

On Libraries

by Oliver Sacks

Exercise, Notes, Summary, Questions and Answers

(Exam focused Questions)

Class 12 English

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About the Author

Oliver Sacks was one of the twentieth century's greatest neurologists, authors, and lifelong lovers of books. Born in London, England, he grew up in a family that valued learning, literature, and science. His father was a Hebrew scholar who admired the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, while his mother built an impressive collection of literary classics. This environment surrounded Sacks with books from his earliest childhood and shaped both his intellectual curiosity and his future career.

*Besides becoming a world renowned neurologist, Sacks became famous for writing essays and books that combined science with personal storytelling. His works include *Migraine*, *Awakenings*, and many other influential books that made complex neurological ideas understandable to ordinary readers.*

*In *On Libraries*, Sacks reflects on the libraries that transformed his life, from the oak paneled library in his childhood home to the great libraries of Oxford and New York. The essay ultimately becomes both a celebration of physical libraries and a heartfelt lament for their decline*

during the digital age.

Summary

On Libraries is an autobiographical essay by Oliver Sacks that celebrates the profound influence of libraries on his life while expressing sorrow over their decline in the digital age. Through his personal memories, Sacks shows that libraries gave him something far greater than information. They gave him intellectual freedom, lifelong curiosity, meaningful friendships, and the joy of unexpected discovery.

The essay begins with Sacks's earliest childhood memories inside the oak paneled library of his family home. His father, a Hebrew scholar who admired Henrik Ibsen, filled the shelves with plays, poetry, history books, and adventure stories. His mother added works by Emily Dickinson, Anthony Trollope, George Bernard Shaw, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Rudyard Kipling, and many other literary figures. Even medical books occupied a special cabinet in his parents' surgery, while a small laboratory nearby allowed young Sacks to combine reading with scientific experiments. Since he learned to read when he was only three or four years old, books became his closest companions. Whenever he disappeared during lunch or dinner, his family knew exactly where to find him because he would be completely absorbed in reading inside the library.

Unlike the freedom he experienced at home, Sacks disliked formal schooling. Sitting quietly in classrooms and following instructions felt restrictive because he preferred learning actively rather than passively receiving information. He later described himself as not a good pupil, but a good listener. Instead of depending entirely on teachers, he searched

for answers himself by exploring library shelves and choosing books according to his own curiosity.

His love for libraries continued throughout his education. One of his happiest places became the Willesden Public Library in London, where he spent countless hours reading freely. As his interests shifted toward science, especially astronomy and chemistry, he discovered that his school's Walker Library lacked chemistry books. With help from his schoolmaster, he visited the Science Museum Library, where he satisfied his growing fascination with scientific knowledge.

University life expanded his relationship with libraries even further. At Oxford, he regularly visited the Radcliffe Science Library and the famous Bodleian Library, where he became fascinated by Theodore Hook, a nineteenth century writer celebrated for his extraordinary wit and ability to compose more than five hundred operas through improvisation. Inspired by Hook's remarkable talent, Sacks began collecting historical materials from the British Museum Library to write a biography about him.

Among all the libraries he visited, the Queen's College Library became his favorite. Designed by the great architect Christopher Wren, the magnificent building resembled a palace, while beneath it lay vast underground chambers lined with classical shelves, ancient manuscripts, original editions, and rare works ranging from Gesner's *Historiae Animalium* to the writings of Darwin, Sir Thomas Browne, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, David Hume, Alexander Pope, and John Dryden. Exploring these historical treasures filled him with excitement because every shelf offered the possibility of discovering something unexpected.

In 1965, Sacks moved to New York City. Although his small apartment made reading and writing difficult, his life changed after joining the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where he found another excellent library that became his intellectual home. There he even formed meaningful friendships with fellow readers while searching for rare books such as *Volumes of Brain* from 1890. Libraries became not only places for solitary study but also spaces where people connected through shared curiosity.

