

# Rethinking Reference in Our Library

**A Quest for the Course LIBR 210:**

**Reference and Information Services**



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## Introduction

***“Whether or not there is a future for reference librarians rather depends if they remember in time where they misplaced their goals”***

***Donald Davinson***

Reference librarians face great opportunities and challenges to adequately respond to their users' needs. During this quest, you are going to play a role as a member of a reference department. Your enthusiasm,

knowledge, and creativity are fundamental to succeed in your job. By the end of the assignment, you will be informed enough to develop a personal vision of the reference services.

Are you ready? Take your books, computer, pencils, and notebooks. It is now time to examine the reference services' goals and think about the kind of future you envision.

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## **Task**

You will be members of a Task Force on Reference Services in a specific library (choose a scenario: school library, public library, academic library, or special library). You will be appointed by the administrator to examine the conditions of reference services, discussing issues and trends in the field, sharing your own perspectives, and preparing a report that reflects the revised visions of the department.

You and your colleagues understand that the Reference Department must carry out changes; therefore, you see this meeting as an opportunity to express your concerns. It is expected that each member of the team conducts research and notes the perspectives of his/her role.

Each of you will present your perspective within the group. Afterwards, you will prepare a group report that combines what you all think is important.

Each team will make a presentation to the class at-large. At the end of the exercise each student will turn in a chart/essay that reflects his/her personal vision of the reference services.

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## **Process**

## 1. Looking at Reference Service from Different Perspectives

You will be working together in a small group of 3 students. Within the group, each of you will take on one of the following roles:



*The  
technologist*

You love technology! In your opinion, librarians must make the best use of new information technologies if they want to survive in the digital era. You notice that as Internet use goes up, the use of desk reference service is declining. You believe the library must eliminate the traditional reference model because it does not respond to the users' needs: people have access to electronic resources and databases anytime and demand for support twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You think that while your team is analyzing reference on a conceptual level, the commercial competition is winning users by providing information at their point of need. You come to the meeting with the idea that librarians should focus on choosing the best software for real-time reference.



### *The humanist*

You really think that face-to-face service is the centerpiece in libraries. Patrons always need an “information therapist” who helps them clarify their ideas which is only possible through face-to-face interaction. You are not against change but you understand that technology and information resources, on their own, are not effective. People need “live person” service! Certainly, questions at the reference desk have declined, but that is because librarians are working on other tasks (group instruction, the digital library, research consultation, etc.) As a result, librarians do not realize how this negatively impacts service at the reference desk. You definitely think that the human reference service is needed more than ever. Your proposal is to carry out an exhaustive study to improve reference services at the desk.



### *The teacher*

In your opinion, teaching information skills is the most important component of reference service. Librarians not only must provide students with the right answer, but also teach them how to access, organize and use information. You have noticed that many of the questions users ask at the desk are directional and can easily be answered by paraprofessionals. Many people see librarians as clerks, and you think your team must focus on modifying that image. Librarians must start building partnerships with teachers/faculty members and computer experts in order to offer instruction in person, online, or in an electronic classroom situation. You come to the meeting thinking: “Let’s leave the technological aspects to the hands of the technology department, leave the traditional reference service to the paraprofessionals and students. Our main responsibility now is on teaching!”

2. Conduct research from your unique point of view. Use the resources on this page to help you get started (but don't limit yourselves!) There are lots of articles and web resources!

3. Now that each member of the team has become an expert from one perspective, you are ready to combine what each of you has learned into a task force report. This document must reflect your team's vision on reference services.

4. Create a presentation to the classroom by using Inspiration, Powerpoint, or any other format the members consider appropriate for relaying their message. Be prepare to answer questions from the audience.

### Audience Responsibilities

The audience will be divided into several groups. Each group will ask questions to the speakers, according to the needs, expectations, and/or responsibilities of the group the students represent:

Group I	Administrators
Group II	Librarians/staff of the library
Group III	Representatives of the patrons (students, teachers/faculty members, public)
Group IV	Representatives of the technology department

In order to understand the role of your group, read the next articles before the presentations:

Rieh, S. Y. (1999, May). Changing reference service environment: A review of perspectives from managers, librarians, and users. The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 25 (3), 178-186.

Ross, J. B. (1997, March). Defining the divide: causes of friction between librarians and computer support staff. The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 23, 132-133.

## 5. Looking at Reference Service from a Personal Perspective

We have not finished yet!

