

Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century: An Introduction

Second Edition

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and

Uma Hiremath

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Dedicated to you:

The intrepid and skill-seeking librarian of the twenty-first century

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Preface

Skill Sets

Well, of course it would be convenient if there were a genetic predisposition to being a librarian of worth and integrity. It is so much easier being born as something. Then again, it would not be as much fun. The process of maturing into a worthy reference librarian, skill set by skill set, is challenging, unending, hugely rewarding, and, yes, fun. *Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century*, Second Edition, is all about those skill sets. We identify them, analyze them, break them into their component parts and present it to you, the eternally maturing reference librarian, in ways that are reproducible.

The first edition of this book was dedicated to the intrepid librarian of the twenty-first century. The second edition continues to celebrate intrepidity because the reference librarian of the twenty-first century must, above all else, be fearless. Ambiguity, never a stranger to the field of librarianship in general and information studies in particular, seems particularly acute in the face of dramatic new technologies fostering equally dramatic new ways of doing reference. Google committed itself to the prodigious digitization of over 7 million manuscripts available for open reference, even as Twitter began peeping out reedy 140-character reference posts. The solid old desk across which the static transaction of reference questions and answers was conducted is competing or being replaced entirely by “Learning Commons” with roving librarians and mobile technology. Real-life librarians are spawning funky reference avatars that move surreally through Second Life’s three-dimensional libraries, dispensing information and, coincidentally, reminding us that we are not in Kansas anymore.

There have, in short, been enough changes in the past three years, to compel us to write a new edition. A recent job listing by the New York Public Library listed as one of its performance expectations, a knowledge of the library as a “location where new and emerging information technologies and resources are combined with traditional sources of knowledge in a user-focused, service-rich environment that supports today’s social and educational patterns of learning, teaching, and research.” No pressure intended.

The professional reference librarian must commit to an ongoing understanding of the fundamental concepts, essential resources, search techniques, and managerial tasks inherent to reference, which are underwritten in large part by the wider social and educational patterns of information and research.

The chapters contained in this edition support that commitment, even as they ease the pressure of trying to know too much without organized skill sets. The larger universe, where the primacy of information has never been felt more acutely, is kept in strict perspective throughout the text. An entirely new chapter on Reference 2.0 tools is included in this edition. It aims to alert the reference professional to trends and practices that are utilizing new technology in innovative ways. More important, it acknowledges the growing relevance of virtual reference and rising expectations on the part of the user, to access information freely, instantaneously, and in ways that are individually relevant and open to social feedback. While a mix of print and electronic resources was provided in the first edition, this edition also spotlights free Web resources of depth and value, in deference to budget-conscious institutions faced with global recession. Valued suggestions by practitioners are also incorporated. The suggestion by an LIS faculty member to provide the uninitiated student with a comprehensive idea of the immense diversity in reference resources through an accessible list of RUSA Outstanding Reference Resources was adopted, so that a list of five years of selected titles now appears as an appendix in the second edition.

What worked effectively for the first edition has been retained and enhanced with necessary updates. Care has been taken to both cull and expand the hundreds of resources listed in the text, with ongoing plans to amend and supplement the material on a companion Web site at www.neal-schuman.com/reference21st2nd/. Each of the chapters on resources provides an important section on selection and keeping current in the field. We have continued to treat reference transactions as an organic process that involves understanding both the text and subtext of a question, identifying the best resources, and providing an optimal answer. *Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century: An Introduction* differed from traditional reference texts in consciously linking questions to sources, rather than classifying resources and providing a general description of their use. Our approach, firmly grounded in real-world practices, was a direct result of the oft-heard remark from library school graduates who believed their experiences in real transactions felt remote from what they had studied at school. The progression of question → reference interview → search process → resource options → answer was deemed to be a truer representation of what students would face in the real world and this second edition continues to uphold that structure.

Organization

While *Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century: An Introduction* is aimed at all reference librarians striving to acquire or affirm the necessary skill sets, it is organized to complement the syllabus of a prototypical library and information studies course. The four sections that make up the text provide a well-rounded grounding in the fundamental concepts of reference, the arsenal of major resources with which every reference librarian must become familiar to answer basic questions, special topics such as “readers advisory work” and user instruction (that fall within the purview of reference work), and tools to

field the ongoing responsibility of developing and skillfully managing reference departments in the face of constant change and innovation.

Part I: Fundamental Concepts

Chapter 1, “Introducing Reference and Information Services,” provides readers with both a brief history of reference service in libraries and an overview of the breadth of services housed under the reference rubric.

Chapter 2, “Determining the Question,” outlines the first and perhaps most critical step in the reference process. Given that reference is, and always will be, predicated on contact and communication, even in times of change, this chapter takes into account in-person, telephone, and virtual reference interviews.

Chapter 3, “Finding the Answer,” is in many ways a conclusion to Part I and a prelude to Part II. Having identified the question, the next step is to construct an answer. This hands-on chapter trains you to organize your thoughts, develop a strategy for the particular request, and find the optimal solution.

