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Surviving SLIS: A Guide to Getting Through Library and Information Studies Graduate School

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SURVIVING SLIS

**A guide to getting through library
and information studies graduate school
by Eric Willey**

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Introduction

This is a blog about getting into, getting through, and getting what you can out of library graduate school. Most of it is drawn from my experience in a library and information studies graduate program, some of it from a history graduate program, and the rest from conversations with fellow students, colleagues, and instructors.

First of all, a word of caution: Some of this won't generalize to other schools, programs, Ph.D. programs, or even your individual situation. It's all different, and even if you're in the same program I was things will change over time, and be different for you.

With those limitations in mind, let me tell you what I am going to discuss.

What graduate school is, because if you do it well it isn't just more undergrad. Advice about getting into graduate school, from increasing your chances of getting in the conventional way to some less obvious methods. Surviving your classes. Dealing with professors. Applying for grants and scholarships, and stacking the odds of getting them in your favor as much as possible. Writing papers, turning them into articles, and getting them published. Choosing student groups to join. Choosing classes. Writing papers and other assignments. Outside projects. And hopefully, getting a job at the end of it all.

I mostly hope that you'll have some idea of what's in store for you in library grad school, and some ideas to make a plan of your own. No guarantees on any of this advice, this is just one guy making suggestions on one day.

Also, I'm pragmatic about this stuff. Some people, myself included, would even say cynical at times. But from one perspective graduate schools are bureaucracies, and the better you are at understanding how those bureaucracies function the better you will be at understanding what they can do for you. I think I've had some pretty good success at doing that, and I'm hoping you'll have a better understanding of how grad school works after reading this as well. So take what you're comfortable with, leave the rest, and do something amazing.

It's probably not as hard as you think.

So what is library graduate school anyway?

What Is Library Graduate School?

It's not just two more years of undergrad, and you can't go into it thinking that way. What you're going to do in grad school is learn how to take the skills you acquired while getting your bachelor's degree and do them quickly, particularly location, analysis, and presentation of information.

Let me elaborate. In the course of getting your bachelor's degree (no matter what your major was), you should have acquired three basic skills: finding or locating information, compiling and analyzing information, and reporting your findings back to an audience. Sure, you memorized some dates and facts, some math formulas, but the real training was in finding, analyzing, and reporting. You learned how to learn.

Even for STEM majors, part of what you learned was how

to learn because some of the factual information you memorized will be obsolete at some point.

That's really what all those papers were about. No one cared about your opinion of what the river symbolized in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Professors have read hundreds if not thousands of those papers, and you're probably not going to say anything they haven't already heard unless it's really dumb. When you wrote that paper you were actually being taught to find sources, extract relevant information from them and analyze it, and then use that information to answer a specific question for your audience.

In graduate school you learn to do that quickly. You read more, write more and longer papers, and report your findings. Hopefully your program has you doing this to a live audience at least a few times, so you get comfortable speaking in public.

You do this because, as someone with an advanced degree, you are more likely to have a job where you are solving problems. If you have a high school or bachelor's degree, you are much more likely to have a job where you report a problem to a supervisor. With an advanced degree, people notice a problem and report it to you. Ideally anyway, plenty of people are under-employed.

It is then your responsibility to either have a solution, or find information on the problem, analyze it, and report it back in the form of a solution. Either to the people you are supervising or the people who supervise you, depending on the problem and your job. Sound familiar?

So what does this mean in practical terms?

Well, you're going to take fewer classes in terms of credit hours, read a lot more for those classes, and write longer papers. You're still not doing original ground breaking research (for one thing you probably don't have the time), but you could be adding to the established literature in the field. If you're determined and good enough, this results in a thesis or maybe a published article by the time you graduate.

You're going to be expected to talk in class. To have insights and questions. When you talked in your undergraduate classes (hopefully you did talk in those classes) it was probably a little more factual. It probably took the form of asking or answering a question about the material. There's not a lot of discussion about when the Battle of Hastings was, because it's a date. English and philosophy classes might have been a little more free wheeling, but you're still probably discussing the texts in question, answering largely factual queries without much in the way of gray area.

The point of this memorization was to give you enough factual context to understand what authors are talking about in upper level and graduate level classes. It's hard to discuss an author's arguments about the Civil War without knowing some factual things about that period of history. So you memorized a lot of facts.

By the time you're sitting in a graduate class, you've moved beyond that. You read more specialized literature that interprets those facts, and discuss what they mean. This means you need to have done the assigned readings and be able to discuss them in relation to each other, other courses, and the larger context of your discipline. Have some semi-original insights or questions of the "But how does this interact with that?" variety. You don't need thirty

questions for each text, but try to jot down one or two as you go. Why a certain author's ideas won't work in some other context, how you could make them work, or what that says about their argument.

You do this because you need to be able to analyze information (and most professors kind of love it when people add to the class discussion with their own insights and questions). That's really the point of getting an MA. You're past the point of gathering facts, and you're doing a lot of analysis and refining of other people's arguments. If you really want to create brand new stuff to add to the field, you go on to get a Ph.D. For now, you're pretty much tinkering with other people's work, adding little what-ifs and yeah-buts.

If you're coming to an MA program right after your bachelor's degree, this will probably be the hardest thing you've done so far. That doesn't mean it's actually hard. If you spend the time, you'll probably get through it. Ask most people who have done a previous graduate degree and they probably won't describe a library degree as rigorous. Some people go so far as to describe the MA in library science as an "MA-lite." I did an MA in History previously, and while I would by no means call that program "the meat grinder" it was more difficult than the MA in Library Studies.

Working a full time job, raising kids, and especially doing both are probably harder than library school. The main difference is in graduate school no one's going to hold your hand or bug you to get stuff done, so you need to find the time and make it a priority to get things done yourself.

So that's what graduate school is. You read a lot. You talk

some. You write a lot. But how much is a lot?

How Much Work Is Library Graduate School?

This is going to vary widely. Really widely. Depending on your program, course load, professors, how efficient you are, and how much work you put into it.

So consider these very rough guidelines...

You'll probably read around 50–100 pages of material per credit hour per week. So for a 3 credit course you're looking at 150–300 pages a week. This goes up and down (especially in library school) depending on the course and instructor. If you're taking a database design class, you might only read 30 pages a week, but you spend a lot of time putting together a database for class. If you're taking a course about something that is very abstract, like ethics, you'll probably be reading closer to the 300 page end of things, or even more.

The difference is, you don't have to memorize the whole thing. This isn't the factual memorization we talked about last chapter, where you had to do a close reading of each paragraph. For MA level reading you usually just need to know an author's thesis, what evidence they use to support that thesis, and their conclusion.

So basically what you do is read the introduction, read the conclusion, and skim the body (in that order). For skimming I usually read the first and last sentence of a paragraph and skim the rest, but figure out what works best for you. The good news is you get faster at skimming

with practice. By the time you're done with your degree you should (ideally) be able to get through a decent length book of around 300 pages in an evening. Take some notes while you're doing it, jot down any questions or thoughts you have, and be ready to contribute to class.

As for how much you need to talk, that depends on the class, professor, and grading scheme. I like to try to say something at the beginning, middle, and end of class that is relevant and interesting. If you see your professor making a chicken scratch on a piece of paper after someone talks, they're probably keeping track. You'll have to talk more in classes with only a few people, less in classes with more. If you find yourself dominating the discussion, it's probably a good idea to shut up a little and let other people talk. People will appreciate it, and there are almost always some people in the class that will make it difficult to get a word in edge-wise. Everyone usually knows who these people are, except the people that can't shut up.

As for writing, library schools love group projects, so how much writing you'll do is actually a little hard to gauge. In a history program, a 20-30 page paper per class based on original (primary source) research is pretty standard for each class, and a few shorter (5-10 page papers) along the way, most of which get incorporated into that final paper. Most library classes seem to run about half that, with a fifteen page and ten page paper, or a bunch of shorter papers. Archives classes are a little more rooted in a history background (library courses usually fall more in the social sciences) so if you're in an archives class you might expect more writing. Database or information science classes will probably have less writing, but a final project which is technical in nature and still a comparable amount of work.

If you're doing online classes, most of your class discussion will probably be in the form of writing on the equivalent of a forum or message board. So quite a bit more writing, but less or no talking. Some people prefer this arrangement, some people don't. It's probably not a bad idea to take at least one online class even if you're on campus, so you can say you have experience with online instruction if it comes up in a job interview.

Overall, three classes at three credit hours per semester is considered full-time by most programs (and pretty typical for a full time student), twelve credit hours a semester is maximum for most schools. Less than nine hours is part-time and typical for people with jobs, families, or just taking their time working through the program. This is for Fall and Spring by the way, nine hours is usually the maximum course load in the summer, and six full-time. But always check your program for what is considered full and part-time. So, if you think you have the time and self-discipline to do that, the next logical questions is, should you go to library grad school?

Should I Go To Library Grad School?

Remember earlier, when I said I was cynical? You're going to see that here.

Graduate school is expensive, in terms of time and money. Before you go, you need to figure out what you want to get out of it.

There are good reasons to go to grad school, and bad

reasons to go to grad school. Some of the good reasons: You want a job you can only get with an LIS graduate degree, you already have a steady job that will pay for it (either up front or in terms of increased wages and promotions) and make it worth your time on top of paying your tuition, and... erm, that's about it really. You're independently wealthy and want to hang out with college students, maybe.

That isn't to say that you won't experience other good things at grad school, but if you have a passion for reading, you can satisfy that with a library card. Want to discuss books, join a book club. Like books, buy some bookshelves and start filling them up. Want stress, late nights, and bills, have a kid. Except for the kid, these options are a heck of a lot cheaper and don't take two years. Ultimately, LIS graduate school doesn't offer a damn thing you probably can't pick up somewhere else for less money and time, except a degree. If that degree can get you something you want, you probably have a good reason. If not, I'm skeptical.

So what are some of the bad reasons? You've graduated and don't know what else to do, you like school, or you can't find a job anyway. These seem to be the big ones, and you can figure out who these people are in the program pretty quickly. They do what they have to in class, and nothing extra. They're on a damned expensive vacation for two or more years. And some will argue that they're making themselves more employable, and they are, but they're doing it very, very inefficiently. Unless a job requires an advanced degree two years of practical experience probably counts for more than a graduate degree, and it pays a hell of a lot better.

That two years of experience at a job will also come with

cash in, not tuition and fees going out. Seriously, most people would be much better off joining the Peace Corps for two years than going to graduate school without knowing exactly what their goal is in getting an MA. At least the Peace Corps will give you medical coverage and six grand when you're done with your tour, instead of billing you for student insurance the whole time and hitting you with interest on 50k worth of student loans when you graduate.

As an aside, colleges and universities (administrators at least) are perfectly okay with students who are just there because they like school. Their tuition money spends just well, they increase enrollment in classes professors want to teach (damn near all professors like teaching graduate seminars much more than intro survey courses), and they don't take up much of the professor's time with outside class projects because they don't do them.

Ultimate point being you need a reason, a goal, to tell you why you want to drop 5-figures (add up tuition and lost wages to see what you're really spending, this is probably 6-figures if you're not fully funded and going out of state) and two years of your life in graduate school. And make sure graduate school is the only way you can get that.

Because that goal tells you what you need to do while you're in graduate school to make it all worthwhile. Not the graduation requirements, those are just a bureaucratic hoop to jump through at best.

They're also a good way to fail at library graduate school and still get a diploma.

How to Fail Library Graduate School and Still Get a Diploma

It's deceptively easy. Just satisfy the graduation requirements without doing anything more.

Seriously, no one wants to hear this, but 36 credit hours (or however many your program requires) and a 3.x GPA is the minimum. If that's all that you do, they might as well write "DID THE MINIMUM" on your diploma in that fancy Gothic script, because that's what every hiring committee and employer will see.

But, but, but... you did get the degree, you can still get a job now, right?

Maybe, but I wouldn't bet that way. Not in this job market.

Because while what classes you take are important, they don't make you stand out from your classmates. A lot of your classmates will have the same or very similar classes, and if they've done extra stuff outside of class you'll be fighting an up hill battle on the job market. Because there are other candidates who didn't do the minimum, and most employers prefer to hire people who will do more for the same pay, and who have enthusiasm for their profession outside of class, or the job.

The exception here is that if you already have a job, and your employer has said, "If you get an MA we will make it economically worthwhile." That's different. Do the minimum, take the easiest classes, spend as little time as possible on things, look at the technical requirements to graduate and don't do a single ounce more. If you just

need the diploma, and that's all you're there for, why spend extra time or effort? Go to classes, be a good student, but unless they're going to pay you more for being in a student group or publishing an article outside of class, why bother? Goal directed behavior people, figure out what you want, and if something doesn't help you get to it, then that something is a hobby. If you already have the job and just need the MA graduation requirements are a great checklist.

If, on the other hand, you want to compete in the job market with your classmates after graduation, you're going to have to do something to make yourself stand out. And you've only got two years. You can't wait until your last semester and make it happen, you need to start right away or you're competing with people with an eighteen month head start. Be aware of all this, and take it into consideration when you're deciding if you want to go to graduate school.

Because next chapter we'll talk about whether where you go to school matters or not.

Does Where I Go to Library Graduate School Matter?

You need a program that is American Library Association (ALA) accredited. That's the only hard and fast rule. Check job ads and if it requires a degree in LIS odds are it says "from an ALA accredited institution" right afterwards.

There's a list of ALA accredited programs here:

<http://www.ala.org/accreditedprograms/>

If the program is on probation that could go either way. I'd suggest talking to someone in the admission's office and asking why the program is on probation and what they're doing to correct the deficiencies. It's not the end of the world, but might raise some questions and some checking probably wouldn't hurt.

If you're doing archives or another sub-program, see what job ads require. For example quite a few archives jobs want a program that meets the Society of American Archivists (SAA) criteria. Here's a list of those programs:

<http://www2.archivists.org/dae>

If you're looking to work in a foreign country, for a specific organization, or for a specific type of library (a law library for example) you'll need to check those out on your own. Look for job ads or find a relevant professional organization and they should be able to give you some idea of what you'll need to do.

That's about the only hard and fast rule, but there are some other criteria to keep in mind.

Cost is a biggie. In state will almost always be cheaper than out of state tuition. Check residency requirements and reciprocity agreements for your home state, and compare cost of living for the cities the various schools you are looking at are located in (plenty of cost of living comparison sites can be found with the search engine of your choice). Add up your total bill for each institution.

Opportunities to get practical experience should be something you seriously think about. Practical experience

is a good way to make yourself stand out, and shows employers you can actually do the job and won't hate it when you start. Some schools have mandatory practicum courses (read: internships you get class credit and pay tuition for), some have good student jobs, some have libraries in the area that are known for giving students jobs. I would have a hard time suggesting someone go to a school that didn't give them practical experience working at a library for at least a semester, and the more experience you can get the better.

Check the course catalog to make sure they offer classes you want or need. Some classes will show up everywhere (cataloging class, for example), but some things like conservation and preservation or technical classes will be more hit and miss. Also check course schedules for classes that are a must have. If a class is in the catalog but hasn't shown up on the schedule (not the catalog) for three years, I wouldn't count on getting it. You can always contact the department and ask, but it's something to be wary of. Online programs versus meatspace is something to think about, but it's almost totally down to individual preference and varies from course to course and instructor to instructor. Some programs only charge in state tuition and fees for their online courses, look around for these if you're thinking of going the online route. For online programs you'll want to see if all of their courses are offered online, or only some of the courses. If they only offer some of the courses, or require frequent campus visits, that's a definite consideration.