You have read several articles and listened to everybody's points of view. That means you are ready to take a stand on this topic! Prepare a chart/essay that reflects your personal vision of the reference services. Ask yourself:

- What aspects of reference services are important to me?
- What role do I want to play if I would have the opportunity to work as a reference librarian?
- What skills will I have to develop to be the best reference librarian?

## 6. Use the rubric to grade your individual and group's performance

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## Resources

### Digital Reference Resources -

[http://vrd.org/pubinfo/proceedings99\\_bib.shtml](http://vrd.org/pubinfo/proceedings99_bib.shtml)

This bibliography cites articles examining the implementation and effects of digital reference service. It has about 165 citations, sorted by setting: public, academic, business, government, and special libraries.

ELITE Project - <http://www.le.ac.uk/li/distance/eliteproject/index.htm>

Excellent information about distance access to libraries. There is up-to-date information about, and links to, libraries using conferencing, chat,

MOOs, e-mail and Web forms, and "MyLibrary" interfaces.

Keefer, J. (1993, Spring). The hungry rats syndrome: library anxiety, information literacy, and the academic reference process. RQ, 32 (3), 333 (7)

(Infotrac: Full Text)

Library reference services and library instruction can be viewed as delivery of a product or as a process that is more than just content based. The process model in the development of information literacy is discussed.

Kuhlthau, C. C. (1994). Students and the information search process: Zones of intervention for librarians. Advances in Librarianship, 18, 57-72

A six-stage model of the students' search process was developed from the thoughts, actions, and feelings commonly experienced in the process. The author indicates important directions for services in reference and bibliographic instruction.

Lipow, A. G. (August 1999). "In your face" reference service. Library Journal, 124 (13), 50-52.

The author believes that reference librarians will always serve as an important filter for quality information because computer, however "smart", will never be perfect.

Mann, T. (1998, Fall). Reference service, human nature, copyright, and offsite service--in a "digital age"? Reference & User Services Quarterly, 38 (1), 55(1). (Infotrac: Full Text)

The author points out that real libraries, with inherent locale limitations, constitute the only means our society has for overcoming the what and

who restrictions of "virtual libraries," thereby making copyrighted texts freely available. According to Mann, we need to promote the importance of libraries as destinations in themselves--as places in which readers may freely consult not only copyrighted books and journals, but also site-licensed databases that cannot be tapped into from anywhere, at anytime, by anyone in cyberspace.

Rader, H. B. (2000). Information literacy in the reference environment: Preparing for the future. The Reference Librarian (71), 25-33

Teaching of skills to cope effectively in the information society will become a vary important component of reference services.

Sarkodie-Mensah, K. (1997). The human side of reference in an era of technology. Reference Librarian (59), 131-138.

Argues that as libraries adopt more technology, reference librarians must recognize diverse users and their needs, gauge user knowledge and connectivity, use technological terminology clearly, emphasize critical thinking, stress the existence of print sources, pursue innovative ways of doing reference, and learn new concepts.

Service Perspectives for the Digital Library - <http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/~b-sloan/e-ref.html>

This paper explores role of the librarian in providing remote reference services and outlines potential service perspectives for the digital library.

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## Evaluation

### Rubric to grade your individual and group's performance

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Role in your team: \_\_\_\_\_

Role in the audience: \_\_\_\_\_

	<b>Beginning</b> 1	<b>Developing</b> 2	<b>Accomplished</b> 3	<b>Score</b>
<b>Teamwork</b>	Our group could not agree on the final report	One person in our group dictated what would be done and the rest agreed	Our group reached consensus	
<b>Group Presentation</b>	Our ideas were unclear, disorganized and weakly presented	Our ideas were clear and organized but the presentation did not reflect a balanced participation by all the members	Our presentation was clear, organized, fully supported, and reflected a well balanced participation by all the members	
<b>Personal Involvement in the whole assignment</b>	I was not engaged in this assignment and always relied on others to do the work	I participated in all the activities but only because I had to do that	I assumed responsibility for the assignment and enthusiastically participated in all the activities	

Personal Vision	My essay/chart did not reflect Individual reflection	My essay/chart did reflect a superficial analysis of the issues	I was able to express my personal opinion based on a depth analysis of the issues	
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## Conclusion

During this quest, you gained a broader understanding of reference services, participated in a “library department”, and thought about the role you would like to play as a reference librarian. The challenge for professionals in this field is to constantly find better ways of providing information and instruction. Human relations, teaching, and technological skills are fundamental to succeed.

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