



# A LETTER TO MY SENIORS

▶ JOYCE KASMAN VALENZA

**E**ACH SPRING, I WATCH ANOTHER GRADUATING CLASS LEAVE ME FOR COLLEGE AND ASSORTED OTHER NEW WORLDS. SECRETLY I WISH I COULD GO ALONG WITH EACH OF MY SENIORS TO PENN STATE OR JAMES MADISON OR TEMPLE. (I REALLY DO.)

But short of that, I'd settle for being able to send my best advice—a letter to stick in the pockets of their gowns at graduation. It would include my top ten tips for moving to the college information and communications landscapes, for searching smart, and for using information powerfully.

The graduation experience always brings to mind the weekend I took the training wheels off both my own childrens' bikes. They were determined to ride those two-wheelers like big kids for the first time. I was a little nervous. They'd been falling

and getting up a lot. The moment came when all that practice paid off, though. With a little push, and some you-can-do-it shouts, they successfully flew down the road, balancing on their very own.

I wondered, as my seniors lose their *research training wheels*, what should they take along with them to balance and fly straight through even bumpier information and communication challenges? Will the students I send into the world as supposedly information fluent distinguish themselves from other freshmen

without similar skills? What would my you-can-do-it shouts of advice for them sound like?

## ON WORDS

**Think about words.** When you search, enter the most important words first. Use nouns first when searching for documents. Try adjectives when you are searching for images. When you are working on visual presentations, adjective searching often results in powerful, evocative stuff.

Imagine your dream document. What words would the author definitely include? And remember spelling counts. Some search engines, **Google** for instance, will make spelling suggestions, but when you are unsure, it's best to check.

Word choice matters. You *don't know* what you don't know in a new or unfamiliar discipline. Your limited vocabulary is certain to restrict your results. You need context, a basic level of understanding. Mine your best results and the best documents you find for new words, phrases, names, and organizations. Be on the lookout for synonyms and related terms. Listen to how experts—including your professors—describe a topic.

**Subject headings help.** Use the subject headings that appear in library databases to discover new vocabulary, to better understand broader and narrower concepts, and to discover related topics. When you use subject headings, you take advantage of the work the database does to group things and organize knowledge. Some search engines—clustering and semantic search tools—also offer subject heading or tagging help. So in addition to **Google**, try **Clusty** (<http://clusty.com>), **Cuil** (<http://www.cuil.com>), **Grokker** (<http://live.grokker.com>), or **Hakia** (<http://hakia.com>).

**AND is your friend.** Search engines like **Google** and some databases assume an automatic AND. They are “AND agnostic.” But many databases worship AND as a Boolean operator. It is a cue that ensures all those words and phrases you enter in your search box appear in your results.

Because you are not always able to determine how a database treats AND, it is better to be safe and use it as a word between words and phrases. By the way, **Google** *does* like little plus signs for those little “noise” words it ordinarily ignores (+to+be+or+not+to+be). And when unwanted words thwart your **Google** search (for instance “football” for a search on “eagles”), consider using the minus (-) sign.

Quotation marks make very good friends too. In both search engines and databases, they keep together words that want to be together. Use them when you are searching phrases—two or more words together in the very same order as they appear in your dream documents. Names, songs, book titles, and true phrases like “genetic engineering” and “bed and breakfast” are best searched as phrases. So are quotable lines like “to be or not to be.”

## ON STRATEGIES

**Exploit your killer resources!** Once you've found the greatest article in the universe, cannibalize it. Examine the works cited. Whom did the author cite? Are the cited articles relevant to your research? Do the names of certain authors appear over and over again in the literature of the field? Are those authors worth searching?

**Use the advanced search screens.** Advanced search screens often allow you to better focus your research. In databases, you may choose to filter by date range, publication title, or document length. You can easily combine or eliminate words. One of my favorite advanced strategies is to search **Google** by file type, for example “.doc” and “.pdf” files. Searching this way can result in longer documents—sometimes valuable reports and ebooks. Searching by domain allows you to find only “.gov” or “.edu” sites.

**Are you searching in the right place?** Think bigger than **Google**. Think bigger than **Wikipedia**. Pick your databases with skill. You became really comfortable with our high school databases. Think beyond those databases you knew and loved. Those databases

were your research training wheels. You will find their look-alike older brothers and sisters on your college library's Web site. This may seem obvious, but if your research involves history, those news and current events databases are not likely to help.

Your university databases cover more journals, more magazines, more newspapers, more reference tools—more sources. They have more full text. They are often more specialized. You will also find a variety of databases devoted to the knowledge and literature of your major and the other disciplines you elect to study. Use them first!

For many of your projects, your instructors will expect you to find scholarly content. Know how to find the scholarly stuff. You may choose to begin with **Google Scholar** (<http://scholar.google.com>), but you will more likely find the full text you need in the university databases. **JSTOR** (<http://www.jstor.org>) is usually a good choice with its mostly

scholarly content. In the other databases, remember you can filter for the scholarly stuff. Look for the “easy” button. It will be labeled *scholarly*, *peer reviewed*, or *academic*.

**Be energetic about documentation.** You learned about crediting sources in your high school research, regardless of the medium your own research product took. Your professors will expect similar diligence, whether it is in a familiar format or one that is new to you. Follow your instructor's style sheet or the style recommended by the university even if is not explicitly required. Show yourself as a scholar. Demonstrate that you understand information ethics. Be proud of the research you conducted. Lead your reader back to these sources.