If you can visit the campus, that might tell you something, but it's down to what you think is important and how you feel about the campus. If the program devotes some space for students, such as a lounge or break-room kitchenette style area, those can really help your quality of life and

also tell you something about how the program views its students. Floor space is valuable, so if the program is turning it over for student use, that's usually a good sign that they care about your experience.

You should also be aware of what type of university or college it is. R1 or R2 (Very High Research or High Research Universities) will have different cultures than a SLAC (Small Liberal Arts College). At a research university faculty get promotion and tenure for research, and teaching is given comparatively little weight in their promotion. This means the newer professors are going to be spending a lot of time doing research. SLACs tend to value teaching more, and there's less emphasis placed on original research. There's still a lot of variation in individual professors, enough that this isn't that useful of a metric, but if it's down to a coin toss the type of institution can tell you something about what that institution values.

Beyond that, I don't think which school you go to is all that important. A professor once suggested what school you went to only mattered if the person hiring you went to the same school, and thought the program prepared them well for the job. But that's probably a little bit out of your control.

As a brief aside, Library and Information Studies programs tend to be more social science people based, and Library and Information Science tend to be more concerned with the organization of information and technology based. As best as I can tell anyway. But the two terms also tend to be used pretty interchangeably, and I wouldn't put much stock in the differences without extra information. Look at what the program offers, and it'll give you a better idea of what they're all about.

So once you've figured out where you want to go, how do you get in?

Getting in to Library Graduate School

There's the normal way, and then there are some other ways. The normal way is to apply, pay the fifty or so bucks, do the paperwork (essay, letters of recommendation, and references), and see if they accept you.

Check the admissions page, but most places require a bachelor's degree in anything, a certain minimum GPA, english proficiency if you're not a native speaker, maybe GRE scores, an essay, and whatever else.

The bachelor's degree is pretty much non-negotiable, but I honestly don't think it matters what field the degree is in. You'll find plenty of English, History, Sociology, and other humanities and social science majors in LIS. People from other fields are around, and might have an easier time finding a job if they're willing to be a librarian in the field of their original bachelor's (so a BS in physics will have an edge when applying to a science library). Overall, you need the bachelor's, but any field will do. It's also possible that certain "unusual" degrees will help, especially fields like computer science or foreign languages.

GPA is a little more flexible. There will be a minimum (3.0 seems to be typical), but depending on the program it can be overall, in your major, or in your final sixty credit hours (about two years) of classes. If you don't have the

GPA in one area, stress the other in your application or contact the admissions office and see if they're flexible. They might okay it, or require you to take the GRE. Or they might just say no, in which case you're probably better off looking at another program. If you have a prior master's or other graduate degree they'll probably take the GPA from that degree rather than your bachelor's.

I don't know anything about The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), so you'll have to find someone else for advice on that criteria.

The GRE is the Graduate Record Exam. You'll probably need decent scores on the English portion, lower scores on the Math (for most places just don't embarrass yourself too terribly), and a decent score on the written. There are whole guides written on this test, so you should be able to find a much more detailed discussion than I can provide here, but I can offer a couple of suggestions.

Briefly, I would suggest taking the practice test they send when you register (mine came in the mail on a CD) so you'll be comfortable with the format and not stress out over the instructions on the exam. For the English portion, you can subscribe to one of those word a day emails or get a calendar. Read the word and the definition to try to improve your vocabulary. For the math, sometimes it's easier to just substitute each of the multiple choice answers and see which one works correctly than to solve the equation for the correct answer. For the written, just do it like an essay test: read the topic, make an outline in the margin, and use the five paragraph essay.

You'll probably also need letters of recommendation, and I like to spread them out a little. The program might give you criteria, otherwise I like to get one from an instructor

(it is a school after all, they're going to want to know how you did in school), and if you have practical experience in a library setting, a letter from a supervisor. Third one, I would probably go with another instructor or supervisor, but if you have someone else who can write a good letter you might consider them.

One thing to keep in mind, depending on the program they might not expect everyone to meet every single criteria. Some programs don't require the GRE at all. You might be able to get away with lower GRE scores if you have a killer GPA or vice-versa.

It's not always mentioned, but anything you can do to get practical experience in a library before applying is helpful. Part time work or even volunteering shows you have at least some idea what the job entails and won't graduate with a degree that prepared you for a job you will hate.

Finally, follow the directions to the letter. If it's a 750-1000 word essay, those are the acceptable number of words. No more, no less. If it says three letters of recommendation, send three. No more, no less. You might have four absolutely killer letters of recommendation, but if you send all four in and they only want three, you are going to come across as someone who either doesn't read directions, or doesn't follow directions. Nobody wants to deal with a student like that, no matter how brilliant. Then there's the letter of intent or statement of purpose, whatever they happen to call it. That is big enough to warrant it's own chapter, so we'll tackle that next time.

The Letter of Intent, Admissions Essay, Statement of Purpose, etc.

These are very unique to each person and even the institution you're applying to, so these are just some rough guidelines.

You need a letter of intent, or admissions essay, or whatever they call it. It's basically an explanation of why you want to go to library graduate school. More than that, it needs to explain why you want to go to that particular graduate school.

Some places will give you criteria (UW-Madison lists "what you hope to accomplish from this program, your reasons for choosing UW-Madison's SLIS program, your tentative career goals, and your leadership experience and potential for leadership in the profession"). That's from their website at:

<http://www.slis.wisc.edu/students-application-ma.htm>

but some places are a little more free-wheeling and just tell you to write an essay. For those places, check their website and do some digging, and see what the program is all about. If they have a big social justice component, and you're into social justice, that would be a good thing to mention in your letter. If they're all about organizing information and you are too, great. If you're not very interested in their primary goals, you might want to consider if that's the program for you. It doesn't mean one or the other of you is superior, just that you might not be a good fit in the program. In any case, explain why you want to go to that particular graduate school, as opposed to graduate school in general.

I would avoid the “I want to work with Professor Jones on their research in the area of...” For one thing Professor Jones might be way more into the research than mentoring students, or taking a year long sabbatical. For another thing, you’ve kind of given the finger to every other instructor at the institution. It might be true, but it’s not very tactful. If you really do want to work with a certain instructor, get in the program and then see if you can make it happen.

One thing you should try and cover is why you want to be a librarian or archivist. Don’t just say you like books, because librarians tend to be about patrons more than books (many librarians and instructors will tell you that, anyway). A lot of people will tell you just liking books doesn’t make you a good fit for grad school, and it probably won’t help your application.

If you had an “A-ha!” moment when you realized you wanted to be a librarian, this is probably a good place to bring it up.

Otherwise, the five paragraph essay isn’t a bad thing to break out for most of these. You probably learned it in high school or even earlier. It’s an introduction, point 1, point 2, point 3, conclusion. It at least gives you a starting structure, and if you need to expand or contract it later you can.

Word count wise, keep it near what they suggest. Don’t go over the limit under any circumstances, and I usually try to keep it within 20% or so of the upper limit of what they want. In other words if they say 1000 words, go for 800–999 words. Anything shorter you risk getting bad attention. Anything over is right out, because you can’t

follow directions.

If the program is a large geographic distance from your current location, consider mentioning if you've researched the area or visited before and liked it. Any local support structure (relatives or friends) you have in place might also be a good thing to mention. It sounds irrelevant, but the people looking at these applications genuinely want you to succeed (seriously, they really do, and if nothing else people dropping out looks bad for the program), and if you've never left your home town moving across the country is going to be a big chunk of stress. They don't want you to implode because you went into graduate school with no support structure.

Using humor in your essay can be -iffy. Make sure it's not the least bit cruel or offensive (if you have any doubts whatsoever, don't use it). Personally, I used humor because I didn't want to spend two years with people who couldn't laugh, but I admit that it was a gamble. This is also an area where if you have a strong GPA and good recommendations you can probably afford a little levity in your essay. If not, you might want to concentrate more on selling yourself.

These essays can be miserable, horrible things to write. If you're pulling your hair out you're probably not alone. Everything else is pretty cut and dried, but this is personal and you're going to be evaluated on it by strangers. Just follow the guidelines, or if there aren't any cover why you are a good fit for that program, why you want to be in that program, what you have done to prepare yourself, and your plans for after graduation (they don't have to be elaborate, but showing you have some idea what you want to do can help, and you can always change your mind later). Throw in anything else you think will help, and if

you have better reasons than these by all means use them.

Never type one of these up and send it right in. You will probably finish writing this, be feeling a lot of stress, and just want to hit send and get it over with. That might be a mistake. At the very least let it sit for awhile, go have a snack, and come back and reread it. Ideally, let it sit overnight and have a couple of other people look at it. Spellcheck, proofread, and read it aloud to see if it flows well.

If you're currently getting a degree and your major has a graduate program, you might ask the grad adviser or someone else on the admissions committee to read over your essay. Another pair of eyes is rarely a bad thing, and your friends are probably just going to read it and say it's great. Let it sit for awhile, get some critical readers, revise, and then send it in.

Below is a copy of the template I used for creating letters. All my schools were in the Midwest, and I was committed to doing an archives track, so it didn't change much from school to school. I overwrote the word counts, then cut it down to meet the correct word count depending on the requirements for the institution I was applying at. Frankly, looking at it now I don't know that I'd say it's that great, but it worked.

It's ultimately up to you how you want to do this. Just don't give them any reasons to turn you down, and present yourself as knowledgeable about the program and well prepared.

And now, my letter of intent in all it's glory...

Bear in mind, this is a template I used to apply to graduate

schools. I wrote it out, and then made changes depending on the specific requirements of the program I was applying to. Generally I find it easier to overwrite and cut parts out than add to writing, so I took the highest word count any of the programs required (I think that was UW-Madison at 1200 words maximum) and wrote to exceed that, then cut things out until I met the needed word count.

I have added some notes in italics above certain paragraphs to explain what I was trying to do. The square brackets are blanks I filled in depending on the program.

I wanted to give some background explaining why I was going back to grad school in my 30s. I also figured I might not be the most qualified person, but the giant googly-eyed robot would make my application stand out and be something people would remember. Hopefully for good reasons.

It was ultimately the googly-eyed neurotic robot who convinced me to go to graduate school. I was working the night shift at a factory where I spent most of my time placing components on conveyor belts for a robot to assemble and weld. The robot was computer controlled and the computer would occasionally crash like any other; however, this computer operated a robotic arm with three points of articulation that ended in a giant metal claw and had its own laser welder. In a fit of whimsy, someone had attached large googly eyes to the casing around the robot's claw, giving it the semblance of a face. When the computer crashed the robot would halt. The googly eyes would stare through the shatter proof glass at me forlornly, demanding that I fix whatever had gone wrong. It was my job to determine what had caused the computer program to crash and restart it, thereby restoring order and purpose to the robot's existence. As life experiences go solving an

existential crisis for a giant, orange, googly-eyed robot at 4:00 in the morning may not offer much in the way of cosmic answers (generally it was just “You dropped a part, pick up another one,”) but it certainly encourages a person to start asking questions about their own life choices.

It was during one of these binary therapy sessions that I decided to go to graduate school, because keeping the robot sane was making me crazy. I continued working, but enrolled in the history graduate program at Western Illinois University with plans to become a history teacher. Soon after, I was offered a position as a paid intern for the Illinois State Archives at their Regional Archives Depository (IRAD) on campus. I said my farewells and started a job whose main attraction (at the time) was that it didn't occur in the middle of the night, and didn't have insane robots.

This is my a-ha! moment.

Then I found out that I really like working in an archives.

A professor had told me that most historians have one particular part of historical research that they really enjoy, whether it be reading the previous work, finding sources, or writing the paper itself. For me, it was finding the sources. My work at the archive mainly consisted of performing reference tasks for genealogists. For a person who liked finding sources, this was great. I also got to look at records, examine original, unique primary documents, and got paid to do it.

A list of stuff I've done academically.

I certainly enjoy history, and plan to continue to actively participate in the field even after gaining a Master's

Degree in Library Studies. I have presented papers at multiple conferences, and written journal length articles for classes several times. I have had one article published in the Illinois State Genealogical Society's quarterly journal, and another article is currently undergoing the peer review process for publication in the Journal of Illinois History. I like history, I like historians, and I like talking to people about history, but not enough to do it as a career. As a career I want to work in a library around more sources than I could use in a lifetime, and assist others in finding those sources.

Why I want to go there. One thing, where I said "library science" I should have changed that to "library studies" for programs that describe themselves that way. In practice the two terms are used interchangeably a lot of the time, but some people are pedantic about it. It was a very small but potential reason not to accept my application, and should have been corrected.

While my time as an IRAD intern has given me ample experience in finding records for patrons, I would very much like to learn the theory behind acquisitions, cataloging, digitization, and in general gain an understanding of library science at all levels. Eventually, I hope to apply this education to a career in a university library, gradually taking on greater responsibilities than I currently have with an emphasis on the digitization of information.

The MLS program offered at the [wherever I'm applying] is ideal for my own immediate educational goals and future career plans, with its [whatever they say they do]. [Another reason to go to this school]. I believe that the city of [wherever] itself would be a great place to live, and somewhere that I could easily envision myself happily

residing for many years.

Tentative career goals.

While the job market will be a large factor in where I eventually do locate, my ultimate goal is to work as a librarian in a university or with local government, preferably at the state or even county level. The sheer magnitude of larger archives (the National Archives and Record Administration for example) actually make them less attractive as a career for me personally. I would prefer to work with a smaller, more localized collection of documents. While these documents may not have the broad scope that national records have they can be tied into local history, and may offer more opportunities for an individual to make a greater impact and work in a leadership role, something I have enjoyed doing in my time at IRAD.

Practical experience. Since I was applying for archives tracks I skewed it to archives experience hard.

I have been the senior intern for the WIU IRAD depository since January of 2009. My daily tasks include performing reference work for patrons, answering queries over both telephone and through formal letters, processing documents, and creating indexes for our patrons and inclusion on the Illinois Secretary of State website. I have prepared training material for future interns, and worked with the IRAD adviser to standardize and improve restoration methods, record-keeping practices, and internal procedures. I have also prepared digitized versions of our materials for use in presentations to county genealogical societies.

Leadership experience.

Currently, I am developing instructional material and procedures to implement a co-operative program between IRAD and the history department's First Year Experience (FYE) program. This program will have freshman students create indexes of immigration and naturalization records as part of their FYE requirements. The program is being developed with the goal of encouraging students to take a more active interest in local history, while simultaneously generating an index of records which will be made available to IRAD patrons. Once completed the program will be used to create guidelines for similar projects in the future benefiting both library patrons and the history department FYE program.

Any extra skills or experience I might have that might be relevant to the program.

I have also processed a medium sized collection of documents from beginning to end as part of a graduate level internship in the library archives. Under the direction of a trained archivist I processed the 3.2 cubic foot Scott Jones Industry School District Anti-Redistricting Collection. I was directly responsible for the initial assessment, creation of series and sub-series, and generation of a complete finding aid and contents list for this collection.