Part II: Introduction to Major Reference Sources

The nine chapters in this section focus on how, what, where, who, and when questions as they correlate to authoritative resources, rather than describe types of resources. Included in this section are:

Chapter 4, “Answering Questions about Books, Magazines, Newspapers, Libraries, Publishers, and Bibliographic Networks—Bibliographic Resources”

Chapter 5, “Answering Questions about Anything and Everything—Encyclopedias”

Chapter 6, “Answering Questions that Require Handy Facts—Ready Reference Sources”

Chapter 7, “Answering Questions about Words—Dictionaries”

Chapter 8, “Answering Questions about Events and Issues, Past and Present—Indexes and Full-Text Databases”

Chapter 9, “Answering Questions about Health, Law, and Business—Special Guidelines and Sources”

Chapter 10, “Answering Questions about Geography, Countries, and Travel Atlases, Gazetteers, Maps, Geographic Information Systems, and Travel Guides”

Chapter 11, “Answering Questions about the Lives of People—Biographical Information Sources”

Chapter 12, “Answering Questions about Governments—Government Information Sources”

Each of these chapters begins with an overview of materials and how they are used to answer the particular type of question. We provide sample questions

(and answers) for which those sources are best used and describe the major print, electronic, and Web-based materials available. Resources are explored holistically since most major reference works exist in both print and electronic formats. There is also guidance for collection development and maintenance practices; further considerations and special information particular to the topic; a final list of the “Top Ten” reference sources in the subject area and a list of recommended free Web sites. As each chapter is uniformly structured, you will find it conducive to both advanced reading in preparation for service and as an effective reference source at the desk.

Part III: Special Topics in Reference and Information Work

Chapter 13, “When and How to Use the Internet as a Reference Tool,” addresses one of the most challenging and ubiquitous reference resources to have emerged in our times. Outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet as a reference source, this chapter also contains a five-step approach to using the Internet in reference transactions.

Chapter 14, “Reader’s Advisory Work,” brings together reference work and the other hallmark of librarianship—literacy. While readers’ advisory (RA) is sometimes housed in departments other than reference (Adult, Children’s, or Young Adult Services), the librarian sitting at the reference desk should and often must be prepared to field all questions, including an RA question. This chapter, authored by Mary K. Chelton, describes the most common types of RA queries, offers advice for handling RA requests, and provides a list of resources for consultation.

Chapter 15, “Reference Work with Children and Young Adults,” also authored by Mary K. Chelton, expands the reference conversation to a new and sometimes tricky user group. With unique perceptions and needs, children and young adults present opportunities and challenges to librarians—instruction, homework help, and concerned parents or guardians. Reference work is more than simply answering questions—it can also be a learning experience for both the patron and the professional.

Chapter 16, “Information Literacy in the Reference Department,” discusses the importance of information literacy in all types of libraries and offers suggestions for one-to-one classroom instruction and distance learning. In the right transaction, instruction can be a very appropriate and valued response to a query.

Part IV: Developing and Managing Reference Collections and Services

Essential to solid reference services is a solid reference collection. Management skills are essential for the library professional as are the development of assessment tools that measure the library’s progress.

Chapter 17, “Selecting and Evaluating Reference Materials,” provides sources for review and evaluation criteria. You will also find guidance for man-

aging the materials budget, assessing collections, weeding titles, writing policy, and marketing the collection.

Chapter 18, “Managing Reference Departments,” looks at staff, service, and department organization. This chapter provides options for managers and considerations for decision making. While aimed at the manager, it is also a helpful glimpse for any professional into the form and function of today’s reference departments.

Chapter 19, “Assessing and Improving Reference Services,” moves from the day-to-day practice of reference work to the vision and development of future service. In times of budget stringency especially, the emphasis on assessment and accountability is heightened. From why we should assess, what and how to assess, and what we should do with our findings, this chapter encourages a hands-on and proactive approach to improvement.

Chapter 20, “Reference 2.0,” provides a comprehensive snapshot of the many tools and sites mined from Web 2.0 technology and used to enhance reference services by innovative libraries across the United States, Great Britain, and Canada.

Finally, Chapter 21, “The Future of Information Service,” looks ahead to the models, materials, and service, which will continue to evolve and define reference services in the foreseeable future.

Round 2

In asking the user to absorb the skill sets provided in this book as a means to fearlessly navigate through the shifting sands of reference, we have been rather fearless ourselves. We have invited stringent critiques from theoreticians and practitioners, students and faculty, colleagues and friends on the ideas, organization, choices, and usability of the text. Our personal egos have been temporarily suspended in the search for an objectively good product. The four members of the Advisory Board (listed on the verso of the title page) have been invaluable in helping us toward this goal, with one exemplary role model providing a methodical thirty-page report covering every detail. We have been in safe hands and we hope to pass that security on to you.

David Lankes, a mover and shaker at Syracuse University, talks of libraries and reference as conversation and participatory networking. Round 1 of this book was birthed through intense conversation. We could see our fetal ideas gain bone, muscle, and tissue as we held focus groups at ALA conferences, deconstructed scores of reference syllabi, poured through publishers’ catalogs and Web sites, and immersed ourselves in “participatory networking” with both aspiring students and grizzled practitioners. It was a heady experience. Round 2 has been a process of fine-tuning, of quieter contemplation, of more in-depth questioning and expanded experience. Comprehensiveness, currency, and readability have been the ternion values undergirding all additions, subtractions, and edits to the text. Tethering multiformat reference tools and services to the larger movements in society has provided context to the choices we have made. The product you hold contains both the energetic fire of its

birth and the controlling waters of intensive calibration and expansion that marked Round 2. We hope this combination will find its resonance in your individual development as reference librarians of the twenty-first century.