THE SPIRIT OF REFERENCE SERVICE

Robert B. Downs
Dean, Library Administration, and Director, Library School
University of Illinois

It is practically a truism that modern library philosophy, especially in America, emphasizes the use of materials rather than their preservation. There is recognition, of course, that rare and valuable books must be given special protection and used under regulations guaranteeing their safety. To apply the same rules to the great mass of current publishing, however, would be a severe handicap to our concepts of library service.

Though the point may appear so obvious that it is hardly worth stating, perhaps because we have become thoroughly accustomed to it, this feature of American librarianship is in striking contrast to prevailing practices in many other countries. As a result of our stress on public service, circulation, reference, and research departments are highly developed in nearly all types of libraries. It is revealing to compare this approach with the attitude of, say, most of the Japanese, Mexican, and Turkish librarians, with whom this writer has worked in recent years. Traditionally, these librarians believe that professional librarianship stops with cataloging and classification. They have considered that their job was done when they acquired the books and placed them on the shelves. If anyone wants to use the books, there they are.

In some instances, in fact, the librarians have taken an even more extreme stand. They thought that there was something menial about giving reference service to a library user. To do so, in their view, would be behaving like servants, and therefore would be beneath their dignity. If a person comes to the library to look up information, the books are available. Let him use them himself to find what he wants.

Actually, the modern idea of reference work in a library is a comparatively recent development, even in the United States. It has come, in part, because of the enormous growth of libraries—growth both in the size of individual institutions and in their varied nature. Reference assistance was perhaps less necessary in the older libraries with their small collec-
tions and relatively few reference books. Reference work exists because it is not possible to arrange books so mechanically, so perfectly, as to do away with the need for personal service. The reference librarian is the middleman between the reader and the right book.

It has been estimated that fully 95 per cent of a library's users do not know exactly what they want or where it can be found when they enter a library. Without the aid of the reference librarian they would leave the library in as befuddled condition as when they came into it.

Someone divided the people who come to the reference librarian for help into three categories:

(1) The select few who know just what they want, clearly state what they are looking for, and expect you to find it for them.

(2) The people who expect nothing of you, apologize for disturbing you, and break into a fever of gratitude over the slightest assistance.

(3) The people who expect the reference librarian to do all their work for them.

The person who drew up this classification may have viewed the world with a jaundiced eye, but his descriptions are apt. One of the hardest jobs frequently is to find out just what the reader wants. As one exasperated reference librarian commented, "They will choke to death and die with the secret in them rather than tell you what they want." Often the inquirer will begin miles away and only gradually work around to what he actually has in mind. He will start out perhaps asking for a world atlas when what he really wants to know is how to get from Urbana to Monticello, Illinois. Some amusing examples were cited by Raymund F. Wood of Fresno State College. One inquirer wanted to know, "Do you have a complete list of firms in the U.S. publishing music?" The reference librarian massed an array of books that included Ulrich, Ayres, Mudge, The Writers' Market, the Faxon Guide to Periodicals, and the Cumulative Book Index, and was about to bring out the back files of some of the leading music magazines when he was told that all that was wanted was the street address of G. Schirmer, Inc., in New York.

On another occasion the question was "Do you have any information on insects?" Statistics on the number of different kinds of insects in the world vary from about 700,000 to 6,000,000. Eventually it came out that the information really
wanted was just what the boll weevil does to destroy the cotton crop.

Still another query that was difficult to pinpoint came from a young man who asked if the library possessed information about the state university medical school. Accustomed to answering questions about the relative merits of the various schools, the reference librarian tried to ascertain whether he wished to find out about its academic standing or possibly its faculty-student ratio, or perhaps the tuition fees. No, none of these would do. As a matter of fact all that was really wanted was the telephone number of the student nurses' dormitory close by.