For my final semester I will be taking a graduate level workshop in paleography, and continuing to create historical articles for submission to peer reviewed journals. I will graduate with my Master of Arts in History in May of 2010.

Wrap it up.

I feel that the Master of Library Science Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison would be an excellent way for me to continue these activities, and begin a long term career working in the field of library science. Thank you for your time and consideration.

And my thanks to the googly-eyed robot that convinced me to return to graduate school as well.

Sincerely,

Eric Willey

One thing to remember: This was deliberately written long so I could move chunks around and cut out anything that wasn't relevant to the program I was applying to. It's not an actual essay, just a starting point to customize depending on the school. I hope you found it useful, good luck.

Next up, what if they turn you down? Some other ways of getting into a grad program.

What If I Still Don't Get In?

If you are really committed, you've still got some options even if they turn down your initial application.

First you'll want to make a realistic assessment of why they turned you down. If you have a bad GPA, and feel that's why you weren't accepted, you might need to go back for another bachelor's degree and build your GPA up over the two years that takes. Usually a second bachelor's is another 30-40 credit hours, but good luck getting all the

courses you need in the right sequence in two semesters. That's a big investment of time and energy, and you need to consider if it's worth it, or if the same things that resulted in your GPA last time haven't changed.

On the other hand, if you satisfied all the numerical criteria (GPA, test scores) but didn't get in, you might consider applying as a graduate student without applying for a specific program. Usually the admissions to graduate school in general are less strict than to a specific graduate program, and may not require letters of recommendation or an essay. I've included a link to UW-Madison's below, at this time it's just a 3.0 GPA, a bachelor's degree, English proficiency for some students, and financial information for international students.

[UW-Madison Graduate School Admission Requirements](#)

So you apply as a graduate student, but not to the LIS program. Then you take a couple of core classes (make sure the core/introduction classes aren't restricted to LIS majors before you try this), work your butt off in them, say smart things in class, ask your professor or professors for a letter of recommendation to the program next admission deadline, and try to enter the program again. It might take you an extra year to complete the program since you probably won't be able to take a full course load the first semester or two, but it might also get you into the program. Eventually.

Be careful with this, because the rules for part time students on financial aid are a lot different than full time, and if you filled out your FAFSA as a full-time student it's probably not going to apply. Financial aid offices do notice this sort of thing, so don't think you can slip it in under the radar either. There are also some courses you

might not be able to take unless you're actually in the program. The good news is intro courses are usually open so people from other majors can take them, and they usually have a pretty high number of seats so a lot of the incoming students can enroll. Still, check before you apply.

So you've got a shot if you want to try this, but it's still a gamble, especially if you're moving to do it. Personally, I'd suggest doing this online before going to the expense of moving, although that might result in weaker letters of recommendation from your instructors depending on the class. On the other hand it is cheaper and you can always do the rest of your classes in meat space later. Look at your situation and decide what works best.

Another option is just to reapply next admissions. The university will gladly take your application fee year after year if you want to keep applying.

While you're waiting to apply again, do what you can to improve your chances. Practical experience is always good, but you also need to look at why you think you didn't get in. If it's weak letters of recommendation, you can address that with volunteering at a library (provided you do a good job and your supervisor will write one). If you have a low GPA, you either need to bring that up (and address whatever caused the low GPA in the first place), or realistically look at whether graduate school is a good fit for you. If you lack leadership experience, volunteer for one of the local charitable organizations. You don't have to run a Fortune 500 company here, organizing a pancake and sausage breakfast fundraiser is leadership. Read some of the guides on taking tests and retake them if your GRE score is what's holding you back. Point being, figure out what went wrong and fix it.

The last option I know of is not much of an option in my opinion. Some institutions offer dual degree programs, although usually you have to be accepted to both programs for that option. You might find an institution that doesn't have that requirement, but I don't consider it likely. You could go for an entirely different degree and take some LIS courses, since most programs allow a certain number of outside the department courses (3 courses or 9 credit hours seems to be standard) to count towards graduation requirements.

All of these options are expensive in terms of time and resources, and there's no guarantee they will work. Evaluate if they're worth it or even possible before deciding to pursue them.

But for now you've applied, and you can enjoy the feeling of being thrown into a black pit into which no information enters and compulsively checking your email to see if you've been accepted. Just how long should that take anyway?

When Will I Hear Back?

You should get some sort of notification (probably an email) when your materials are received and your application is complete. A lot of the programs I applied to used an online program for this, and you can see boxes get checked off as test scores, essays, transcripts, and letters of recommendation are received. Some places just send an email. If you haven't gotten any of this, you might do some investigating and make sure your application was received. At the very least you should get something on

your credit card or bank statement showing they received payment, and that can be a starting point.

You will probably hear back from the general graduate admissions program fairly quickly, and then there will be a delay until you hear back from the LIS graduate program. The two are not the same thing, so please don't get too excited when you get that first email. It's good news, but it just means that you've been accepted into the graduate school, not the LIS program.

If your application was completed and received, and you're tearing out your hair with worry you can call the admissions office and check the status, but I don't know how much good it will do. If they were going to offer you a spot, they would have gotten ahold of you. You might (maybe) be able to get an approximate timetable, but I kind of doubt it, and it might not be that accurate anyway. So all in all, my guess is you're not going to get an answer you're going to like, and you're better off just being patient and waiting. It's rough, I know.

Ultimately, the short and tautological answer is that you will hear back when you hear back.

Part of the problem is that people apply to multiple programs. When they hear back from one, they don't always make a decision on attending that program or let the others know right away. That program may not have been their first choice, or they might wait longer until the financial aid program gets back to them. When they've finally heard back from all the programs and weighed all their options, then, hopefully, they let the programs they won't be going to know.

That opens up a slot, which gets kicked to the next person

down the line. Then, if that person is still waiting on other programs, the whole process starts over again. Sometimes programs will let people know they're on a wait list, sometimes people just wait. That whole mess can take quite awhile to sort itself out, so unless you're accepted early you're not just waiting on that program but every other program people have applied to for an answer.

Most people (based on my extremely unscientific poll of asking whoever happened to be around at the time) seem to apply to between three and five programs. So for any program that didn't ask you in the initial wave of acceptance letters, you're actually waiting on the slowest of the five programs everyone ahead of you has applied for. If you are in that first wave, for some programs you'll probably hear back early, but some will still take awhile if the people reviewing applications go on vacation, or have other things going on.

Because of this, the programs you do hear from will probably want an answer fairly quickly. You have a few options here. One is to just give them an answer, a plain yes or no. Depending on what other programs you've heard back from and how excited you are (or aren't) about the program this might be an option. The other is to ask if you can give them an answer later. Explain the situation, and the worst they can do is say they really do need an answer by the deadline they provided. The third option is to say yes, and then withdraw if you get a better offer. It's slightly, well, shifty, and fairly disingenuous. You'll want to make sure they don't charge you anything for withdrawing (most places don't charge until you've signed up for and gotten into a few weeks of classes, but some do charge a fee after a certain date), but this is an option. Just keep in mind other people are waiting, and you're dragging out the process for them.

The good news is, until you've heard from a program, they haven't said, "No." So hang in there, hurry up, and wait.

You can also kill time by making a shopping list for when you are accepted.

Hardware and Software

You don't necessarily need a lot of stuff to get through a LIS grad program, but some things will help.

First of all, I highly recommend a slow cooker (aka a crock-pot). Seriously. Unless you have someone to cook for you or are willing to live off of take-out and sandwiches for two years, this can improve your quality of life quite a bit. Get a slow cooker, find a few recipes you like, freeze portions of whatever for later, and it'll help keep you from eating out of boxes or getting delivery all the time. Hopefully your program has a microwave somewhere students can access it, and you can take leftovers in and heat them up.

Otherwise, most hardware is going to depend on your budget, and how much you think you'll use it. Monitors large enough to display two A4 (8.5" x 11") pages side-by-side are nice. You can have a pdf of a journal article open on one side and a paper you're writing open on the other. Or a draft of a paper on one side open and a revision of that paper on the other. A dual monitor system would work for this as well, just make sure your operating system supports multiple screens.

E-book readers (or e-readers) can be useful. I don't personally own one, but you'll probably be reading a lot of journal articles off of electronic reserves. Being able to save them to an e-reader means you can look at them while in class and read them on the bus or whatever. A netbook is a little bulkier, but more versatile, same with a laptop. Check out the e-reader before you buy, being able to annotate (take notes) or at least highlight pdfs is really handy. Ideally it should be able to copy and paste to another document or platform as well, unless you want to retype quotes for papers. The ability to do this is probably going to change as platforms and the policies and laws regarding DRM change, so I'm not going to get into specific brands that might be altered tomorrow.

Think about getting a black and white laser printer. Brother makes quite a few models under \$100, if you're just printing text the toner cartridges last quite awhile, and they save you from having to make last minute trips to the campus computer labs or wait in line during finals week. There are still quite a few professors who want hard copy, and mine made my life a lot easier. Presumably you could do the same with an inkjet, but I hate buying new ink cartridges. If you're short on cash you can always use university printers so this is by no means a necessity, just something nice to have.

You probably don't need much software. Any word processing program should do, as long as it can save in doc and rtf format. Being able to export to pdf is also handy. If you take a database class you'll need whatever program it uses if you plan to work at home. That will probably be Microsoft Access, so keep that in mind if you're a dedicated Mac (or Unix) user. It might be something else though, or you always have the option of doing your homework in one of the campus labs.

Get used to google docs. There are a lot of group projects, and this was the preferred way to share papers and documents (especially if you have a distance student or students in the group) when I was taking classes. If you're familiar with modern word processing programs, google docs should be no problem. It's just word processing in your browser.

For swapping large files online (or "cloud") storage is useful. Dropbox and Spideroak are currently two of the more common programs. They're both a good way to backup your stuff as well, which I highly recommend. If you're not backing up your work, preferably to your main computer, one additional on-site platform (such as an external hard drive or jump drive), and one off-site platform (Dropbox or Spideroak, or at the very least emailing it to yourself), you're asking for trouble if your computer crashes.

That about covers it, from my point of view. You shouldn't need a lot of stuff, and you could probably do without all of this except the word processing program to tell the truth. Even that should be available at a campus computer lab. This stuff just makes things a little more convenient.

So how do you pay for this all stuff, plus tuition and fees?

Paying For it All

This is super serious could wreck your plans if you get it wrong stuff, and I'm only giving general guidelines. Absolutely, positively, check this out for yourself and learn how it applies to your situation.

First off, there aren't a lot of TA (Teaching Assistant) or GA (Graduate Assistant) positions for LIS programs. The LIS is only a graduate degree, or at least I've never heard of an undergraduate degree in LIS. This means that there aren't LIS101 introduction classes packed with freshmen for TAs to teach like mandatory Intro to Writing classes. And there tend to be quite a few people in the LIS programs, so any graduate assistant positions available tend to be competitive, and for some programs automatically go to the Ph.D. candidates anyway. LIS programs also don't tend to have wealthy alumni to donate funds to the program, so they're not always as well funded as other graduate schools.

Point being, if you're thinking it's like majors where if you get in you have a good chance at an assistantship, that's not the case.

There are some out there, check the schools you're applying to for postings. Champaign-Urbana in Illinois had some when I was applying. UW-Milwaukee had some that went to the Ph.D. candidates (at the time I was applying, both of these may have changed).

Just be aware that a lot of these are contingent on funding, and might disappear. Having discouraged you thoroughly, there are a couple of other possibilities.

One is to apply for a master's in whatever your bachelor's is in, get an assistantship through that program, and do a dual degree. Quite a few schools offer dual degree options, and LIS fits well with several disciplines. Of course, this requires you to get accepted into that program, get the assistantship, and do the extra work in a dual degree program, but it's a possible avenue if you

think the money is worth the added work.

Another method that requires less resource expenditure but is less certain is to look around outside the LIS department for assistantships. You might only be able to pick it up for a year or even a semester, but some non-academic departments will offer assistantships for workers. Library students are involved with technology, people, and information, and that covers a lot of turf in university jobs if you spin your experience right. So don't restrict your search to just the LIS department postings.

If you do get an assistantship, and you're going out of state, make sure you know if it covers full tuition, or only the in state portion. Either is a good deal, but it makes quite a bit of difference in the amount of cash you're paying.

As far as federal financial aid, it changes, and the FAFSA website can tell you a lot more about your individual situation than I can.

<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/index.htm>

Apply as early as possible, probably as soon as you've filed your tax return (and your parents have filed their returns if they still count for your financial aid). Know the differences between the types of loans (unsubsidized versus subsidized), and check the interest rates. I think the FAFSA site is actually one of the more well designed applications I've seen, and while it can still be stressful, it's not a bad process. They do ask what schools you are or will be applying to, so know that before you get started.

As it is now PELL grants are undergraduate only, so financial aid will probably be loans and/or work study.

Work study is financial aid that you work (usually in a job at the university) to get. This is pretty much free money as far as your employer is concerned, so think about what kind of job you want if you have this option. You can probably afford to be a little picky, although not every place has federal work study eligible positions.

Your university financial aid package will usually be calculated using your FAFSA, and be offered through the university financial aid office. The procedures and timetables of these offices vary, some will make an offer as soon as the program accepts you, some wait until it's almost time for classes to start. They're used to taking calls, so the financial aid office is one place I would call if you had questions. The basic method here is that the university figures out what they think you'll need, what you're eligible for under their rules, and then subtracts what you can get through FAFSA and decides whether or not to make up the rest. Some places might have a financial aid estimator, some you might just have to wait and see.

Again, you're probably going to be getting loans and work study, not grants.

Scholarships are great, and if you're even remotely qualified for one apply. Your LIS program should have a list of department and university scholarships, and search engines are always your friend.

If you're wanting or willing to do your degree online, some places only charge in state tuition for online classes. It's still a big chunk of cash, but cheaper than paying out of state tuition.

There is one last thing you can do that's not strictly

speaking financial aid, but that can save you a lot of money. Go to school in state. If it's ALA accredited and you can pay in state tuition (or you have a state that shares reciprocity on tuition), it can save you a lot of cash. It might not be ideal, but getting through this with the minimum amount of loans possible is always a good idea. Compound interest can be brutal.

Applying for financial aid from the federal government (the FAFSA) is all factual, they don't need statements of purpose or essays. Scholarships are squishier, and we'll discuss some strategies for applying for them next post.

Applying for Scholarships

When applying for scholarships, a lot of people have a fear of rejection, so let me get something out of the way right now for you: If you apply for things you will be rejected sometimes, but unless it's an organ transplant you will live. The more scholarships and awards you apply for, the more you will receive. It's kind of like dating that way.

I have been very fortunate to receive a few scholarships, and while I am not privy to the selection criteria or how it was weighted, these are some things I have done that I feel helped my applications. Please feel free to use or disregard, and use your own judgment in applying these general suggestions to specific applications.

1. For a general scholarship tell the committee as specifically as you can how the money will be used, what problem it will solve, what opportunity it will make possible, and how that will benefit someone or something. "With funding from this scholarship I will be able to verb

the noun, furthering the thing.” For awards or scholarships for leadership or tech projects, or travel scholarships, it’s probably less important because they have a specific purpose already or are tied to things you’ve already done, but a general idea of how you’ll be spending the money still might help.