**W**HEN YOU SEARCH,  
ENTER THE MOST  
IMPORTANT WORDS  
FIRST. USE NOUNS FIRST WHEN  
SEARCHING FOR DOCUMENTS.  
TRY ADJECTIVES WHEN YOU ARE  
SEARCHING FOR IMAGES. WHEN  
YOU ARE WORKING ON VISUAL  
PRESENTATIONS, ADJECTIVE  
SEARCHING OFTEN RESULTS IN  
POWERFUL, EVOCATIVE STUFF.

## ON THE NEWER STUFF

**Search smart—PUSH.** Don't work so hard when it's unnecessary. These days you don't always need to "pull" or search for information; you can have the specific information "pushed" to you.

When you are searching a database, you may be able to have your searches continually updated by setting them up as e-mail alerts or RSS feeds. You won't have to keep checking the database for new content. Instead the database will come to you when new information pertinent to your search appears. **Google Alerts** (<http://www.google.com/alerts>) explores blogs, news, the Web, video, and more, pushing new content directly to your e-mail.

RSS feeds also come in the form of blogs and news sources. Look for feeds that match your research needs or your interests. An economics major might want regular feeds to sections of the **Wall Street Journal** or **The Economist**. An art major might want to regularly see the Arts section of **The New York Times**. Set these up as gadgets on an **iGoogle** page (<http://google.com/ig>) or set up your feeds in a reader or feed aggregator like **Google Reader** (<http://www.google.com/reader>).

**Look beyond articles.** When you search, search for blog posts as well as Web documents and articles. Most of the major search tools offer a blog search like **Google Blog Search** (<http://blogsearch.google.com>). Also check out **Technorati** (<http://technorati.com>), **Bloglines** (<http://bloglines.com>), or **Blog Pulse** (<http://blogpulse.com>). Blogs are primary sources. They often provide breaking news in a particular field and may be written by experts or firsthand observers who are in a position to forecast and identify trends. Blog content can also be more timely than content that goes through the formal publishing process.

You may also choose to search for experts to follow on the highly popular microblogging tool, **Twitter**. To search **Twitter**, use search tools like **TweetScan** (<http://tweetscan.com>) or **Search Twitter** (<http://search.twitter.com>) or **Twellow** (<http://www.twellow.com>).

It is important that your search go beyond text to include media as well. **Wikipedia** is only one way to get started. When I begin my own research, I often look for video and slideshows to help me better understand that new topic. I use **YouTube** (<http://youtube.com>) and **Google Video** (<http://video.google.com>) of course, but I also look at **SlideShare** (<http://slideshare.net>), **Academic Earth** (<http://www.academicearth.org>), **TED** (<http://www.ted.com>) and **UChannel** (<http://uc.princeton.edu>). Remember our media search pathfinder for more ideas (<http://streamingvideo.wikispaces.com>).

**Appreciate the gifts of Creative Commons and the Open Source movement.** And speaking of finding media, use **Creative Commons** (<http://creativecommons.org>) search tools when you produce and remix images, sound, and video. **Creative Commons** licenses allow creators to change copyright terms for their work from the default assumption of "all rights reserved" to a variety of "some rights reserved" options. People who contribute to the Commons want to share their work with you, as long as you attribute. Using **Creative Commons** resources demonstrates your respect for intellectual property as well as your recognition of a more open information landscape and the need for content users to build on prior knowledge.

The **Creative Commons** movement is great and growing. By the time you graduate from college, it should cover a huge amount of the creative material on the Web. Consider assigning a **Creative Commons** license to the work you create. You can also go back to our Copyright-Friendly Pathfinder (<http://copyrightfriendly.wikispaces.com>) for more background and a growing list of media portals.

## ON FINAL THOUGHTS

You'll notice that this letter is more about *getting* information than *using* information. The *using* part would require a much longer letter. But as long as we're talking about getting information, as a college student and curious learner, I hope you will do more than what the researchers call "satisficing," a cross between satisfying and sufficing. I want you to use your skills to find quality. I want you to go farther than many of your peers will. I want you to search for quality, relevance, currency, and credibility. I want you to find excellence, display excellence, and distinguish yourself from other freshmen.

And here's one more bonus tip, perhaps the most important one of all: You are not alone.

It is not uncool to ask for help. You will find librarians everywhere. (Sniff.) You will find one to take my place. You will likely find virtual reference on your campus. But please also get up and take a walk. If you make it to the library, librarians will help you. Build a relationship like the one you had here. You may find that your university has several libraries. The librarians who work in these libraries have specialties in your majors. They know about stuff

you need to know about and how to get the stuff you most need.

And guess what? I am still here. I love getting e-mail. I want to hear about your issues as well as your successes. ■

Keep in touch.

Wishing you happiness and information success,  
Your high school librarian,

*Mrs. V.*

*Joyce Kasman Valenza is the librarian at Springfield Township High School in Erdenheim, Pennsylvania, and her video series, Internet Searching Skills, was a 1999 YALSA Selected Video for Young Adults. Her newest book is Super Searchers Go to School (Information Today, 2005). Valenza's Virtual Library won the IASL School Library Web Page of the Year Award for 2001, and her blog won the Edublog Award for 2005. An active member of several professional organizations, she speaks regularly about issues relating to libraries and thoughtful use of educational technology. She recently earned a doctoral degree in Information Science at the University of North Texas.*