One of the unresolvable questions often discussed by reference librarians is how much help to give readers. The usual answer is: it depends. The amount of time will depend on the question, on the reader, and on his need or purpose. The librarian must be able to distinguish between the serious and the trivial inquiry, between the reasonable and the unreasonable, the possible and the impossible. In the case of school and college libraries, the reference librarian has to learn to stop with suggesting sources and techniques to students, and instructing them in the use of indexes and other reference tools, while avoiding doing the work the student has been assigned to do. On the other side, a considerable degree of leading-by-the-hand may be necessary for public library patrons without experience in libraries or in the use of books. Likewise, the busy school or college administrator, the trained scholar, and the mature teacher may merit more time and assistance than the average person is likely to require. Every reader is entitled to a certain minimum of courteous help and attention. After that it must be left to the judgement and common sense of the reference librarian.

The constant aim of the reference librarian is, or should be, to help readers to help themselves. Usually it is sufficient to refer readers searching for particular facts to the proper or probable sources of information, and to give further aid only when it seems to be needed.

Incidentally, there is a certain type of reference librarian who annoys everyone with whom he or she comes into contact. These are sometimes known as "gushers." They are always inclined to overdo. They overwhelm a reader with material far beyond his need, not knowing when to stop. They bring more and more, when a single book or article would have been completely adequate. Thousands of hours are wasted by reference librarians who do not realize when enough is enough.
The good reference librarian is always careful to see that help given a reader is not wasted by being misunderstood. The best bit of reference work may be lost unless a string is kept on the reader. Make certain that he comes back if the material provided is unsatisfactory.

Another important point to remember is that the reference librarian should never be so individualistic as not to want to pass on a difficult question to someone better qualified to answer it, to someone who knows more about the subject, such as a specialist. In a sense, it is well to think of every member of the library organization as a member of the reference staff. The acquisition librarian, the cataloger, the classifier, the documents librarian, and others may possess special information, have unusual avocations, or be otherwise better prepared to answer a given reference query than the regular reference staff. Even beyond this, one should take advantage of the human resources of the whole institution and community. In a college or university one can often obtain valuable assistance from members of the faculty, while in any sizable community the variety of professions and trades represented will constitute an important resource upon which to draw. Find out who knows and what.

And in this connection stress should be placed on the reference department's relationship to the institution or community which it is designed to serve. In the public library, the reference librarian must be community minded, know what projects are being sponsored by service clubs, the programs of the women's clubs, the business and industrial activities of the area, the cultural interests. Similarly in the school, the college, and the university the reference librarian needs to be familiar with the curriculum, with the methods of instruction, and the general objectives of the institution. The closest possible working relations with the faculty are essential, for in this way only can the reference staff work most effectively with students.

Cordial community relations also, of course, include cooperation with other libraries. Their collections and personnel frequently may supplement those of one's own organization. The knowledge and resources of special libraries, the state library, and like institutions may be utilized through telephone inquiries, correspondence, interlibrary loans, and otherwise. Since cooperation is a two-way street, it is understood that reciprocal assistance will be given when requested.

In further reference to the amount of aid to furnish individual readers, one of the reference librarian's important respon-
sibilities is to train the public in the use of the library's collections. Especially in the case of school and college libraries, the reference librarian is dealing with a captive audience, and there will be many opportunities to teach students, and perhaps even faculty members, how to use standard reference books and other tools, thereby making them more self-reliant and relieving the librarian of numerous routine questions. For the past several years, at the Chicago Undergraduate Division of the University of Illinois, a program for giving every student instruction in the use of the library has been carried on. The dividends are high. The number of reference questions has declined as students have learned how to help themselves, and the questions asked are on a higher level. Furthermore, as these students have come on to Urbana for upper division work, they have shown the benefit of their training and are more proficient in their use of libraries. Admittedly, such instruction as is provided by the Chicago division is demanding of a great deal of staff time and energy. Most libraries are too short staffed for this type of program. In general, however, it can be said that any teaching in the use of books and libraries which can be done by reference librarians will in the long run make their work less burdensome, more interesting, and more rewarding.