2. If you’ve already done anything related to the purpose of the scholarship, mention it. It shows you’re committed to the project or work and have a basic understanding of what it entails. For example, for a leadership scholarship, write about any leadership type activities you’ve performed. If an application requires a writing sample, a relevant paper or research project can also be used to show a long standing interest in and commitment to the project identified.

3. If it’s a general scholarship, spread the subjects of your letters of recommendation out. If you need three letters, ask for one person to write about your work or practical experience, another your academics, and another your student org or other extracurricular activities. Ask people specifically to do this, and explain what you’re doing to them, so everyone’s on the same page. It probably doesn’t hurt if the people writing your letters are active members of the organization giving the grant either.

4. While on the subject of letters of recommendation, when you ask for one give the person you’re asking plenty of time (I try for 4-6 weeks, although I’ll lower that a little rather than send someone a request during the holidays), and a list of things you’ve done or accomplished relating to what you’re asking them to write about. It’s courteous, and results in a stronger letter when they don’t have to try to remember all you’ve done. This is basically the same as the admissions process.

5. Talk about relevant things and scholarships or awards you've already received in your cover letter. People like to bet on winners, and if you've done something you have every right to be proud of it.

This is important, so I'm going to say it again: If you have done something you have every right to be proud of it. To put it even more bluntly, false modesty is bullshit in this business. The only person who will care more about what you've done than yourself is your mother, so learn to self-promote. If you don't care enough to mention it, don't expect anyone else to care more.

6. If you just can't get started, look at past letters you've written for common themes or examples you can use. Everyone wrote a letter of interest to get into the LIS grad program, and if you're at this stage it was at least good enough. You've done this before, you can do it again.

7. Apply for everything. As Woody Allen said, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." Especially for some awards which go to first year or entering students you may feel like you haven't done much, but you're competing with other people in the exact same boat. A lot of people just don't bother to apply, and that helps your chances enormously. You don't have to compete against everyone, just everyone who bothers to show up.

8. Depending on the required length of the letter or essay, I sometimes like to use the old high school 5-paragraph paper format (introduction, point 1, point 2, point 3, conclusion). It fits in well with an introduction, academics, extracurricular activities, experience, conclusion list, and helps keep you focused, even if you just use it as a starting point.

9. Don't use wishy-washy language. "The scholarship will allow me to..." shows a lot more confidence than "If selected the scholarship will allow me to..." Don't be arrogant, but do be confident. Attitude plays a part.

10. The usual technical stuff: Proof read everything, double check to make sure you've followed all requirements (especially word count or page length), submit the right number of copies of things, make sure you're sending it in before the deadline and have the right number of letters of recommendation.

Like I said, these are general suggestions, so you might need to alter them for context. And you never know how things are weighted, or if people will think your specific situation is compelling. There is also an element of chance. But if you don't apply, your chances are zilch.

If you get the scholarship or award, congratulations. So what happens if you don't?

What If You Don't Get the Award?

First of all, you'll live. Rejection is never pleasant, but it happens. Find yourself an inspirational poster (there are many with kittens hanging in there, I believe), stand up and dust yourself off, and try again.

As far as how to react, there's a process here, especially if it's an in department thing that there is an awards ceremony for. Basically it's just being gracious and polite (or at the very least an adult), but there are actually some good reasons to do this beyond just being a decent person.

First thing, you need to go to the award ceremony, applaud when they announce the winner, and congratulate them. There's usually standing around and chatting after these things, and if you know anyone who was on the award committee, thank them for their time, mention it must have been a tough decision, and make sure they know you're not being a sore loser and you understand why whoever won did. You don't have to follow this exact process, but make sure people know that you're happy for whoever did win, and understand that the decision was fair and it wasn't personal.

This is important for a couple of reasons. You want people to know you're a grown-up about these things, because when you are a professional you will have ideas that get shot down, and apply for grants or other funding and be refused. Letting people know that you don't take rejection personally or become petulant can come in handy when you're asking for letters of recommendation, and helps people say you are a person they would like to work with. If you do take rejection personally, break that habit as soon as possible.

You might actually be surprised how strong your reaction or that of your classmates is to not getting an award. People in graduate school tend to be the people who did very well as undergrads, and a lot of them are used to dominating these things or at least doing very well. Graduate school might be the first time they've been in a large group of individuals as academically competent as they are. Not being the star pupil any more can require a cognitive shift.

The second reason is that any award or grant has one or two winners, and a whole lot of disappointed people. Most people serving on the committees who make these

decisions are there because they like students, like seeing what projects they're involved in, and like giving out the awards. The downside is at least one of them has to write a bunch of rejection letters and not fund a bunch of worthy people because there's never enough money. Let these people know that you appreciate what they're doing, and don't hate them just because you didn't win. They're probably doing this as volunteers, and in any case it's polite to thank for their time and effort.

This is a little less critical for awards if you mail in applications and don't directly interact with the committee members on a regular basis, but a thank-you note or even an email can go a long ways. I presented at a conference once, and eventually turned that presentation into an article. A couple of people at the conference and the chair of my panel gave me some great advice, and when the article was published I sent them thank you emails. The chair of the panel replied that after years of commenting on papers, he could not recall anyone else sending a note of thanks.

Common courtesy isn't that common. Say thank you, even if the result wasn't what you hoped for. It really will go a long ways.

A couple of final things that might help you feel better: You're basically asking people for money just for being yourself. The default answer here for almost everyone except an awards committee is going to be no. Imagine asking someone on the street to give you cash because you want to study youth services. They'd look at you like you were crazy. The scholarships and awards are very generous things, and no one is entitled to them. If you get one, be thankful. If you didn't, remember that no one owed it to you.

Second, and this is really mercenary sounding, if you are a good loser it might help with the next award. Act like an ass now, and that's a reason not to give you an award next time. Act like a person who understands and appreciates it anyway, that's a reason to give you an award.

And if that's not cynical enough for you, next time I'm going to talk about picking classes.

Picking Classes

This is another largely individual matter, and prone to changing with circumstances, so take this advice with large grains of salt. Best case it will give you some ideas and maybe a place to start.

Look at your graduation requirements. If there are required courses, take them or you don't graduate. Pretty simple. Usually these are intro courses that serve as prerequisites for later courses as well, so if you want the advanced courses it's a good idea to get the prerequisites done early.

Otherwise, there's only one way I can figure out to make a course selection that's not based on personal preference. First off, make a current c.v. (curriculum vitae, basically a super resume that lists all your qualifications, education, student orgs, volunteer activities, and experience). It'll probably be light at this point, especially if you're fresh out of undergrad, but don't worry about that.

Now find some job ads for positions you want, the more the better. I would say at least five, ten is probably plenty. Then you need to look at the required and preferred

qualifications for all those job ads, and pick out the ones that appear over and over. If every job ad for this type of position has a certain qualification, that should definitely make your list. If one out of ten has it, you can probably leave it off your list. You now have a big list of what you need to have on a c.v. or resume to be qualified for those jobs. Look back at the c.v. you made, cross the qualifications you already have off the job list, and what you have left is a list of things you need to do in grad school to get that job.

Look through the course catalog, and see what courses will help you fulfill those requirements. You can probably see past syllabi in the student office, or talk to the professors teaching those classes if you're not sure. Make a list of the classes, and you've at least got the beginnings of an idea of what to take. If you can't find a class and it's a critical job requirement look at courses outside the department, or even at a community college if there's one local, or set up an independent study.

You probably won't be able to cover every single job requirement just with classes. Some requirements you'll satisfy with job experience, some with volunteer or student org activities, some with other things. But this should give you some idea of what courses will help you get the job you want.

This is pretty pragmatic, I realize. And I'll admit that it's a good idea to occasionally step outside your comfort zone and take a course you normally wouldn't take. One of the best history courses I ever took was well outside what I usually studied. And sometimes the odd course pays off if there happens to be a job that requires knowledge of some obscure subject and you just happen to have taken a course in it. I'm basically just trying to provide a way to

generate a rough list starting out.

And then there's the question everyone has, and no one can answer. So what professors should I take?

So Which Professors Should I Take?

This is one of those questions you probably won't know the answer to until it's too late.

Basically, take a professor whose teaching style matches your learning style, is passionate about the things you are passionate about, and will teach you things that will help you get a job. That's probably not much help, but if the department has a meeting where professors talk about their research or experience that's a good opportunity to find out what interests them and at least get a first impression.

The obvious answer is to ask other students which professors are good, but there are some problems with that strategy. The other students might have different learning styles than you, and that will make their advice less useful. If you don't know the other student they might just be lazy, and tell you not to take a professor you would learn a lot from just because the class is more work than another.

The other big problem with asking other students who to take is that professors are human, with outside lives. A professor who everyone raves about can have a bad semester and everyone in the class for that one semester might end up hating them. If a professor has a sick kid or spouse, a death in the family, tenure review, financial problems, or any of a hundred other things that can throw

them off their game in the classroom. Some professors can just set this all aside, walk into the classroom, and bring their A-game while their personal lives crash down around their ears, but a lot of people can't. And even the greatest professor in the department can get bad reviews from people that were in a class while they were dealing with outside circumstances.

It happens.

The one caveat is that if you ask a bunch of people who are at different points in the program, and everyone says a certain instructor is horrible and give concrete examples of why (they don't provide clear instructions on assignments, they cancel class at the last minute a lot, they just aren't interested in the subject matter), you might look for alternatives. If you're local you can always try sitting in the hall outside a lecture and listening in, if that's an option. There are some sites that allow students to evaluate professors, I think these are about as much credible as bathroom wall graffiti, personally.

There are bad professors. There are great professors. Most will fall somewhere between Captain Bligh and Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society. Ultimately, it shouldn't be a problem for you because you'll do most of your learning on your own now. So don't worry about it too much.

I've had professors I liked as people, and professors I respected as instructors and scholars. Ideally, you'll get both in the same package, but if I had to choose I'd go with "respect" before "like." I learn a lot more from those professors, and most people will tell you which professors they like personally when you ask who you should take. I prefer my professors to teach me a lot, and I have people I

like for outside of class time.

The best advice I can offer is to try to take classes that will help you get a job or that at least interest you, and even if you don't like the professor you'll get something of value out of the class. The rest you just have to deal with, like a boss you don't particularly like.

So should you take online or meat space courses?

Online Courses in Library Graduate School

Online courses are easier to fit into your schedule, but take more time. You'll probably be expected to post things to a message board type area each week, and read and react to what your classmates are posting. I would suggest doing this posting early if you are in such a class, otherwise it gets harder to find something original to say.

If you are doing online courses because you are a distance student, being off campus can have some disadvantages. Access to libraries and resources for research relies on your internet connection, and must be done over the web. A lot of stuff is online, but if you need to actually go in and look at a book for something, you might have a problem. A lot of student groups tend to be campus based, and although they're usually welcoming to distance students, some of the things they do require you to be physically present. You'll want to consider local placements for practicums, internships, or student work, since the office probably doesn't have a list of contacts for your particular local area. Not all courses may be offered online.

The main advantages are you don't have to move, you can listen to lectures on your own schedule (a few distance courses have live lectures but most seem to be pre-recorded), and some programs charge in-state tuition for online courses even if you reside out of state. It may also fit better with your learning style if you prefer to read and ponder before replying to lectures or questions.

Online instruction is big in libraries right now, so at least one online course would probably be a good idea for any student, even those living on or near campus so you can say you have experience with remote instruction.

Most online course management systems can be set to keep track of the links a user clicks, so your professor may very well be able to check and see if you've done the readings or listened to the lectures. Or at least if you've clicked the links. Keep that in mind if you're taking a course online because you want to ignore it as much as possible.

A lot of universities are pushing online courses since (according to my understanding) they're relatively profitable compared to on-site classes. You don't have to pay for the infrastructure of a classroom, parking lots, or heating, cooling, maintaining, and cleaning a building. Apparently IT is relatively cheap compared to these layouts.

Speaking of IT, you'll probably need a reasonably modern operating system and web browser to access most online content. Exact requirements will vary, check before you decide to do online courses.

If you're not sure about online learning, you could always try a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course). These are

web-based courses which usually don't have an assessment component (you're not getting graded on your work) and you do not get credit for, but you can take for free. Just drop free mooc courses in your favorite search engine, and find something that interests you.

Even classes taking place in a physical classroom will probably have some sort of online course management software for getting readings, downloading assignments, and uploading homework, so you will get some exposure to online education resources. If you really enjoy the message boards and interacting with classmates online, these courses might suit you well.

Either way, you're going to have to write papers.

Writing Papers

This isn't about how to do research, or grammar or punctuation. These are my thoughts on the mechanical process of writing a paper. It's the system I use, because it helps me keep track and fulfill the technical requirements of the paper assignment. Actually doing research well should be something you covered in undergrad, and if you didn't there are entire books written on the subject.

I'll even recommend one: *The Craft of Research* by Booth

But that's about research, and I'm talking about the actual process of writing a paper. First, make a new folder for the paper on your PC, and create a blank word processor document in it. Copy the instructions for the assignment onto the word processor document. If your professor gave you an electronic copy of the instructions, just use copy

and paste. If the assignment was on paper, transcribe it. It doesn't have to be word for word, but you need to know what the requirements of the paper are. If the professor gave some standardized instructions in the syllabus for all papers, you'll need to copy those as well.

The point is you now have a checklist at the top of your paper of what you need to do to satisfy the instructions. As you finish each item, strikethrough it (usually in the menu under format/character/strikethrough or some similar command) so you know it is done. Don't delete it, you'll still want this checklist later.

Next, pick a topic. People will usually tell you to write about something that interests you, or write about something you want to write about. That's kind of true, but kind of not true. You need to write the paper you can write, at this time. That means you have sixteen weeks, if you know what you're doing day one and have until the last day of the semester to finish. You need to pick a topic you can do in that amount of time.

I usually figure out a topic I can do, and then decide if it interests me. If it does, I'll write about it, but the key requirement is that I can do it in a semester. Keep it limited, look around in recent journals for ideas for what is being published and relevant in the field, and ask your professor if the topic is suitable. Look at assigned readings in class for unanswered questions or things that could be clarified. For one thing, you're reading those articles anyway, and for another your professor thinks the topic is important enough to assign readings on.

Once you have an approved topic, start gathering sources. Find what you can, look in the footnotes and bibliographies for further sources, and keep checking until

you have enough sources. This is basically the research phase.

Once you have enough sources you're going to write the body, or middle, of your paper. Not the beginning (introduction) and not the end (conclusion), you need to write the body first. This probably doesn't make much sense, but what you're actually doing is compiling evidence to make an argument. If you can simultaneously hold information from two dozen sources and their evidence in your head and analyze them, you probably don't need this blog.

So take the first article, and summarize it. If there's an abstract, you can drop that whole into the paper, just make sure you have a system to know what's a quotation. This is a good point to start citations, because you don't want to go anywhere near plagiarism. In general, I err on the side of over-citing. I figure I might lose a few points for improper citations, but could fail an entire course for plagiarism. Anyway, once you have all your sources summarized start grouping them by the arguments they make, the type of sources they use, or how they relate to your topic.

Once you have the body of your paper written read through it, and see what conclusions you can draw. Unless you're doing original research, by which I mean creating tests and gathering data, you're just looking at what other people have done and seeing what conclusions you can draw from their work.