The essay's final section shifts from celebration to sadness. During the 1990s, Sacks noticed that students increasingly preferred accessing digitized books on computers instead of visiting library shelves. When he returned to a library shortly before writing the essay, he was shocked to find most of the physical books removed and replaced by screens. For someone who valued the feeling of holding books, wandering through shelves, and discovering forgotten treasures by chance, this transformation felt like the quiet destruction of centuries of knowledge.

Although he acknowledged that digitization preserved many important works, he believed that digital books could never fully replace the experience of physical libraries. Printed books carried history, beauty, personality, and emotional value that screens could not reproduce. The essay therefore ends as both a tribute to libraries that shaped his life and a moving reminder that preserving physical books means preserving humanity's cultural memory itself.

Important Themes

Love for Libraries

The essay celebrates libraries as places of freedom, curiosity, and lifelong learning.

Intellectual Freedom

Sacks values the freedom to choose books according to personal interests rather than following fixed classroom instruction.

Self Learning

The essay argues that genuine education often comes from independent exploration.

Power of Books

Books shape personality, knowledge, imagination, and lifelong curiosity.

Serendipitous Discovery

Libraries allow unexpected discoveries that often become life's greatest learning experiences.

Physical Books vs Digital Books

The essay explores the emotional and cultural loss caused by replacing physical books with digital screens.

Character Information

Oliver Sacks

The narrator and central figure whose lifelong love for books and libraries shapes both his education and his career.

Sacks's Father

A Hebrew scholar whose library introduced Oliver to literature, history, and intellectual curiosity.

Sacks's Mother

A passionate reader who expanded the family library with numerous literary classics and poetry collections.

Theodore Hook

A nineteenth century writer whose extraordinary wit and musical improvisation fascinated Sacks.

Important Events

Childhood Reading Begins

Young Oliver spends countless hours inside his family's oak paneled library.

School Feels Restrictive

He prefers learning independently rather than following classroom routines.

Scientific Curiosity Grows

He explores astronomy and chemistry through different libraries.

Oxford Expands His Learning

The Bodleian and Queen's College libraries become major turning points in his intellectual life.

New York Offers Another Home

The Albert Einstein College library supports his reading and writing career.

Digital Libraries Replace Shelves

The disappearance of physical books deeply saddens him.

Difficult Vocabulary

Oak paneled: Covered with oak wood panels.

Voracious: Having a very eager appetite for reading.

Hebrew Scholar: A person who studies Hebrew language and literature.

Serendipitous: Happening unexpectedly in a pleasant way.

Subterranean: Underground.

Improvisation: Creating something without preparation.

Incunabula: Books printed before the year 1501.

Camaraderie: Friendship and trust among people.

Digitized: Converted into digital form.

Autonomy: Independence in making choices.

Key Message and Main Idea

Oliver Sacks teaches that libraries are much more than buildings filled with books. They are places where curiosity grows, independent thinking develops, friendships form, and lifelong learning begins. While digital technology offers convenience, preserving physical books remains essential for protecting humanity's cultural and intellectual heritage.

Literary Devices

Oliver Sacks combines personal storytelling with vivid descriptions to express his lifelong relationship with libraries.

Autobiographical Narrative

The essay draws directly from the author's own childhood, education, and professional life.

Imagery

The essay creates vivid pictures of oak paneled rooms, underground libraries, towering bookshelves, and quiet reading spaces.

Symbolism

Library: Freedom and lifelong learning.

Books: Knowledge and cultural memory.

Shelves: Endless possibilities for discovery.

Screens: Modern convenience replacing physical tradition.

Contrast

The strongest contrast appears between passive classroom learning and active library exploration, as well as between physical books and digital reading.

Tone

The tone moves from nostalgic and joyful to reflective and deeply melancholic by the end.

Textbook Exercise and Answers

Understanding the Text

a. Where could the author be found when he was late for lunch or dinner?

Whenever Oliver Sacks was late for lunch or dinner, his family knew exactly where to find him because he would be sitting inside his favorite room, the beautiful oak paneled library in his family home. Completely absorbed in reading, he often forgot about meals while exploring books from different subjects and genres.

The library became his happiest place during childhood because it allowed him to spend hours reading freely without interruption.

b. What are his first memories?

