Scholars immersed in contemplative silence and surrounded by books – for centuries, they were the personification of learning. But can libraries still function as central "research locations" when the digital age has seen most sources made available online? Researchers worldwide would answer this question with a clear “yes.” The printed book is still the preferred publication medium in many areas of knowledge, while libraries can be seen as well-equipped labs without which no research would be possible. It therefore comes as no surprise that guest scientists often have to plan their stays at the Max Planck Institutes according to the capacities available for library use.

However, the quality of a library is not judged solely by its collections, as valuable as these may be. It is the accessibility of the knowledge that matters. This is the responsibility of the librarians: they comb all the available sources for new, relevant publications, prepare data in keeping with modern technological standards, and also assist researchers during the publication process. This naturally applies not only to the printed word but also to other media such as images, audio and video material.

The 120-year-old library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, shown here, is one of the world's most renowned libraries of art history. It provides access to around 300,000 monographs, 50,000 volumes of serial publications and more than 1,000 specialized journals. Approximately 7,000 new acquisitions are added each year. The library naturally also contains laptops, computer terminals and electronic media – even though they are not visible in this picture. Along with its print media, the library provides access to 2,500 e-journals and around 100,000 e-books on fine arts and related subjects.