Once that's done, you can write your introduction and conclusion. If you had done these before you assembled your evidence, you might have been wrong, and people usually don't like to change things once they've written

them down. What you've done instead is compiled the evidence, organized it, and then discussed what the evidence indicated.

Your personal feelings on the matter are irrelevant here. You are discussing what the evidence shows, not what you feel.

This is important because you're trying to answer a question, not prove a statement. "How effective are summer reading programs in creating lifelong library patrons?" is an example of a question. If instead you set out to show that "Summer reading programs create lifelong library patrons because I was in a summer reading program and loved it and think they should get more funding," you have a huge problem. Namely, you don't know if they do or not for most people. If all the evidence shows they don't, you're kind of screwed.

So you gather your evidence, then draw your conclusions. Write the body of your paper, and then write the introduction and conclusion.

Once you're done you should have a paper which has three sections. The first is the introduction, or "This is what I'm going to tell you." It's a summary of your paper, and it should tell your audience what question you were trying to answer, a summary of what evidence you found, and what answer you found. This isn't a mystery novel, don't surprise your audience by hiding the answer until the end. If your audience knows your question, what evidence you found to answer it, and what your answer is they'll be able to follow your argument much more easily.

The introduction should also include a thesis statement, which is basically the purpose of the paper. You can create

a thesis statement by turning the question you tried to answer into a declaration (and you can do this now that you know what the evidence says). Don't be subtle here, you want all points possible for this so hit people over the head with it. "This paper will demonstrate that..." is a big neon sign that this is the thesis statement. Ideally, drop it in as soon as you can (first page is good, first paragraph and in the abstract is probably better) so your audience knows why you wrote the paper as soon as possible.

The second part of your paper is the body, or the "This is me telling you what I said I was going to tell you in the introduction." This is where you present your evidence (articles or monographs), and explain how these articles are relevant to your argument. It's not enough to present a long list of articles and sources, you need to explain how these articles interact with your thesis, if they prove or disprove your thesis, and how they interact with each other. This is a good place to address any methodological flaws in the research you're citing as well.

Finally, the conclusion, or the "What I just told you" section. It's basically a summary, and very similar to the introduction. You're reminding people of the central argument (thesis) of the paper, the evidence you've presented, and what the paper shows. Throw in some suggestions for further research, and you're good to go.

Ending the paper can be hard, especially if you feel like it just trails off. One strategy is try to write a good introduction explaining why your paper is important or at least relevant, and then copy and paste it on the end. You'll need to revise and reword this (it shouldn't be word for word copy) but ideally it will remind you and your audience why your paper's findings are significant.

If all this seems a little repetitive, it is. Your basic formula is “This is what I’m going to tell you,” “Tell them,” “This is what I just told you.” You’re driving in a circle here, and ending up the exact same place you started because you’re making an argument. If you want someone to remember something, tell them three times.

Admittedly, this is a lousy formula for fiction writing, but you’re trying to inform people not entertain them. Watch a weather forecast on television some time, and look at the formula they use. The weatherperson does that huge map thing, which shows the national weather and cold fronts and winds. Then they go to the weekly forecast which breaks it down by day, and gives specific temperature ranges for a specific area, and discuss how the stuff in that giant weather map is making all this happen. And then they sum up with how horribly your weekend plans are ruined.

“This is what I’m going to tell you,” “Tell them,” and “This is what I just told you.” Your argument is likely to be a lot longer, but it’s the same basic formula.

Do not put the words, “The End” on the last page. Just don’t.

Now it’s down to editing. Make sure your footnotes are properly formatted, your transitional sentences transition, run spell check, proofread, check your bibliography, and so on. If you need help with this your university probably has a writing center that can look things over and give you advice. Take this stuff seriously, it usually affects your grade and they’re pretty much easy points. Don’t get knocked down a grade because of poor spelling, not formatting footnotes properly, or forgetting a bibliography. For a lot of professors, this is as much about showing you

understand how to write a paper as saying something original or even interesting.

Now, finally, go back up to the top of the paper, and hopefully you've gotten each item from the instructions with a big strikethrough line on it by now. Look at them, make sure they're really satisfied, and delete them as you check. If there's a portion of the instructions you can't strikethrough, you're not done yet. Do that, and then give it another final read and hand it in.

This won't teach you how to write well, but hopefully it will help you satisfy the technical requirements of the paper and not lose points because you forgot the word count or used the wrong citation format.

This also might seem very anal retentive for some people. I follow this process because I basically look at writing papers as a job. Set up the procedure, follow it, and go on to other things. The more standardized it is the easier time I have getting started, and the less likely I am to forget something.

And if you think this is anal retentive, I even have a discussion on handing in papers.

Handing in Papers

This is probably the single best suggestion I can offer anyone. It's short, it's simple, it has probably saved my butt more than once.

On your desktop, make a folder called Attachments.

When you are done with an assignment and have to upload it to course management software or print it, copy it from whatever folder you have it in, and paste it in the Attachments folder. Don't move it, you want to keep an original copy elsewhere. Open it, look at it, make sure it is the final version of your assignment.

Now go the course management software, and upload it from the Attachments folder, and only from the Attachments folder. Or print from the Attachments folder, and only from the Attachments folder.

I know this sounds like a waste of time, but it helps you make certain you know which version of a paper you are handing in to your professor. If you have ten versions of a paper, and number ten is the final version, but you upload or print number nine, your grade is going to suffer. If you click on the wrong line in a folder and send `grocery_list.rtf` instead of `grad_app.rtf`, you might have just sunk yourself.

I used this system, and still use it for resumes and job applications. Nothing gets sent out or printed unless it's in that folder. It's not a fool-proof system, but it's at least idiot resistant.

As far as file formats go, if you're printing hard copy it doesn't really matter. If you're uploading, I like to upload a doc or docx and pdf format of the file, assuming you can upload multiple files. If your professor has a specific file format in the instructions or the syllabus, that trumps everything. Use that format. If they don't and one of you is using a twelve year old copy of word, you might have some formatting problems between the two programs. If no file format is specified, the pdf will at least show them that it's a software compatibility problem.

Don't use weird file formats. I love LibreOffice, but I would never upload a file in odt format unless the professor specifically requested that format.

So just stick to common file formats (doc and even rtf should be safe, pdf as a backup if possible), and use that Attachments folder.

It'll save you some frustration, and you'll probably get plenty of that from group projects.

Group Projects

I think it's fair to say that group projects are the bane of many a library school student's existence. Not because there's anything inherently bad about working in groups, but mainly because of scheduling. Trying to synchronize the schedules of 4-6 people between classes, work, and all their other commitments can be a nightmare. And for some reason a lot of library programs love group projects. It's a running joke among certain faculty.

There are a lot of reasons given for having so many group projects. Some are, in my opinion, bad reasons and some are merely mediocre reasons.

I've always found the idea that they're necessary to prepare people for the workplace to be slightly suspect. Pretty much every profession that requires a graduate degree is going to have to work with other people, and I don't know of any other programs that require nearly as many group projects. These people in other programs seem to do just fine in the work force without having a

group project in every class. This is actually the real problem, not that group projects are assigned, but that there are way too many of them.

They also limit your opportunities for individual accomplishments. Like it or not, it's a much bigger hassle to get six people to continue a project and turn it into a conference presentation or published article than one person. It's just extra logistics. And at the end of the day, no one is going to hire your project group. They're going to hire you. If you don't have something you can sell yourself with, you're not going to get the job.

I've also heard library schools like group projects because they sometimes attract people who are, as they say, lacking the social skills. This forces these people to interact with their classmates and learn some basic social skills. I guess the other students get experience working with people who don't do well in group projects, which is in all fairness probably a valuable job skill.

The only other reason I've heard is that people would sometimes use professors as references, and one of the questions they would get asked is if the person works well with others. Again, I guess, but if you're using a professor who needs to rely on student evaluations of your group work as a reference, you're doing it wrong, and I don't think that a professor saying your group didn't complain about you is going to get you that job.

And at the end of the day, some people do some amazing things with group projects. The Library as Incubator Project and Sound of the Archives are both very cool group projects, but they were also created by people outside of class, not a group of people put together by a professor to undertake an assigned project.

Having said all of that, you're basically stuck with group projects. You can (probably shouldn't, but can) raise all these arguments with your professor, and you're not going to win. If you want to mention this in an exit interview for your program (assuming your program has one), feel free and maybe it will make things better for someone else down the road. I'm only telling you this so that you can look at group projects, recognize them for what they are, and get what you can out of them with a minimal amount of fuss.

Learn to use google docs, so you can work on things with other people without having to email copies of files back and forth. Try to get everyone to agree on a project, hopefully one that everyone is interested in doing. Accept that your way is not the only way to get things done, and as long as the instructions for the assignment are being ticked off be happy with the progress. Don't do all the work. Do your fair share of the work. Don't wait until the last minute to do things, there are other people waiting to get this handed in as well. Having a project manager, team leader, or whatever you want to call it can be useful, but don't take advantage of that person.

Otherwise, it's pretty much being a grown up, and not freaking out.

Which will probably happen, by the way.

Freaking Out

That's the technical term for the point in graduate school where you seriously regret your decision and suspect that

you're not at all qualified and everyone knows you're just a big fraud. The thing is, it's normal, and I'd even go so far as to say expected for most people. I won't say it happens to everyone, but it happens to a lot of people.

LIS programs aren't the most difficult or rigorous graduate programs out there, but they should still be challenging. You're going to be learning new things, and if there isn't some point where you feel like you're not getting it, I don't think you're getting your money's worth. My first semester I had a class where I left every night feeling like the biggest dummy on the planet, because it was a tough course and the professor really knew his stuff.

But that also meant I was learning a lot. If you show up to class every night and leave after two hours of just having things confirmed or feeling like you've had the obvious pointed out to you... it kind of begs the question of what you're doing there in the first place.

So at some point expect to have an assignment that is just miserable and soul-crushing, or to say something in class and have someone correctly point out that you're flat-out wrong, or get a paper back that you didn't do as well on as you thought you did. It happens to pretty much everyone.

It's usually a brief or temporary thing, and if it is just do whatever you need to do to get over it. Take a shower, pet a puppy, find an all you can eat Mexican buffet and fill the void in your soul with tacos. Maybe not all at once. Talk it over with a friend or significant other. Clean your bathroom. Jump on your bed and yell and flail. Whatever.

If it's really serious or ongoing, you can talk to your academic advisor or your campus mental health services people. No one wants to see you fail out, and I seriously

doubt you'll come up with a problem they haven't heard before. They're there to help, and fixing things before they become serious problems is better for everyone.

I'm not qualified to give mental health advice, and I'm mainly writing this just to let you know that moments of doubt are common. You're doing something challenging, and if you were an undergrad academic rock star you're going to take a few more hits to the ego than you're used to taking. Use support networks if you need to, don't panic, and work your way through.

But what if you really screw something up?

Really Screwing Something Up

So what if you miss a deadline, or your computer crashes and you don't have something backed up, or you scheduled your vacation the week a major assignment is due?

Well, hopefully it wasn't something you could have avoided, but in any case I have two principles here for you:

1. Tell the truth and you probably won't get in more trouble than you deserve.
2. If you're asking for help getting out of a jam, make it as easy as possible for the person you're asking the favor from to help you, and don't make it look like you're being rewarded for screwing up.

The first one is really pretty simple. If you forgot a

deadline, or put something in your calendar wrong, or screwed up in some other way, just tell the truth, tell them what you're doing to make sure it doesn't happen again, and tell them what you're doing to make it right. Make it clear you're not asking for any favors at this stage. If they offer a favor, feel free to take them up on it, but part of being responsible is accepting consequences.

“Hey, I totally let things get away from me this past week, and didn't realize how many things were due. I'm sorry, I'm working ahead now on some projects so I'll have more of a buffer, and I'll have that assignment for you tomorrow. I understand there will be late penalties on the grade, and totally understand.”

There you go. You screwed up, you're doing something to make sure it doesn't happen again, you know what the consequences are and you're not complaining. Aside from actually getting it right the first time, I don't know what more anyone could ask.

But what if you really do need that favor, for whatever reason?

First, accept that you might not get it, and you'll survive. But stack the deck as much in your favor as possible.

Do this by already having alternatives or solutions ready for the person you're inconveniencing. If you just say, “I can't do this at the time or the way I'm supposed to, how can I do it differently?” you've just dumped a problem in someone's lap. You're still going to be dumping a problem in someone's lap, but if you give them solutions at the same time, it helps.

Offer two or three solutions to the problem that

inconvenience the person as little as possible. If you need to reschedule a meeting, offer to come by during office hours, or some other time they're already on campus. Don't make them make a special trip just because you need to reschedule something. If you can't take an exam on time, offer to take it with another section of the same class (earlier, if possible), or make a special trip to campus to fit their schedule. You're the one asking for a favor, make it as easy and painless as possible for the other party and you're a lot more likely to get that request granted.

There's another reason to offer solutions as well. They might not be ideal, but if you offer solutions you can make sure that whatever alternative your professor selects isn't worse than the original problem. The last thing you want is to have someone do you a favor that makes things even worse.

Generally, try not to get into these situations in the first place though.

And avoid incompletes if at all possible.

INCOMPLETES BAD! TREE PRETTY!

Most situations in grad school are pretty individualistic, but incompletes are almost always bad news. Basically this occurs when you have a major paper or project, and you don't have it done by the time course grades go in for the semester. Your professor has given you an extension, but they have to put something in the grade box so they mark down an incomplete for the course.

And your life can now be screwed up in so many ways.

First, you still have to finish the project. And that's going to be work on top of the regular work next semester. If you didn't have the time to get it done when it was due, what are the chances you'll have time next semester when new courses start and you have to finish those as well?

Even if you can get it done, that incomplete counts as a zero until it's resolved. Which doesn't sound like a big deal, but if you need a certain GPA or number of credits for financial aid, you might not have it anymore (oh yes, financial aid can and has been withheld from people because of incompletes lowering their GPA). If you need a certain GPA to stay in a program, you've got that working against you as well.

Depending on the instructor, incompletes might take a hit on grading as well (they are, by definition, late). If you can hand in a project now and get an 80% on it, your grade will still be higher than if you hand in a project a month later that gets a 95% raw score, but loses 30% for being late. And if you hand it in now it's over and done with.

Also, never, ever assume that not handing something in will get you an incomplete. You need to talk to your professor, or that assignment will probably get a zero. Incompletes are something that might happen, if you have a good reason and whatever other requirements the professor needs, not automatic.

In certain circumstances, incompletes might be necessary or they might even have helped people. But they've always seemed like a bad idea to me.

So how can you make sure you make your deadlines, and

don't need an incomplete?

How to Meet Deadlines

Well, the obvious answer to making deadlines is to know when your stuff is due and get it done on time. There are plenty of tools to help you track your schedule, from custom software to google calendar to an old fashioned paper pocket calendar. Having a primary and a backup isn't a bad idea, in case you lose one or net access. Copying all the stuff off the syllabus for each class is a good start.

Otherwise, I tried to work about a week ahead on stuff. That was a good compromise for me between not being rushed to get things done last minute, and actually remembering what I had read or done so I could discuss it in class. This is easier to do for some classes than others, but it should be workable. It gives you a nice buffer of up to thirteen days or so if you need it (you're one week ahead, and have one week to do whatever is due the next week), which should cover most emergencies. If you have to take more than thirteen days off of class for something, it's probably so major that graduate school is no longer your primary concern.

