of the people reading this article is, you will probably be rejected for a position. This, fortunately, is not the end of the world. The important thing to remember is that, to a large extent, you decide how the rejection affects you.

The only way that rejection letters are ever helpful is to let you know that you don't have to think about a particular job anymore. They will never include the kind of information that will improve or modify your approach to be more successful in the future. They are basically junk mail. That being said, the biggest mistake you can make is to throw your rejection letters in the trash—at least recycle them. Instead of disposing of your rejections, even in an environmentally friendly manner, think of a creative way to use them to your advantage. I taped my rejection letters to my refrigerator. It was a practice started by some of my roommates when I was an undergrad. Some mornings, while getting milk, orange juice, or beer, it was our custom to look at the rejection letters and silently curse the company or institution that believed themselves too good for us. Most days, we reminded ourselves that anyone who couldn't see our potential and value wasn't someone we would be happy working for anyway. After these

ruminations, we would go out to face the day with renewed vigor and the determination to prove these naysayers wrong.

I continued the practice when I started looking for a library job, and it worked for me. A few friends visited my house and upon finding a refrigerator covered in rejection letters, started making inquiries about my mental stability. I'm not saying the refrigerator will work for everyone, but you should consider doing something cathartic with your rejections: burn them, tear them into little bits, or check them for spelling and grammar errors and then return to sender, with corrections in red ink.

Some libraries don't send rejection letters. There is no excuse for this. None. If you work in a human resources department or are in a position of power in a library and are reading this article, ask yourself, "Does my library send rejection letters?" If the answer is no, fix this immediately. There are few things worse than applying for a job and then never having closure. It never really bothered me all that much to be rejected. It did not tarnish my overall impression of the institution in the slightest. My view of the libraries that chose not to reply at all is much different. When a library didn't reply to my application, I was forced to make one of the following conclusions. One, the library was totally classless and had no respect for the effort I put forth. Two, the library was so strapped for resources that it couldn't devote the time and manpower necessary to send or email a form letter. Three, both the first and the second conclusion were true, and it was a good thing that I would not be working there.

#### **The interview is a two-way street**

Getting one's first phone interview is a good feeling. It's fine to bask in the success that comes with that event, but one phone interview should not be a signal to stop applying. Instead, view it as a sign that the efforts you are putting out are producing results. It's difficult to know what sort of questions you will be asked, but be prepared to talk about why you are interested in the position, your experience and education, and always be ready with questions for the interviewers.

The feeling of getting a phone interview doesn't really compare to the feeling of getting an in-person interview. The same can be said for the anxiety that may build as the interview date approaches. You will likely be asked to give a presentation, so practice and prepare ahead of time. If you have PowerPoint files or any other type of handout, be sure to make it accessible in a variety of ways (for example, via flashdrive, CD, emailed, uploaded) so that there are no disasters on your end. When traveling, pack as lightly as possible. If you are flying, plan ahead for connections and delays, and, above all, try not to check luggage. It's adds a risk worth avoiding if at all possible.

One of my professors told me that any library that wouldn't pay travel expenses for an interview wasn't a library worth working for. Whether this is true or not is largely up to you. Whatever the case may be, it is a good idea to get a credit card to take care of those expenses. Even libraries that pay travel expenses will usually only do so through reimbursement. There's no reason to drain your bank account upfront.

One piece of advice that you will hear from people over and over is that while you are being interviewed, you are also interviewing the library and its staff. When I first heard this, I found it laughable. I saw my prospects for finding a job so bleak that I couldn't imagine a situation where I wouldn't take a job that was offered. I felt this way until one library failed its portion of the interview after only about two hours. From the exchanges that had taken place during that time, I realized that even if I were offered the directorship, at a salary exceeding my wildest expectations, there was no way I would work there. It wasn't the right fit for me, and I could sense that I would be miserable. I had the exact opposite experience after a phone interview for the position I am in currently. After hanging up, I knew that I wanted to work there and that I would be at least a little disappointed if I ended up anywhere else.

#### **Be prepared for success**

The best-case scenario for library students entering the job market is being forced to pick among a handful of solid offers. It is not a stress-free situation, but it is certainly a better flavor of stress than the kind most people experience while waiting to hear back from their first round of applications. When you find yourself faced with multiple offers and looming acceptance deadlines, turn to your mentor. The best sort of mentor will probably listen to you talk about the options and then tell you what you have already decided but not realized. Most libraries will give you a bit extra time to make a decision as long as you are honest about your situation. That being said, don't take one minute longer than necessary to give an answer.

#### **Advice**

My biggest problem in the job search was that I was convinced I would be jobless when graduation rolled around and I would be forced to rent out my research services to undergraduates like some sort of bibliographic prostitute. Teachers, supervisors, and friends told me that this wouldn't be the case and that I would eventually find a job—I just didn't believe them. Everyone will have advice for you, just as this article does. It will all be well intentioned, so do your best to absorb it, process it, and decide if it's sound advice for you. Best of luck.

#### **Best Resources for Job Seekers**

One thing to keep in mind when searching for jobs on the Internet is that many are cross-posted, so it's not necessary to visit every one of your favorite sites every day. Be organized. If you're thinking about being a librarian, you probably already love spreadsheets. Start one for to keep track of when you applied for jobs, due dates, and rejections.

## HigherEdJobs

Some of the jobs listed on [higheredjobs.com](#) can be found in other sources, but it is still a useful site to use because of its sorting options for results. After searching for jobs by keyword, users can sort returns by "Date Posted," "Institution," "Location," "Priority," "Job Title," and "Category."

## JobWeb

University of Texas School of Information's JobWeb can be counted on to be up-to-date, easy to use, and full of detailed information for each listing. In addition, JobWeb provides an intuitive interface for searching listings that lets users limit by job type, specialization, and location. JobWeb will send users new jobs that match their preferences after filling out a simple form titled "Request Email."

## LIS Jobs

Rachel Singer Gordon's site is one of the best for finding library jobs. The "Job Postings" list is simple in appearance but provides one of the most comprehensive collections of available jobs anywhere on the Internet. Consider using the RSS feed to keep abreast of the most current announcements. The site also contains a wealth of briefly annotated links to other sources of information on the library profession.

## USA Jobs

If you're looking for a job with the U.S. government, this is the place to start. Federal agencies, the armed forces, and the Library of Congress all advertise openings on [usajobs](#), so there are almost always plenty of listings in areas all nationwide. Users who register with the site have the option to save their searches and receive updated results as new jobs appear.

## Other Excellent Resources for Job Listings

### [ALA Joblist](#)

### [ARL Careers](#)

### [Chronicle Careers](#)

### [HERC](#)

### [LIBJOBS discussion list](#)

### [Link Farms](#)

### [Indiana University School of Library and Information Science](#)

### [University of Texas School of Information](#)

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Steven Hoover is an Instruction/Liaison Librarian at Trinity University in San Antonio. His job search lasted about six months but ended well