Oliver Sacks's earliest memories are connected with the beautiful oak paneled library in his childhood home and the countless books that surrounded him from the age of three or four. The shelves contained plays, poetry, history books, adventure stories, medical books, and literary classics collected by both his father and mother.

These memories shaped his lifelong love for reading and learning.

c. Why did he dislike school?

Sacks disliked school because he disliked sitting passively in classrooms and simply obeying teachers' instructions. He preferred discovering knowledge independently rather than receiving it through fixed lessons.

In libraries, he enjoyed choosing books according to his own curiosity, comparing ideas, exploring subjects deeply, and learning actively. For him, genuine education came from personal exploration rather than classroom discipline.

d. What did he feel about the library?

Whenever Sacks entered a library, he felt a powerful sense of freedom. He could roam among thousands of books, choose whatever interested him most, and enjoy the peaceful atmosphere shared by other curious readers.

The quiet companionship of fellow readers made libraries feel like communities where everyone searched for knowledge together.

e. Why was he so biased about sciences especially astronomy and chemistry?

As Sacks grew older, he became especially interested in astronomy and chemistry because these subjects matched his growing scientific curiosity. Since his school library lacked enough chemistry books, he searched for additional resources in the Science Museum Library.

Instead of reading every subject equally, he deliberately focused on science in order to gain deeper and more specialized knowledge.

f. Why did he become so fascinated by Hook?

Sacks became fascinated by Theodore Hook because Hook was famous for his extraordinary wit, theatrical brilliance, and remarkable gift for musical improvisation. Hook was admired for composing more than five hundred operas on the spot, an achievement that amazed Sacks.

Inspired by this unusual talent, Sacks decided to research Hook's life and eventually began writing a biography about him.

g. Describe library at the Queen's College.

The Queen's College Library at Oxford became Sacks's favorite library because of both its magnificent architecture and its priceless collection of rare books. Designed by Christopher Wren, the building resembled a palace, while beneath it stretched vast underground chambers filled with heating pipes, classical shelves, ancient manuscripts, and original editions.

The library contained remarkable works ranging from Gesner's *Historiae Animalium* to Darwin, Sir Thomas Browne, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, David Hume, Alexander Pope, and John Dryden, making it a paradise for anyone who loved books and history.

h. Why did the students ignore the bookshelves in the 1990s?

During the 1990s, students increasingly ignored physical bookshelves because computers gave them easy access to digitized books and electronic resources. Reading through screens became more convenient than searching through library shelves.

As fewer students borrowed printed books, many libraries began removing physical collections in favor of digital systems.

i. Why was he horrified when he visited the library a couple of months ago?

Sacks felt horrified because he discovered that most of the physical books had disappeared from the shelves. Many books had been thrown away, digitized, or removed entirely, leaving once vibrant libraries looking

empty and neglected.

To him, this was not simply a technological change but the loss of centuries of accumulated knowledge, making the disappearance of physical books deeply painful.

Reference to the Context

a. The author says, I was not a good pupil, but I was a good listener. Justify it with the textual evidences.

Oliver Sacks's statement reveals the difference between formal education and his personal way of learning. A good pupil usually follows classroom rules, obeys teachers' instructions, completes assignments, and learns according to a fixed system. Sacks honestly admits that he did not enjoy this kind of learning because he disliked sitting passively in class while simply receiving information.

Instead, he considered himself a good listener because he carefully absorbed ideas, became curious about them, and then searched for deeper knowledge in libraries. Rather than accepting information without question, he actively explored books that matched his interests. Whenever teachers introduced a topic, he often continued learning independently by comparing different books, examining additional sources, and satisfying his own curiosity.

The strongest evidence appears throughout the essay. During childhood, he spent countless hours reading in his family's oak paneled library, often forgetting meals because he became completely absorbed in books. Later, when his school's Walker Library lacked chemistry books, he

visited the Science Museum Library to continue studying the subject on his own. At Oxford, he independently researched Theodore Hook by collecting historical materials from different libraries and eventually decided to write a biography about him.