Please note that's work a week ahead, not turn things in a week ahead of time. I tried to turn things in about twenty-four to forty-eight hours ahead of time for stuff handed in electronically (in case of system or ISP outages), and the day it was due for paper assignments. Go ahead and print paper assignments or put a copy of the final assignment in the attachments folder when they're done, just wait to turn them in. The reason being, if you hand something in a

week ahead of time and there are errors, you clearly had time to fix them and didn't. Which can make you look like a schmuck.

Otherwise, learn to skim articles rather than reading and trying to commit every word to memory, accept that you'll miss out on some fun things, and just make yourself do stuff.

Oh, and don't take grades more seriously than you should.

How Much Should I Worry About Grades?

Some people are absolutely determined to wring every possible point they can out of an assignment. And they shouldn't be. They want good grades, but that's not the point of the assignment. And it can get them a lot of extra work, for very little reward.

The assignment is there to teach you something, and the grade is there to provide you with feedback on how well you learned that something. Then you get an overall grade at the end of the class, and a lot of people focus on that way too much, especially for minor assignments that aren't worth many points.

I'm not going to convince people not to worry about their final grades (and you should, to a point), but at least look at the math and realize how little difference a few points on a minor assignment can make in that final grade.

Hypothetically you have an assignment that's worth 5% of your final grade. That means every percentage point on this minor assignment is worth 0.05 of the 100 percentage

points of your final grade. That decimal point is not a mistake. Every 20 points on this assignment is one point on your final grade. The math breaks down as follows:

100% on the assignment is 5.0% towards your final grade.

90% on the assignment is 4.5% towards your final grade.

80% on the assignment is 4.0% towards your final grade.

And so on. What I'm trying to get across is that a 20% difference in the grade on this assignment only translates to a 1% difference in your final grade. That's not much. Beating your brains out to get an extra five percent on this assignment (or arguing with your professor over five extra points) will only get you an extra 0.25 percent on your final grade. That's one fourth of one percentage point.

You could get a solid F (50%) on this assignment, and only lose 2.5% on your final grade. Now that's significant, and could drop you a letter grade, but that's also really screwing up the assignment. You should take small assignments seriously, because they do add up and you still need to know this stuff. And you'll look like a jerk if you blow them off. The problem is with the people arguing over two and three points on an assignment worth not very much of their final grade. They don't seem to understand the amount of effort versus the amount of reward here.

So why am I going on and on about this?

It's because this is all related to budgeting your time, setting priorities, and getting things done. If you have a class with three assignments, one worth 5% of your grade, one worth 30%, and one worth 50% (we'll assume the

other 15% is attendance and participation for stats purists), and you are spending equal time on all three assignments you are wasting a lot of time on one assignment worth 5%, hopefully spending the right amount of time on the one in the middle worth 30%, and spending way too little time on the third assignment worth 50%.

When your professor set those percentages, they were telling you something. The 5% assignment is important enough to go over in class and grade, but not that big a deal in the grand scheme of things. Don't lose any sleep over it. The 30% is pretty important, and you should devote some significant time to it. The 50% assignment reflects a major component of the subject, and is something you should know well before you consider yourself proficient in the subject matter of the course.

And you should devote your time accordingly. It's just a rough guide, and you should always do even the small assignments and try to do well on them. Just try to remember that you have a limited amount of time, a certain amount of assignments, and some are more important than others. You need to budget your time accordingly.

Because there's plenty to do outside of class, like student orgs.

Student Organizations

Student organizations are really good opportunities, but can be difficult to balance. They can give you experience you can't get anywhere else, but they can also eat your

time if you're not careful. They also tend to be organizations which are pretty relevant to what people are interested in, if for no other reason than they've survived. When you have an all volunteer organization that turns over its entire membership every two years, simply being around awhile is pretty impressive.

So they're usually organizations centered around things people are interested in, and this can lead to people trying to be a member in every student organization. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it'll eat up a lot of time. From a purely pragmatic perspective I would suggest being really active and trying to be an officer in one organization, or being pretty active in two student organizations. After that the experience you get will probably become kind of redundant.

What you're going to get are opportunities to do some applied things relevant to the group such as fundraising, networking, leadership opportunities, plus whatever else comes down the line. Some student orgs are associated with national organizations, some aren't. I don't think there's much difference in the experience either way.

Being an officer looks nice on a c.v., but isn't as important as what you do. If you want to do something just suggest doing it at a meeting and put yourself in charge. You'll still get the experience, it'll still be your project, you just won't have the title or "official" duties. If enough people think it's a good idea and invest their time, you're more likely to have a successful project. If no one else invests their time, it still might be a good idea but it's just not the right group of people or time.

That happens because these are volunteer organizations. You can't really run them from the top-down, if you or an

officer try to be an autocrat and order people around your members will, in all likelihood, just stop showing up and doing things. Help them work on projects they want to do, and you'll have a much better chance of success.

Otherwise, look back over those job ads, see if the student org can get you any experience you can use to fulfill the requirements, and try not to let it consume your every waking moment.

There are other things to do that with, like trying to get published.

Getting Published

If you can do well on your papers in grad school, you probably stand a decent chance of getting published. It's hard work, but probably not as hard as you think it is, and there are some good reasons to try to get published.

For academic librarians, if you're tenure track you'll probably need to publish to get tenure, and even if you don't it shows you're familiar with the process. Even for librarians who aren't formally required to publish, it shows potential employers you can set long term goals and accomplish them, you can work with others, you can conduct research and report the findings, and that you can write well. All things that most, if not all, employers are interested in.

So where to start? Well, for your first paper it helps if you work within a discipline you're familiar with. If you come from a humanities background, think about getting published in humanities type journals. If your

undergraduate degree was in a social science, do something in that vein, and so on. It's certainly possible to get published in another area, but if you're more familiar with the kind of articles that get published, the citation style, the format, and the field in general that will help you get the first paper published and build some confidence.

From there I recommend you take a class with a major (probably 15 page minimum) paper assignment. Mention to the professor at some point that you'd like to try to publish, and ask them if they'd be willing to critique your paper with that in mind when they grade it. The down side to this approach is that if your professor does the extra work and you never try to publish it, you look like a jerk. So make sure you're willing to invest some time and effort in this before you ask others for help.

The advantage here is you have a Ph.D., or at least a Master's with several years experience critiquing your paper and holding you to a certain standard. This is a huge advantage, and I'd encourage everyone to take advantage of it while they can.

By the end of the semester you hopefully have a paper you've spent significant time on, and your professor has looked it over and offered some suggestions that might make it publishable. Incorporate those suggestions, and then look around for possible journals to submit to.

The quickest way to find a journal is to look at your footnotes and bibliography. If you have some journals that show up quite a bit in your citations, you're probably doing the kind of research that they publish. Check their submissions guidelines and see if your article looks like a good fit.

LIS seems pretty open to publishing from people still getting their Master's degree, journals in other disciplines sometimes have a policy of only publishing from Ph.D.s (some journals will tell you this, some won't). There are also journals specifically for graduate student publishing. Library Student Journal (LSJ) seems to be the big one for library science, and in the interest of full disclosure I have published an article in LSJ. They have different sections for different kinds of submissions, and are open to a wide variety of topics.

My experience with LSJ was very positive. There is a decision to make here though: Do you publish in a journal specifically for graduate students, or do you publish in a, for lack of a better term, regular journal. Honestly, either one looks good on a resume. This isn't something a lot of people do, and getting published in a graduate student journal is nothing to sneeze at. The regular journal might count towards tenure requirements if that comes up, but that's a ways down the road.

It mostly boils down to an honest appraisal of your work. If it looks like the sort of thing that a regular journal would publish, you should probably go ahead and submit to one. If they don't accept it, you can always try other journals or a grad journal later. You can submit to a less prestigious journal if you're rejected, but once it's published that's where it's published. It's up to you and how much time you're willing to spend, and how ambitious you are.

Now that you've chosen an initial journal to submit your article to, you need to make your article conform to their submission guidelines. Be aware, you're not sending in a finished article at this point. You're just sending in

something good enough to get the editor to send it out for peer review. This is why spelling, grammar, punctuation, and following the submission guidelines to the letter are critical. It shows you take this seriously, and you're not going to need a lot of hand holding. If an editor has two manuscripts, and one is going to require a lot of correction and didn't follow the submission guidelines, and one did, I'm pretty sure I know which one is going to get rejected.

Make people's lives as easy as possible, and they'll be more likely to work with you.

So follow the guidelines. Make sure the word count is acceptable, formatting is correct, proofread carefully, and don't give them a reason to say, "No."

Then you send it in, and wait... and wait... and wait...

Hopefully you'll get some sort of email from the editor notifying you that they received your manuscript, and giving an approximate timeline. If not, they received the submission and will email you when they make an initial decision. This can take awhile. What's happening is the editor is reading your manuscript, and deciding whether to send it out for peer review or not.

There are three possible answers. They reject it, in which case you look for somewhere else to publish. They suggest revisions before they send it out for peer review, in which case you make the changes and send it back in. Finally, they can accept it for peer review, in which case they send it out anonymously to professionals or professors in the field who look it over and critique it. For non-research papers it is possible they'll skip the peer review process, in which case it might just get accepted.

When your paper is accepted for peer review, you're back to waiting. This can really take awhile. What's happening is your paper is being sent out for critique by professors and professionals in the field (or fellow students in some cases, such as LSJ). These people are busy with their own stuff during the academic year, and during break they're on their break. They're also almost always unpaid volunteers, and doing this in their very scarce free time.

So these critiques are slowly making their way back to the editor. It can take months for this to be completed, or years in the case of some of the more prestigious journals. When the editor has all the feedback from the peer reviewers, they will send it to you along with any notes they themselves might have.

At this point, you revise your article based on the feedback. This can be a lot of work, or not very much at all depending on the article you sent in, and the people doing the peer review. My advice at this point is to follow the feedback, even if you don't necessarily agree with it. When you have a few more publications and experience, and some reputation in the field, then you might have more room to argue. For now, the reviewers probably have a lot more experience, and were chosen for their knowledge of the subject. Probably best to follow their lead.

So you either need to make the revisions, or at least offer the editor a good reason you couldn't. Getting feedback you can't follow does happen. Sometimes you get contradictory feedback, and you can't satisfy one reviewer without ignoring the other (think "This is irrelevant, omit it" versus "This section needs to be expanded, look at these sources"). Sometimes they suggest you look into something more closely, and it turns out there's nothing

there. Just go through the feedback item by item, and make a list of the feedback you couldn't follow and why. You'll include this in a separate document when you resubmit. Don't forget that during the revision process you also need to update changes in your bibliography and footnote new material.

Keep in mind, at this point you are writing for an audience of one: the editor. Make sure you follow their suggestions, and when you've ticked off every item of feedback, send it back along with comments on feedback you couldn't follow.

Now, you get to wait again. Hopefully it won't take as long this time. But it might.

At some point the editor sends you their second decision. Probably either acceptance or more revisions, it's kind of rare to send an article out for peer review and not publish it, provided the critiques are satisfied. If it's more revisions, revise and resubmit. If it's acceptance, congratulations but don't break out the champagne just yet. You've still got a little more to do, but the hard part is over.

You'll probably have to look over some galley proofs and make any minor grammar or spelling corrections that are necessary. This is just proofreading, and nothing you haven't done before. There will probably be a contract of some sort, you'll want to read this carefully and make sure you're not signing over any rights you don't want to sign over. That's up to you. Depending on the publication and article you might need to provide images or pictures, or send in whatever charts or graphs you have in the format they require.

After that, you're pretty much done. Just more waiting until it actually comes out in published form. Then you can sit down and read your paper.

If you have a distinctive writing style, this can be a little odd. By the time your article has gone through peer review, editing, and everything else it might not look to you like something you wrote. That's okay. I look at the articles I've had published and while they don't look like something I would instantly recognize as mine, the contributions other people made created a stronger article. It really is a group effort, and is part of being a member of the LIS community.

This probably sounds like a lot of hard work, and to a certain extent it is. But there's a lot of waiting in between, where you're not doing anything with the article because you can't proceed without feedback. I really think most people capable of writing an A research paper are capable of getting published, if they put in the time and effort.

Although after you're published there's still one thing left to do, and for some people it's the hardest part.

You need to make sure people know about it, and take credit for all the hard work.

Self-Publicizing

There are people who do awesome things. There are people who talk about what they do. You want to be in the narrow cross-section of people who manage to do both. You gotta do it, because if you don't advocate for yourself no one else will.

You don't have to brag here, just look at it as sharing good news with like minded professionals. When a professor has a book published or gets a research grant, they definitely let people know.

As a student, there are some different ways to do this. One of the easiest is that if your department has a student newsletter, send in anything that you accomplish outside of class relevant to the profession. If you have an article published, give a conference presentation, or get a grant, let people know.

There might be journals that have sections devoted to members who accomplish things, and you could send them news. Probably the easiest way is just to thank anyone who helped you, no matter how tangentiality. If a professor gave you the original idea or helped you on a project, say thanks and let them know how that idea turned out.

There are good reasons for doing this, beyond it helping you get a job some day. When you accomplish something, it reflects well on your program. It gives something back to the professors and people in the program, and builds you some political capital. It's basically a courteous thing to do for the people who helped you, but there are pragmatic reasons as well.

You want to do this, because when you get a job you're going to be expected to promote your projects and institution. If you're in charge of a library program that succeeds you will be expected to report on that success to your superiors, to the people paying your salary, and to the profession. It looks good for the library, and it makes it easier to get funding, secure grants, and lets people know

there are good people working there.

So you might as well get used to it now.

This is more a frame of mind thing than anything else, so I don't have much more to say about it. Just remember two things: If you did something, you have every right to be proud of it. And the only person who will ever care more about what you have done than yourself is your mom.

Unless she's hiring, you need to let people know about your accomplishments. Doing great things isn't going to help you get a job if no one knows about them, so you need to talk yourself up. And a great place to do that is conferences.

Conferences

Conferences are a lot like student organizations. They're great for learning, networking, and self-promotion, but they can eat up big chunks of time.

While a student I did a conference a year, and wish I had made it a conference a semester. They really are great opportunities, but you're pretty much blocking off 3-5 days, as well as spending money on hotel, food, and travel. Check with your department, they might have funds to help student conference travel which will defray the costs. Most conferences charge lower admission for students, and quite a few also offer travel grants, so check that out.

The time is pretty much non-negotiable, but often well spent.

If you've never been to a conference, here's what generally happens. You're going to sit and listen to people present papers and talk about their projects. How they do this depends on what their background is, for the most part. Some people read papers verbatim, others stand and talk. There's usually a question and answer period at the end.

Feel free to ask questions, a room full of blank faces is kind of terrifying when you're up there.

Dress like a grownup. You'll see people in jeans and t-shirts, but these people probably already have jobs and aren't worried about impressing anyone. Turn off your cell phone. You're here to meet people and talk to them, and staring at your twitter feed all day isn't going to help you do that. Be positive, it's a small world and this isn't the time or place to badmouth professors, programs, or other professionals.

You'll need to talk to strangers. If you can't do this already it's a good time to learn. It'll help you with job interviews, dealing with colleagues, and maybe even your dating life. One of the best places to talk to strangers is the chow line. There's usually a break once or twice a day with drinks and light snacks, and there's always a line. Get in line between two people you don't know and start a conversation.

