Research Skills
of Incoming Students

What can you expect of new first-year students? For the past few years, the library has surveyed the incoming class. Here are some of our recent findings:

We have come to understand that students’ perceptions of their abilities do not necessarily match their actual knowledge and skills. For example:

- Only 50% of students understood the meaning of “peer-reviewed,” yet 70% of students said they were able to determine whether a source is appropriate for an academic project.
- Only 20% of students understood the effect that additional search terms would have on the number of matching records in an online search, but 70% of students said they were able to revise their searches to increase the relevance of their results.

The way you describe the requirements for a project could have an effect on your students’ work. Consider providing examples of what you’re looking for. Librarians are glad to help students with source evaluation, too.

Because library databases are often designed for scholars, it can be difficult for new researchers to use them effectively. Library workshops can help students acquire the skills they need to fully engage with academic research.

Nearly 40% of incoming students are willing to admit that they are unsure of when or how to document a source.

Students arrive on campus with a variety of experiences regarding academic writing. Once they’re here, they’ll probably need to use several different citation styles, and they’ll be expected to adhere to Middlebury’s Honor Code too. The Academic Integrity Tutorial (http://go.middlebury.edu/aithelp) can help introduce students to academic integrity at Middlebury. The Library’s Citation Guide (http://go.middlebury.edu/citation) supplements the tutorial with discipline-specific examples and advice. Librarians are familiar with the tutorial and with citation instruction in general; let us know if you’d like us to share these resources with your students.

When asked about doing research, more than 50% of students say they don’t know which library database to use.

Research guides (http://go.middlebury.edu/guides) can help students find the best sources for any topic. Every guide also includes contact information for the librarian who specializes in the subject. You may wish to include a link to a specific guide in your syllabus; browse the list for the guide that is most relevant.

Please feel welcome to include your liaison librarian’s name and contact information in your syllabus, and refer to the librarian in class. We’re listed by our areas of expertise at http://go.middlebury.edu/liaisons. Remember that your students might not consult a librarian unless you suggest it.

These results are based on a 2015 Middlebury Libraries survey.