His lifelong habit of exploring libraries demonstrates that his real education came not from passive classroom instruction but from active, self directed learning. Therefore, although he may not have been a model classroom pupil, he became an outstanding learner because he listened carefully, questioned ideas, and pursued knowledge with remarkable curiosity.

b. A proverb says, Nothing is pleasanter than exploring a library. Does this proverb apply in the essay? Explain.

Yes, the proverb perfectly matches Oliver Sacks's experiences throughout the essay. For him, libraries were not simply buildings filled with books. They were places of freedom, discovery, imagination, and lifelong learning.

From childhood onward, libraries brought him happiness. His family's oak paneled library became his favorite room because it allowed him to choose books freely without anyone controlling his learning. The shelves contained plays, poetry, history, adventure stories, literature, and science books, giving him endless opportunities to discover something new.

Unlike classrooms, where students had to follow fixed lessons, libraries encouraged exploration. Sacks loved wandering among shelves, sitting quietly beside other readers, and experiencing the quiet companionship of people sharing the same search for knowledge. He especially enjoyed

placing a large pile of books on a library table and spending hours reading without interruption.

As he grew older, this pleasure continued in famous libraries such as Willesden Public Library, the Bodleian Library, the Radcliffe Science Library, Queen's College Library, and the Albert Einstein College Library. Every library opened new intellectual paths for him, from discovering Theodore Hook's writings to studying rare historical editions by Gesner, Darwin, Jonathan Swift, and many other great thinkers.

The essay repeatedly shows that libraries gave him excitement, freedom, friendship, and unexpected discoveries. Therefore, the proverb accurately reflects his lifelong belief that few experiences are more satisfying than exploring a library.

c. Are there any other services that you would like to see added to the library?

Yes, I would like modern libraries to provide additional services while still preserving the peaceful atmosphere and physical books that make libraries special.

First, libraries should include digital facilities such as e books, audiobooks, internet access, computers, and online research databases. These services would help readers who prefer digital resources while allowing traditional books to remain available.

Second, libraries should become more inclusive by providing Braille books, large print editions, and audio materials for visually impaired readers. This would ensure that everyone can enjoy reading regardless of physical

limitations.

Third, separate reading spaces for different age groups would improve the library experience. Children could enjoy storytelling areas and comics, students could use quiet study rooms, and older readers could have comfortable spaces for literature, history, philosophy, or newspapers.

Modern libraries should also include comfortable furniture, proper lighting, good ventilation, charging stations, and small discussion rooms for group study. Security cameras could help protect valuable books from damage or theft, while a peaceful garden or café could allow readers to relax during long study sessions.

Finally, libraries should organize book clubs, author talks, workshops, and community reading programs. These activities would strengthen the sense of companionship that Oliver Sacks valued so deeply while helping libraries remain active centers of learning even in the digital age.

Reference Beyond the Text

a. Write an essay on Libraries and Their Uses for Students.

Libraries and Their Uses for Students

A library is one of the most valuable places for students because it provides knowledge, inspiration, and opportunities for lifelong learning. Although technology has made digital information easily available, libraries continue serving as trusted centers where students can study peacefully, develop reading habits, and discover ideas beyond their textbooks.

Libraries contain a wide variety of resources, including books, newspapers, magazines, journals, encyclopedias, manuscripts, reference books, audiobooks, and digital materials. This diversity allows students to explore different subjects according to their interests instead of depending only on classroom lessons.

One of the greatest advantages of libraries is that they encourage independent learning. Students can search for answers themselves, compare different sources, and develop critical thinking skills. This habit builds confidence because learners become active participants in their own education rather than simply memorizing information.

Libraries also play an important role in improving academic performance. Homework, research projects, examinations, and presentations become easier when students have access to reliable reference materials. Reading regularly also improves vocabulary, writing skills, concentration, and imagination.

Another important benefit is affordability. Many students cannot afford to purchase every book they need, but public and school libraries allow them to borrow valuable books free of cost. This makes quality education more accessible regardless of economic background.

Libraries also create peaceful environments for study. Unlike noisy surroundings, they provide quiet spaces where students can focus without distraction. At the same time, they encourage interaction with other readers who share similar interests, creating a sense of intellectual community.