If there are student presentations (there's usually a poster and paper session), send something in. It makes it more likely you'll get funding from your department, and you meet a lot of people. It's another thing that looks good on the resume as well, and if you've done a class project you might as well get as much mileage out of it as possible.

Business cards are a good idea. There are plenty of places online that will sell you 500 business cards for \$25 or so, and they offer a variety of templates to help you design your card. If you're strapped for cash you can also just design the card and have it printed out multiple times on a single sheet of 8.5 x 11 inch card stock paper at a local print shop. You'll have to cut them apart yourself, but it saves on money, and you don't have to buy them 500 at a time. It's a good way to get your contact info out there, especially if you meet someone you want to collaborate with on a project later.

You're investing a lot of time here, and should try to get all you can in return.

Speaking of which, conferences make excellent blog fodder. If there's an official blog for the conference, you can volunteer to blog about the sessions you attend. Make sure you spell people's names correctly (I learned that the hard way), and just write about the session and what you thought about the material. Social media is pretty big right now, and it will get your name out there.

Speaking of social media...

Social Media

I started out planning the usual post about not putting up drunken political rants and pictures of yourself punching a cop on facebook, but then decided that if you need to be told that you're probably not reading this blog anyway.

Instead, I'd like to talk about making social media work

for you. I haven't done many, if any, of these things so take it with a grain of salt. They're just some suggestions, things I wish I had done when I was in SLIS.

First, let's talk platforms. Different kinds of social media do different things well. Twitter is more or less a conversation, it's good for immediate back and forth posting. Blogging is good for doing what I'm doing here, explaining things, talking at some length. Facebook is somewhere in the middle. You're talking more than on twitter, and you want to be able to get comments, but you're less concerned about back and forth with your audience or being able to write extensively and keep things in a certain order.

What you can do with each is use it as a networking tool, and a way to gain experience. Libraries and archives are big into social media at the moment, and depending on your job you might not be able to gain work experience with social media, or web 2.0, or whatever they're calling it these days. You can use it on your time though. Some employers might not consider it practical experience, but it's better than nothing.

So you can use it to check off one of those items on those job ads. You can also use it as a networking tool.

Use it to publicize your projects and accomplishments, or use it to create some. You're in class, you're reading and learning a lot, you're doing projects and (you might not believe this) there are probably some people who are genuinely interested in hearing what you have to say. You're learning about the most current material in the field, you're closer to a colleague than a student now, and some people have nostalgic feelings about their own time in the LIS program.

So use it. Blogs, twitter, and facebook are all free. If you do have a little money to spend you can get your own web-hosting and domain name for a blog or web page. Packages vary, but it should run you around \$100-\$150 a year for basic web-hosting and a registered domain name. Then use it, create a project and make yourself some publicity. Stick with it, get some readers, and use that platform to subtly mention related projects, presentations, or things you're doing.

I recommend finding a theme and focusing on it, as opposed to going all over the place and changing topics every week. I talk about a lot of different stuff here, but it's tied together by a theme of advice for LIS students. Set a consistent schedule for posting and stick to it, if you can't you'll look like you lack follow-through.

Working ahead is always a good idea, in case something comes up. I had about a month (12 posts at three posts a week) of material written before I started posting. Now I write three posts on the weekend, schedule them for the next week, and sketch drafts or think of topics through the week. Always spellcheck and proofread. You want to look professional, even if this is a hobby.

And if you don't have a project at the moment to talk about, make one. Make some instructional videos about using information resources and upload them, or take some pictures of your local libraries, or just books that you find interesting. Special collections, archives, libraries, they're all full of interesting things. Make them work for you. More on that later.

The other thing you can do is make other people's social media work for you. Find information professionals and

follow their blogs, facebook pages, or twitter feeds. Comment on their blogs (use your real name) and they might recognize you when you apply for a job. At the very least you'll have a better chance of knowing what their institution is doing, and being able to have a conversation about their projects. It's like traditional networking, but you can do it from behind a computer, read and edit your words before you post them, and take your time thinking of something intelligent to say. Just say smart things, ask questions, and have a conversation.

You probably use this stuff already, just transfer it to an academic or job context. Keep it professional, keep it positive, don't mix your business and personal social media, and think before you post.

That's my advice. Everyone talks about social media as a potential liability. Make it work for you instead. Talk about your amazing projects and what you're doing.

So how do you get ideas for projects in the first place?

How Do You Get Ideas for Projects?

Far and away the best way I know of to get ideas for projects is to immerse yourself in the profession. Talk to colleagues and patrons, read the literature, go to conferences, read blogs and the news. We are, in a lot of ways, a profession trying to take down a mountain with a toothpick. We have some really good toothpicks, but it's still a really big mountain. There is a lot more work than there are hands, and I bet most professionals have more ideas for projects than they have time or resources to accomplish those projects.

So have those conversations, and look for gaps in the knowledge or services. If someone doesn't address something in a paper because they didn't have time, piggyback on their research and answer that question (and plunder their bibliography for sources while you're at it). If there's a service not being provided, figure out a way to do it, (if it's for an institution ask for permission), and make it your project. Mention words like volunteer, unpaid, and ten hours a week and you'll probably have more offers than you can accept. Don't take on too big a project here, but if you can find something limited that will help you and others, go for it.

You can also look into turning a potential project into an independent study, practicum, or internship for course credit, which will give you deadlines, structure, and advice from a Ph.D. in the field. It might not feel quite as much like your own unique project anymore, but I'm generally of the opinion that more viewpoints make a project stronger.

But let's step back a minute, because you don't just want to chose a random project. You want to chose a project that is going to do you some good. At this point you can start playing the noun-verb and pick a platform game. Pick a noun related to your chosen field, a relevant verb, and turn it into a question. The third part is figuring out how you think you can answer that question.

Children – picking books – tagging. I want to be a K-5 librarian, so I'm going to look at how children (noun) select books (verb) by asking them to tag (platform) their selections. There are lots of laws and rules in working with children, but we're just in the idea stage here.

Spanish speakers – library usage – data gathering. I want to be an outreach librarian specializing in Latino communities, so I'm going to look at Spanish speaking communities (noun) use of library legal resources (verb) through interviews, census data, and usage statistics (platform).

You get the idea. It might not be your final project either, but it at least gets an idea started, and you can start reading the literature and talking to people.

Even when you find an idea, you've still got a heck of a lot of work left to do. You need to figure out a method, you need to check the current research in the field, you need to design your project and get the resources and permission to do it. You need to make sure someone will care, and the question is worth answering. But at the heart of most projects is a pretty simple noun verb platform concept.

Mongols – Keep them out – Great big wall

Person – Go to the moon – Rocket ship

And be aware, the examples I mentioned above are pretty big projects (they're at least the equivalent of a major class project). If you want something a little less time intensive, find a project you can still talk about but that involves less research. In other words, something skill based. Process or weed a collection, digitize some historical photographs, organize a pamphlet collection, volunteer for a reading program. Redesign someone's website for them, write a grant proposal, compile statistics, make a presentation. These projects sort of just exist on their own, and you're not presenting new information. You're just doing a project, doing it well, and

talking about it.

There are whole books written on actually doing projects, so next time I'm just going to hit some highlights on the sort of projects you might find yourself involved in, and some pitfalls to avoid.

Project Tips

Probably the big one is to milk a project for everything you can. The traditional academic project route is to do a project for class, use that feedback and present at a conference, and then use that feedback to create a journal article. Some things work better for some areas of this process than others, but that's the traditional get paid three times for the same academic paper route.

For this blog, I plan to turn it into an e-book when I'm done. Not because I think I'll sell any copies, but because I want to know how to create an e-book. So I've got blogging experience now, I've made some contacts with people who read it (my name is plastered at the end of every post for that exact reason), and I'll be able to say I created an e-book. Neat.

So get everything you can out of a project, but also have an exit strategy.

I think this is one of the bigger pitfalls for group projects people start in LIS programs. You need to have some sort of plan for when everyone graduates and you're not all in the same city anymore. Are you going to shut-down the project, keep it up long distance, or find someone else to hand it off to? All three are viable strategies, but it's

something to think about.

As far as this project goes, I made a list of things I wanted to talk about (added a few and lost a few along the way), and when it's done I'll leave the blog up and monitor it for comments, but it's done. I've said what I want to say, and I'll move on to something else. Unless something is going to be your life's work and you can see yourself doing it ten years from now, you need to know how you're going to end it.

You need to do this because of the time issue. I can knock out three posts on a Saturday morning, but eventually I'm going to want my Saturday mornings for different things. Other projects or the ground will thaw and I'll want to go hiking or ride a bike or something. I do have some project ideas I'm not working on because they would never end.

Those are projects usually undertaken by institutions, or large groups of people. Institutions can keep allocating resources to the project after you've gone on to other things, and large groups of people can (sometimes) lighten the load. Large groups of people can also dramatically expand the amount of work you do on a project, so be careful.

So know what you're getting into. Do a private trial run and figure out how much time and other resources a project will take, and ask yourself if you're willing to make that commitment. There are a ton of blogs out there that got started and only have three posts because no one realized that it would take time to maintain them and write updates.

If you're not willing to make that commitment, look for another project. There are plenty out there, so don't waste

time setting up one that doesn't matter to you. Generally, I would suggest starting small. It's easier to scale up if you find you have more time or resources, harder to scale back.

Finally, absolutely positively I am deadly serious follow ethical and institution guidelines if you are doing this as part of an institution. It might seem ridiculous, but if you're putting this project out there you're never sure how people are going to interact with it, and you need to follow those guidelines. For one thing it keeps you from drawing your school or workplace into a mess if something goes wrong, and for another it can keep you from wrecking your professional career before it even gets started. Those guidelines are there for a reason, and while no one likes filling out paperwork or reading manuals, they can save you a ton of grief down the road.

It's a good idea to be aware of ethical guidelines anyway, just because it helps you act, well, ethically. Making sure you can satisfy that criteria can help you look at your project critically, as an outsider might. That's usually helpful.

So figure out how much time and resources you can allocate, have an exit strategy, milk that project for everything you can, follow institutional guidelines, and be sure to act ethically.

And then you can put it on your e-portfolio.

E-Portfolios

E-Portfolios are just an online resumes or curriculum vitae

(c.v.). There's nothing mysterious about them. You can either do an independent webpage, or just put a resume up on linkedin and you'll have a basic e-resume. They can do some things paper can't, like offer people the ability to download a writing sample or allow you to use fancier graphics than you would on a paper resume; however, at its heart the e-portfolio is a resume with a URL.

I'm probably in the minority on the usefulness of e-resumes, and I could certainly be wrong. I see e-portfolios as a useful way to organize your information and set up a c.v., but I'm skeptical about their usefulness in an actual job search. A lot of professors in my program liked them though, and their usefulness will vary depending on what kind of job you're applying for.

The more bureaucratic the institution the job you're applying for is, the less likely people will be to look at your e-portfolio during your job search. Hiring committees tend to have pretty strict rules to make sure their decisions are impartial, and googling people is usually against those rules. One position I applied for had to write up the entire search process and submit it to three committees to make certain they had followed the proper procedures. Granted this was a state university, and smaller or more independent institutions will probably not have as much oversight, but they still have guidelines.

The reason that institution went through three committees to make sure they followed procedures is (at least partially) because they are prohibited by law from hiring or not hiring based on certain criteria. If they google someone and find a picture, they might see that the candidate is older, of a certain gender, religion, or race, disabled, or from another protected category. If they don't hire that person and get sued, they might have to prove in

a court of law that they didn't use that criteria in their decision to not hire that individual. Good luck proving you didn't think something. I'm not a lawyer, and I don't know if that suit would be winnable or not, but it's something people worry about. I personally think it's kind of unlikely, but if human resources or legal are worried about that kind of thing, "No googling applicants" might be a rule the committee has to follow.

For awhile there were a couple of third-party firms that specialized in searching social media, taking out information that hiring committees couldn't use in their decisions, and passing along what was left to the hiring institution. I don't know if they ever got much business or not, but they were out there. And some hiring committee members do just google applicants anyway.

So there is a chance someone will see your e-portfolio. Personally, I take the position that if it's on my e-portfolio, and it's relevant to the job, it'll be on my application anyway. The e-portfolio just shows I can make a basic static web page, which is good, but I've never had anyone mention my e-portfolio in an interview.

As I said, they're handy for keeping an up to date c.v. where it can be easily accessed and demonstrating basic web skills. If you're asking for a reference from someone it can be more convenient to send them a link to your c.v. than a file attachment. And people might see it online before you've even applied for a job at their institution and remember you.

Ultimately, I don't see how it can hurt you, but I don't think that it's a magic bullet when it comes down to getting a job either.

So when should you start applying for jobs, anyway?

Making the Job Search Less Stressful

Take any advice I have to give on applying for jobs cautiously. I suspect this is also very individual, so if something doesn't work for you or the job you're applying for, don't do it.

First, you need to find the job vacancies. There are a couple of great resources out there that aggregate job postings. I Need a Library Job and Archives Gig (archivist here) are two of my favorites. If you're tech-heavy Code 4 Lib Jobs has some great opportunities. Look around and see what people in your area use, and subscribe to it.

Check outside libraries as well. Set up notifications for the big job-hunting sites, and be open to working with private industry. Look at some jobs and see what terms people use to describe what you do, and refine your searches and notifications. Make notifications as automatic as possible through email alerts or RSS feeds. If you have to, create a separate (but still professional sounding) email address just for the job search.

Oh, and if you don't have a professional sounding email, get one. Don't use your student email because that will probably be canceled after you graduate.

The next big step for me was organizing the jobs I found. I set up a folder called jobs, and then saved the emails, RSS notifications, and any jobs I was interested in to that folder as a pdf file. Name them something that makes sense, and you don't have to worry about a bunch of

bookmarks to sort through later.

After that, I looked at each job and created a folder. The name of that folder was the date three days prior to the deadline application for that job. So if the deadline application was August 15, 2012, the folder would be 08/12/12. Move the pdf file for the job into the folder, arrange the folders by name, and you have a nice chronological list of deadlines for applications.

Then I set up an applied_for folder, and a rejected folder within the jobs folder. Pretty self-evident what these are for, and I try to keep them both pretty full.

As far as applying for jobs, it's basically the same process you used to apply to grad school. You'll probably need a cover letter, c.v. or resume, and three references, preferably professional. Write the cover letter as a formal business letter. If you don't have a name to send the application to, start off with Dear selection committee: or Dear hiring committee:. My closing is always Sincerely.

There is the occasional news story of someone doing a wacky cover letter or resume and getting hired. My opinion is that these are news stories because everyone is surprised that they worked. Personally, I avoid those tactics. They might work, but that's not the way to bet.

Cover letters in general are rough for me. I've written a lot, and still have a hard time with doing them well. I'd suggest reading this post by Attempting Elegance for what I think is some really good advice. Basically, what you're trying to do is use your cover letter to relate your c.v. to the position you're applying for.

Your c.v. should be tailored to that job, but your cover

letter explains why the experience and projects on your c.v. make you a great candidate for the position. Keep it formal, don't go over two pages. Some people say one page, but I mostly apply to academic type institutions. I figure people at academic institutions are used to reading longer narratives, so as long as I'm saying things relevant to the position I go up to two pages. Just make sure you cover all the necessary qualifications and as many of the preferred as possible.

