Top Ten Research Skills for First Year University Students

When secondary school students first arrive at university to begin their undergraduate work they are confronted with a vast array of branch libraries, online resources, databases and indexes as well as new services to assist them with their research. Becoming familiar with these areas can take some time, but a few very basic research skills can often go a long way to getting them started on the right foot.

Subject librarians and front line staff of the academic libraries have come up, David Letterman style, with the Top Ten Things high school students should know to get started with research in first year. They are:

1. How to look something up in the library catalogue and then use that mysterious "call number" to go to the "stacks" and locate it.
2. The difference between a book and a journal. How can you tell from looking at the "citation" what that source you've found actually is? (and what *IS* a citation anyway?)
3. The reason *you* should write down a citation for that perfect quote you just used in your paper.
4. How to select and search in an online index/database. (and the difference between searching for a journal title and a journal article on a given subject)
5. The difference between searching in Google and searching in the library's databases. What's the benefit?
6. How to critically appraise a source of information on the web. (a government site, a commercial site, a personal site, a scholarly site)
7. The difference between a scholarly/peer reviewed source and a popular source, a primary source and a secondary source, and when they are appropriate to use.
8. What plagiarism is – period. The web has made "lifting" text so easy that some students are unaware of that fine line between extensive quoting and misrepresenting something as your own work.
9. How to formulate a research question and develop a thesis statement, and then use their research to support that statement. This one sounds like we are asking a lot, but this is a core skill for any discipline. Think of it as having a plan for defining completing the assignment.
10. That help is available and it's OK to ask someone, even a librarian, for guidance. The only "stupid question" is the one that never gets asked. The worlds of document delivery, interlibrary loan and microfiche searching are best entered with a partner.

Compiled for work with VSB's School Library Resource Centre Consultative Committee,
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