Even in today's digital age, libraries remain relevant because they

combine traditional books with modern technology such as internet access, e books, and online research tools. Instead of replacing physical books, these resources can work together to improve learning.

In conclusion, libraries are essential for students because they promote knowledge, curiosity, creativity, and independent thinking. As Oliver Sacks's essay beautifully demonstrates, libraries are not simply places to store books. They are places where lifelong learners are created.

b. Do you have any public library in your locality? If so, do the people in your community use it? Give a couple of examples.

Yes, we have a public library in our locality called Bhanubhakta Memorial Library, named after the famous Nepali poet and translator Bhanubhakta Acharya, who is honored as the Adikavi of Nepali literature. It has become an important learning center for students, teachers, researchers, and ordinary readers in our community.

People regularly visit the library for different purposes. Students borrow textbooks, reference books, and examination materials to prepare for their studies. Many readers use newspapers and magazines to stay informed about current events, while researchers consult specialized books that may not be easily available elsewhere.

The library also provides internet access, making it easier for visitors to use digital resources alongside physical books. This combination allows people to enjoy both traditional reading and modern research.

Personally, the library has helped me study beyond my school textbooks by providing additional reference materials. It has also introduced me to

people who enjoy reading, creating opportunities to exchange ideas and learn together. The wide collection of books from different genres makes it unnecessary to search for resources across the city because so much knowledge is available under one roof.

Overall, the library serves not only as a place for reading but also as a valuable community space where education, friendship, and curiosity grow together.

Simple Question Explanations

Why did Oliver Sacks love libraries more than school?

Oliver Sacks loved libraries more than school because libraries gave him the freedom to learn according to his own curiosity. In school, he had to sit quietly, follow instructions, and learn at a fixed pace, which he found restrictive. In contrast, libraries allowed him to roam among shelves, choose any book that interested him, and explore subjects deeply without interruption.

This freedom made libraries feel like places of adventure rather than obligation. They helped him become an active learner instead of a passive student.

What made his childhood library special?

His childhood library was special because it reflected his family's deep love for knowledge and literature. It was a beautiful oak paneled room filled with books collected by both his parents. His father's shelves contained Henrik Ibsen's plays, history books, poetry, and adventure

stories, while his mother's collection included classics by Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, George Bernard Shaw, John Milton, Rudyard Kipling, and many other writers.

The library also had medical books and a small laboratory nearby, allowing young Oliver to combine reading with scientific curiosity.

Why did Theodore Hook fascinate Oliver Sacks?

Theodore Hook fascinated Oliver Sacks because of his extraordinary creativity. Hook was famous for his remarkable wit, theatrical brilliance, and ability to improvise music instantly. He was said to have composed more than five hundred operas on the spot, an achievement that amazed Sacks.

His fascination became so strong that Sacks decided to collect historical materials and write a biography about Hook.

Why was the Queen's College Library his favorite?

The Queen's College Library became his favorite because it combined magnificent architecture with priceless historical collections. Designed by Christopher Wren, the building resembled a palace, while its vast underground chambers contained rare manuscripts, original editions, and classical works by Gesner, Darwin, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, David Hume, Alexander Pope, and many other great thinkers.

For Sacks, every visit offered the excitement of discovering something unexpected.

Why did Oliver Sacks feel sad about digital libraries?

Sacks felt sad because digital libraries replaced much of what he loved about physical libraries. While he accepted that digitization preserved important books, he believed that screens could not replace the experience of wandering through shelves, holding printed books, discovering forgotten treasures by chance, or sharing quiet companionship with other readers.

The disappearance of physical books felt to him like the loss of centuries of cultural memory.

Important Lines and Passages

I was not a good pupil, but I was a good listener.

This is the essay's most important statement because it explains Sacks's philosophy of education. He valued active curiosity and independent learning more than simply following classroom routines.

Whenever I was late for lunch or dinner, they knew where to find me.

This memory highlights his childhood obsession with reading and shows how naturally books became part of his daily life.

The quiet companionship of other readers.

This beautiful phrase reminds readers that libraries are not lonely places. They create silent communities where people share the same search for knowledge.