If you read the post on how to write a paper, I use the same system here. Copy and paste in the qualifications, and cross them off as they are addressed. Don't stop writing until you've explained how you satisfy every single one. Write the middle first, and then summarize at the beginning and end. You should be good at writing papers by now, and this is just another paper titled "Why I am the Best Candidate for This Job."

It can be really difficult to establish any kind of narrative flow in a cover letter, but there should be one overall theme tying the job together. That can help you at least get started. Tie everything back into the position or the institution, and it should read pretty well.

If you're at all specialized, there will probably be certain broad categories of experience you address over and over again in different job applications. What you can do is save a generic paragraph describing your experience in those areas, and then use that in multiple job applications. You'll still need to explain how your experience relates to the current position, but it can save you some time.

When I'm done with the letter I save (or export depending on your word processor) as a pdf so I'm sure they'll display properly no matter what system someone is using.

After you've gotten your cover letter you do your c.v. I keep a master c.v. with everything I've ever done on it, and then delete any items that aren't relevant to the current job. "Save as" and you're good to go.

Listing relevant coursework on your c.v. can also be a good tactic, but make sure it's relevant. No one wants to read through every single class you ever took if it's not relevant to the position. The other thing you need to do is explain why that experience is relevant.

Say you have a job that specifies experience with contentDM, and you took a digital library class. Don't just put "Digital Libraries Class 3 credit hours" down, mention that for that class you created an original digital library with 16 unique objects including selection of material, scanning, creation of preservation and display copies, upload to the contentDM platform, and assignment of modified Dublin Core metadata. Generally, identify major projects for the class that relate to the position, and if necessary add a brief explanation (one sentence) of the course topic if it's not evident from the title.

Generally, I would say address any qualification you can with job experience, then volunteer experience, and then classroom experience. Those last two might be reversed depending on the circumstances. And I do count practicum or internship courses as job experience (you just got paid in credit hours rather than money). I think most employers do as well, just make sure you explain what you did for that practicum or internship.

The key here, and this goes for any application whether it be for a job, or a scholarship, or admission to graduate school, is to let people see what they want to see. If they

want to see a metadata librarian, you need to figure out what it is about you that fulfills that criteria, and let them see it front and center. Every experience and class you have had that relates to being a metadata librarian as defined by that job posting needs to be on display. You can't make them say yes, but you can make it very difficult for them to say no. Right now you need to make sure you end up in the phone interview pile and not the reject pile.

Finally, and again this is critical for any writing, know when to stop. Answer the questions clearly and concisely, and then stop talking. Every word in that application should be telling the committee why you will rock that job. If it's not, it doesn't belong. Take it out.

We've talked about selecting references before, and most of that is still true. For me the only difference between grad school and job applications is I lean heavily towards professional references for a job, and I'm sending out a lot more applications. I started out asking every time I used someone as a reference, and then just asked people if I could use them in general. When I had a phone interview I sent them a polite email saying I'd had a phone interview, they might get a reference contact, and gave a brief description of the position. I also usually attached the position description in case they wanted to look at. It worked out well, but always take the wishes of your references into account.

That's my general plan. It covers about 90% of my applications. Bear in mind, these applications are for government and academic or cultural heritage institutions. Private industry might have very different rules, and I suggest you do some checking about applying for those jobs on your own.

There are also some unusual cases, which I'll describe next post.

Unusual Job Hunt Circumstances

Every job application is unique, but most of them follow a basic format. Send us a c.v., cover letter, three references, and maybe answer some demographic data that won't effect your application. This post is about the unusual stuff I've run into over the course of my search, or heard about from others.

One job didn't require a cover letter. They just had three questions you answered. I'm not sure why they did it that way, but that was their system. Some positions will give you specific things to address in your cover letter as well.

The federal government has their own system, and doesn't seem to ever require a cover letter. You upload your c.v. and sometimes answer questions about your experience, but I've never had to write an actual cover letter for a job application with the federal government. These jobs also go up and are closed quickly (1-2 weeks seems standard) a lot of the time, so if you see one you want note the closing date. Finally, veterans get preferential hiring for federal jobs they are qualified for, so be aware of that when applying.

Some applications will ask for your desired salary. This is a horrible question to ask someone because there's no good answer. If you ask for too high a salary, your application is out. If you supply a figure that's not too high, you've set the upper limit for any salary negotiations

right there. They're not going to exceed it, even if they have the extra money for the position. You're being asked to price yourself out of the market, or give them an upper limit for your financial compensation before you've even been offered the job.

There are a couple of ways to deal with this question. Look around and see what the job typically pays, and if you're okay with that salary just put that salary down. The other option is to supply a range, and stress that you view salary as part of your total compensation package and would need to discuss other benefits before you could supply a firm figure. This is usually how I answer this question, but I've never gotten an interview for a position with this question so it might not be working well.

The final way to deal with this question is to ask for a high salary and probably disqualify yourself. Figure out what you think the salary should be, and add \$25,000 or so dollars a year to it depending on the cost of living where it's located and the typical salary for that position. You probably won't get the job, but you might have made everyone else look like a bargain. And if you do get the job, you've got some extra cash. I wouldn't do this for a job I really wanted, but if you're on the fence you might let them make it worth your while if they want to hire you.

Another annoying scenario is the one where you have to copy your entire c.v. into a form, and sometimes still upload the c.v. itself. It's a hassle, but if you want the job, you have to jump through the hoops. My advice is the first time you do it create a separate document with all that information listed without any bullet points or formatting, so you can just copy and paste it into a form the next time you run across this situation.

My suspicion is that the places that use forms run the applications through human resources, who then send the qualified applicants on to the hiring committee. In cases like this, I recommend you make sure when you fill out that form that every single job requirement is spelled out as it is in the ad.

If the job posting says “Experience with XML” and you put down “Experience with MODS, METS, PREMIS, EAD, TEI and ability to quickly learn other schemas and DTDs,” you didn’t say “experience with XML.” The hiring committee will probably know that those are XML, and understand them if they’re in your cover letter or on your c.v. Human resources personnel, assuming they even read the application and don’t just do a keyword search for “experience with XML,” might not. Feel free to elaborate, but I always made sure those key phrases showed up somewhere.

Always write to your audience, as best as you can determine it, and never, ever, give them a reason to say no. Every word counts and if you have to omit something, do so, but the goal is to never put down something that will give them a reason to reject you.

What you can do, which is slightly different, is try to minimize the impact of any experience you don’t have. If the job listing requires experience with SQL and you only know Excel, you can describe your experience working with relational databases and how you believe that will transfer to work with SQL. It’s not ideal, but probably better than nothing.

Those are the unusual circumstances I have run into, none of them are really bad (except maybe the expected salary question), but they were a little bit of surprise.

So next post, what do you do after you've graduated but while you're trying to get that full time job?

What to do After Graduation but Before you have a Job

Well, that's really up to you, so I'm just going to tell you what I did and why. It might work for you, it might not. Your call.

Looking back, what I mostly lost after graduation was structure. In school you have people setting deadlines for you, giving you lists of readings and projects, and generally making sure you did a certain amount of stuff over a certain period of time.

When I graduated I had a backlog of projects and readings I wanted to do while I was in graduate school, but I was busy with assignments. Without that structure, I tried to do a lot of things a little bit at a time. Because I wasn't focusing on any of them, I did them all kind of poorly and didn't get much done.

Full disclosure: I also took about two weeks off of thinking and just watched television, read for fun, and drooled a lot.

After those two weeks I fiddled with various projects and didn't complete them, I read a lot of blogs and journal articles but didn't really think about them, things like that. What I ended up doing was choosing two projects to focus on (this blog and a photo cataloging project at work that I got side-tracked on and am now doing as a volunteer) and

finish them before starting anything new. That gave me about 20 hours a week of working on projects as a volunteer or on my own time (I only work 20 hours a week at the job), which worked out pretty well.

I'm making good progress on the photo cataloging, this blog is winding down, and I'm not continuously sidetracking myself. I have ideas for my next project or projects, but I'm not letting them distract me from getting these things done. When these things are done, I'll look at what I want to start next and get going.

As far as professional reading, I added some structure there as well. I deleted some blogs that I felt were redundant or I wasn't getting much out of from my rss feed, and set aside Monday night as journal reading night. I limited myself to four journals, and because they're quarterly I can work through back issues as well. Or I can take a week to read articles on a topic I'm interested in.

Archivaria, The Public Historian, Journal of Archival Organization, and American Archivist if you're interested.

Depending on your personality, all this external work might be totally unnecessary. It seems to be working well for me though. It keeps me focused, and it keeps me doing things while giving me free time to socialize.

I am fortunate that I was able to keep working part-time at the job I had as a graduate student, which also helps keep me engaged. I do think that remaining professionally engaged is important. It shows you have a definite interest in the profession, and helps keep you sharp for job interviews.

The temptation for me was to just keep taking classes. I

like being in class, and there were plenty of courses I would have liked to have taken but didn't have time for while I was in SLIS. And learning some javascript or ruby probably would have helped me on the job market. I didn't do this for a couple of reasons. One, it does cost money even if you do it through a community college.

The other reason is, I felt like I shouldn't need someone to tell me to learn things at this point. If nothing else, grad school should give you the intellectual tools to learn quickly, and there are a lot of free online courses and tutorials available. I felt like I should be able to use these to teach myself what I needed to know, without the structure of a formal course. Your mileage may vary, and investing in your education is almost always a good idea, but put some thought into how you do it.

The big advantage to a formal course is, obviously, that you get a letter grade at the end saying you did it. I could have taken a course in blogging and wordpress, but I decided I'd rather just have a blog to show I could do it and not have to pay the tuition and fees. It works for me, but your mileage may vary.

Beyond that, I don't know what to tell you. If you're really interested in the profession, you'll find a way to stay active. Even if you end up living somewhere without easy access to a library or historical society (I don't know where that would be, but for the sake of argument maybe you're in a rural area and don't have reliable transportation), you can volunteer time with professional organizations and work on committees or projects over the internet. Or even find an online transcription project or something else you're interested in to work on. The internet has made volunteering a lot easier.

Speaking of which, next up: Volunteering versus Jobs. The pros and cons of each.

Volunteer vs. Work Experience

First of all, I think that any experience is good experience. And I haven't spent as much time volunteering as some people because I had a really good job that let me try different things. What volunteering I have done is more oriented towards student groups than volunteering for work-like functions.

So I lean towards job experience myself, but both volunteering and jobs have their strengths and drawbacks.

Jobs obviously come with pay, and you'll have a direct supervisor evaluating your work. That comes in real handy for references. The downside is you don't have much freedom in choosing hours or projects. In a very real sense, your time is not your own. On the other hand, this can show that you're responsible better than a volunteer position without a set schedule.

When you volunteer, you can pretty much choose your project and largely set your own hours. There are limitations of course. You have to find someone to let you volunteer at their institution, but most people are pretty agreeable when you offer them free labor.

You do need to bear in mind that when you volunteer you are still taking on an obligation or responsibility. Especially if you need training, they're diverting resources to provide that training. Show up once and skip out, and you're going to look like a jerk.

I think it's generally best to offer a certain amount of hours per week, and a certain number of total hours. Be up front about this. For example, if you're volunteering to catalog some pamphlets, say "I would like to learn to catalog pamphlets. I can give you 6 hours a week for the semester, which will be about ninety hours total. I might miss finals week."

That way everyone knows what everyone else's agenda is, and can make an informed decision. It keeps you from taking on a volunteer project that never ends, and allows your contact to find a project that will most benefit from the amount of labor you're willing to give.

This applies to individual projects more than group volunteer projects, and probably the simplest way to volunteer is just to join a group. You've got an in with the institution, the other volunteers will probably train you (or at least help), and you get some additional free networking. You might also pick up some leadership experience if you stick around long enough.

Personally, I used volunteer experience to get what I couldn't get through work. I sat on a grant review committee to get grant writing and committee experience, and volunteered to be an officer in the Society of American Archivists Student Chapter to get leadership experience. Lately, I volunteered to come in to work during my off hours because I wanted more cataloging and visual materials experience.

It was a project I started awhile ago as part of my job and never got to finish, so there was quite a bit done already. I want to finish it, and I checked with my supervisor and he was all for it. By the way, I'm careful to delineate between

when I'm on the clock and volunteering, and I get my work hours in before I worry about my volunteer project.

Volunteering can take a lot of forms, and I think it looks pretty good whether it's directly related to library science or not. Librarians, archivists, heritage professionals, these are all service professions. Showing you like helping people is generally going to be perceived as a positive thing.

Just find a project that will give you experience you aren't getting at your regular job, treat it seriously, and know when to end it.

Speaking of which, next post will be the last substantive post. I've pretty much said all I have to say, and this is just a book about getting through grad school. We've actually gone a little past that point in one or two posts, and I just have a few more miscellaneous thoughts that don't warrant an entire post by themselves.

So next time, miscellaneous and wrap-up.

Miscellaneous

These are just some miscellaneous thoughts, minor things that don't warrant an entire post on their own.

- If you're worried about what to call your professor, just use the same name they introduce themselves with first day of class. When in doubt, go for more formal, you can always go to a less familiar form of address from there if they correct you.

- Read your syllabus. Twice. All of it. Highlight important things. These are your directions for succeeding in the class. Know these directions and follow them.

- You can get some textbooks through Inter-Library Loan or your institutions equivalent. Just make sure you have the right edition, and be prepared to buy it if it doesn't arrive for some reason.

- It probably doesn't matter, but I once heard about a study that said prisoners received harsher sentences from judges right before they left for lunch than prisoners sentenced after the judge got back from lunch. If you have a favor to ask someone, or an important meeting you want to go well, consider scheduling it for after someone gets back from lunch. Then hope they don't skip lunch.

- All you're paying for in graduate school is for someone to teach you a skill, and then assess how well you learned it. Grades, feedback, papers, projects, all they are is a way to learn a skill and determine how well you have mastered it. Along the way, you'll be socialized as a member of the profession. It's kind of like getting a trade card in a lot of ways.

- If the SLIS department doesn't offer a course you want, you can always take one outside of the department. Just double check the graduation requirements and make sure you won't be short on credits.

- If you can, go to the graduation ceremony. It shows you appreciate what the department has done for you.

- Be careful when updating programs in the middle of a project. At the very least save a copy of the paper or project, make a backup, exit the program, and then update.

Look everything over and make sure it still displays the file correctly. Most programs play nicely with files from previous versions, but some don't.

That's all I have. A brief administrative note, and then this book is over...

Wrap-up

This is a book about getting into, getting through, and getting what you can out of library graduate school. Most of it is drawn from my experience in a library and information studies graduate program, some of it from a history graduate program, and the rest from conversations with fellow students, colleagues, and instructors.

It is based heavily (read: almost word for word) on a blog with ran from December 5th, 2012, through February 18th, 2013. I still receive email notifications for comments, and if you have any questions please feel free to ask.

That blog is located at <http://www.surviving-slis.com/>

It is no longer regularly updated, as I pretty much said everything I had to say. Since the blog ended I have found a full time job. Life is good.

I hope you found something in here useful, and thank you for reading.

-Eric Willey