

## Some Basic Learning Tools and Skills Every Student Should Have

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*An Excerpt from Homeschooling in High School for Higher Education by David P. Byers Ph.D.*

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Over the years, as I've taught students of all ages, I've compiled a mental list of what I think are important tools and skills that every student should have. In this article, I'd like to share part of my list in the hopes that it might be of use to you.

One of the most important learning tools every student should own is a good dictionary—a hardcopy version and not one on the computer. When I say “hardcopy”, I mean a paper-version whether it be a hard back or a soft cover—as opposed to an electronic version. Of course, every student should also learn how to use this vital tool to the point that he/she is proficient with it.

A dictionary provides students with a wealth of information. For those who don't spell well, a dictionary is a resource beyond compare. Oh sure, many students today rely heavily on spell/grammar check on their computers. However, I can tell you from years of experience of grading college students' papers that spell/grammar check is not reliable and that students who live by it often “die” by it.

Dictionaries help students with so much more than just how to spell words. Where else can you go to quickly learn how to pronounce words, to find their meanings, to find their origins, to find their parts of speech, and to find their variations?

It is my opinion that students should learn early (by the first grade) how to use a dictionary, and then they should use it often. I think it is important that students spend a part of each year of the elementary grades learning how to use the dictionary so that it becomes second nature to them. As a result (hopefully), every time students come across a word that they don't know how to pronounce or that they don't know the meaning of, they will immediately grab their dictionaries and LEARN!

In the classroom, I'm always glad when a student asks questions—even about the meaning of a word that I used, but with which they aren't familiar. However, I'm always bemused by students who come to class and ask me how to define or pronounce a word that was in their reading materials. My first thought is always, “Why didn't you just look it up in your dictionary?” I've since stopped asking that question because I'm always dismayed by the number of college students who don't even own a dictionary.

The runner-up learning tool that every student should own is a good (hardcopy) thesaurus. A thesaurus is invaluable for students who want to write well—and every student should learn to write well. No, I'm not saying that every student should be a Pulitzer winner. However, students should know how to use words in the correct context and they should be able to use a variety of words when they write so that they don't repeat the same ones multiple times throughout their papers.

Again, reflecting on my experiences with college students, it's amazing how many students don't write well. It's also amazing how many try to write well without understanding what it is they wrote. For example, I've had students who obviously heeded my directions and used a dictionary or thesaurus to improve their papers. However, it was apparent as I read the assignments that some students simply inserted or substituted words in their papers without bothering to learn what they meant.

The last tool that I think every student should have access to would more appropriately be describe as a combination of tools commonly referred to by many teachers as "resources". For example, you may find that the learning objectives that many instructors write include the statement "students should be able to use appropriate resources to find the information needed to complete the assignment". These resources may include a dictionary or a thesaurus, but more than likely they refer to things like the encyclopedia, the Internet, and the library, to name a few.

Just as students should be able to use dictionaries to learn more about words, students should use resources to learn more about any given subject. In order to use these resources well, students need to learn how to identify what it is they want to know and figure out how best to search for it.

Encyclopedias are easy to learn how to use because their entries are listed alphabetically. However, the Internet may be slightly more challenging to use to search for information because the "hits" that are returned are only as accurate as the "input" that was defined in the search criteria. The old computer acronym "GIGO" stands for Garbage In Garbage Out meaning that what you get out of the computer is only as good as what you put in. For example, a student who searches for information about the "great plains", but who enters "great planes" in the search box will be surprised when the results returned aren't even close to what he/she needed.

If you had asked me about 10 years ago if I thought that every student should own a set of encyclopedias, I would have said, "yes". However, encyclopedias quickly go out of date in our technologically-advanced times. I once read that the average person today has access to more information on a daily basis than a person who lived

around the year 1900 did in a lifetime. In addition, the amount of information available today is said to be doubling every year, if not more frequently. The amount of information available today is overwhelming. Subsequently, in addition to learning how to search for information, students must learn how to quickly scan through it to find what it is that they need.

However, before students can use the wealth of information available to them, they must have access to it. Ideally, every family should have a home computer with Internet access because students are likely to continue to use computers in college and in most every type of career available. Many computers now come equipped with encyclopedias or the software can be purchased for relatively little money. In addition, many sites offer online encyclopedias, dictionaries, and even thesauruses. However, I still highly recommend that students own and learn how to use the hardcopy versions of a dictionary and thesaurus.

The cost of Internet access is decreasing, but it is still costly. In addition, the fears of spyware, viruses, and inappropriate sites make many of us cringe. Although there is protection available for all of the problems in the cyber-world, it is hardly fail-safe.

Whether the Internet is an option for your family or not, there is one very important resource that is a wonderful alternative—the library. Every student should have a library card and should become familiar with what the library has to offer. In addition to all of the wonderful materials the library has, they also come equipped with one of the best resources available—librarians. Did you know that true librarians have studied their craft for years and that they've earned master's degrees in order to obtain their positions? I make it a point to become good friends with librarians!

Although there are other tools and skills on my list that I'd like to share with you, I'll save all of them, except one, for next time. The final item isn't really a skill or a tool, but more of a trait—it's the desire to learn. While some individuals seem to be more predisposed to *wanting* to learn than others, I can't help but think that more people would benefit from a true desire to learn if they would first be taught that learning can be enjoyable and even fun. In our country, it is also a freedom! Therefore, I highly encourage teachers I meet to share the joy of learning with their students as there is not a better gift (skill or tool) that they can give them. Happy learning!

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