The destruction of centuries of knowledge.

This powerful expression captures Sacks's grief over the disappearance of physical books from library shelves.

Mountains of books.

The image symbolizes abundance, endless curiosity, and the excitement of intellectual exploration.

Exam Focused Questions

1. How did libraries shape Oliver Sacks's personality?

Libraries shaped Oliver Sacks's personality by encouraging curiosity, independent thinking, scientific interest, and lifelong learning. Instead of depending entirely on formal education, he developed confidence by exploring books according to his own interests.

2. Explain the significance of the title *On Libraries*.

The title reflects the essay's central purpose of celebrating libraries as places of intellectual freedom, personal growth, unexpected discovery, and lifelong learning while mourning their decline in the digital age.

3. Why does Sacks describe himself as a good listener rather than a good pupil?

He believed that genuine learning came from actively exploring knowledge after listening to ideas instead of simply following classroom

instructions without curiosity.

4. How does the essay contrast school and library learning?

The essay contrasts passive classroom learning with active library exploration. School required obedience and fixed lessons, while libraries offered freedom, curiosity, and self directed education.

5. Why was the Queen's College Library important in Sacks's life?

It gave him access to rare historical books, ancient manuscripts, original editions, and an inspiring environment that deepened his love for literature, history, and science.

6. What does Theodore Hook represent in the essay?

Hook represents creativity, intellectual curiosity, and the joy of discovering remarkable historical figures through library research.

7. Why does Sacks criticize the digitization of libraries?

He criticizes digitization not because technology is useless but because replacing physical books removes the emotional, historical, and cultural experience that makes libraries unique.

Commonly Confusing Points

Did Oliver Sacks completely reject digital books?

No. He accepted that digitization preserved many valuable books. His

concern was the disappearance of physical books and the unique experience of exploring library shelves.

What does good listener actually mean?

It means he actively listened, questioned ideas, and continued learning independently rather than accepting information passively.

Why is the oak paneled library important?

It symbolizes the beginning of his intellectual journey and the environment that shaped his lifelong love for books.

What is serendipitous discovery?

It means finding valuable or interesting books unexpectedly while exploring library shelves.

Why is the Queen's College Library described so beautifully?

Because its architecture, underground chambers, rare collections, and historical atmosphere represented everything Sacks loved about physical libraries.

Why does the essay end sadly?

It ends sadly because Sacks watches physical books disappear from libraries, making him feel that an important part of human knowledge and culture is being lost.

Quick Revision

Author

Oliver Sacks

Genre

Autobiographical essay.

Beginning

The author remembers his childhood inside his family's beautiful oak paneled library.

Development

He develops a lifelong love for libraries, explores famous libraries in London, Oxford, and New York, and becomes an independent learner.

Turning Point

The discovery of Theodore Hook and rare historical books deepens his intellectual journey.

Ending

He becomes deeply saddened by the replacement of physical books with digital screens.

Major Themes

Love for libraries, intellectual freedom, self learning, power of books, serendipitous discovery, and physical books versus digital books.

Important Symbols

Library: Freedom and lifelong learning.

Books: Knowledge and cultural memory.

Shelves: Endless possibilities for discovery.

Screens: Modern convenience replacing tradition.

Literary Devices

Autobiographical narrative, imagery, symbolism, contrast, and nostalgic tone.

Key Lesson

The essay teaches that libraries are far more than places that store books. They nurture curiosity, independent thinking, lifelong learning, and the preservation of humanity's cultural heritage.

One Minute Revision

On Libraries is an autobiographical essay by Oliver Sacks that celebrates the lifelong influence of libraries on his education and career. Growing up in an oak paneled library filled with literature, history, science, and medical books, he developed a passion for independent learning that continued through famous libraries such as Willesden Public Library, the Bodleian Library, Queen's College Library, and the Albert Einstein College Library. His fascination with Theodore Hook, rare historical books, and quiet reading spaces shaped his intellectual journey. The essay ends with a heartfelt lament as he watches physical books disappear from library shelves, reminding readers that libraries preserve not only knowledge but also humanity's cultural memory.

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