Many attempts have been made to define reference work and to describe the ideal reference librarian. A good description was given by W. W. Bishop over forty years ago:

The 'reference librarian' [is] the man who is compelled to be all things to all men, who counting nothing and no one trivial, spends his days opening up to the miscellaneous public the stores of the library's books... He sends the interesting inquiry on to the specialist; ... he greets generations of students...here he averts a difficulty, there he smooths down an irate reader with too often a just grievance; he is an interpreter, revealing to inquirers what the library has; he is a lubricant, making the wheels run noiselessly and well...At his best scholars use him, like him, thank him. At his lowest ebb no one considers him save as a useful part of the machinery. This is the theory of his work--service, quiet, self-effacing, but not passive or unheeding. To make books useful, and more used, --this is his aim. 2
Some mellow, mature reflections on the qualities that go to make a top-notch reference librarian were more recently discussed by David Mearns of the Library of Congress, a great reference librarian. 3

Mr. Mearns lists seven attributes which he considers to be the essential elements of reference librarianship. Summarized briefly they are: (1) First is literacy; as defined, this means not only the ability to read, but to fully comprehend what one has read, plus skill in writing, and the ability to transmit the information found so skillfully that there is no possibility of misunderstanding. (2) Imagination or resourcefulness, by which is meant the willingness to play hunches, to explore even improbable leads, and in general to adopt a flexible, open-minded approach to every problem. (3) Enthusiasm, that is the reference librarian must enjoy his work, and be interested in and sympathetic to readers and their queries. (4) The fourth ingredient is persistence. If one is too easily discouraged, dismayed, or disheartened by elusive solutions to difficult questions, the answers will probably never be found. (5) The fifth requirement is called "a sense of media." The informational sources which a reference librarian needs to use are of wide scope and are of increasing variety. Consequently, he should be aware that his best source may not be a book, but may be a newspaper, a periodical, a manuscript, a government document, a map, or a print. (6) The sixth factor is humility, a little harder to define in this context. In essence, it means to avoid cocksureness, to refrain from glibness, to overcome intellectual snobbery, and to treat every inquiry as seriously as does the person who makes it. (7) Finally, the seventh element is love for a people's service. "Libraries exist only to render it," states Mr. Mearns, "and reference librarians can justify their own existence only to the degree that they are competent and rejoice to perform it...It is the single circumstance which raises librarianship, and specifically reference librarianship, from a technique to a mission."

The paragon described by Mr. Mearns is difficult, though certainly not impossible, of attainment. Many reference librarians have achieved most, if not all, the qualities listed. Some of them are mainly the result of age and experience, except for that rara avis, the "born reference librarian," who seems to enter the profession with the combination of attitudes, intellectual curiosity, broad knowledge, tenacious memory, sense of intuition, inspiration, zeal, and liking for people which comes to most of us, if at all, only after years of service.
To go further with a consideration of personnel, might encroach upon Miss Knox's area for no doubt she will deal with some of the specifics as contrasted to the generalities given here. However, the number one importance of reference personnel from the standpoint of good public relations should be emphasized. The reference librarians and the circulation staff form the impressions which the public has of the whole library. Of these two groups, the reference librarian's contact is likely to make a longer-lasting impact, since the service is more personal and the pressure of circulation work necessarily limits attention to individual readers to brief, perfunctory meetings.

Speaking of public relations, there is a negative side to reference work of which the reference librarian must be aware. Unless handled with tact and diplomacy, these aspects contain the seeds of misunderstanding, disagreement, and irritation on the part of the library's public. There are several types of questions which the reference librarian should not attempt to answer—for example, certain medical and legal questions. It would be a dangerous matter for the reference librarian to try to diagnose an illness by consulting a medical reference book. On the other hand, if a person comes to the library to see a medical dictionary or encyclopedia, it is entirely legitimate to show him the book. There is a clear distinction here.

The same holds true in the case of an individual who comes to the library for legal advice, in the hope of saving a lawyer's fee. Perhaps he wants help in drawing up a will or some other legal document. Here again one is perfectly justified in handing him a book of legal forms, or a work entitled How to Make Your Own Will, but that is the place to stop. Or if someone comes in and says that he is being cheated by his landlord, he can be referred to the section of the state statutes dealing with the problem of landlord and tenant. Actually to advise the complainant or to attempt to interpret the statute, however, would be courting trouble.

Another type of question to shy away from is one involving copyright information. The reference librarian is asked perhaps whether the copyright on a certain play has expired and whether it can be staged without paying royalties, or whether it would be safe to publish certain portions of a book without the permission of the author and publisher. Those are questions which the reference librarian answers at his own peril.

In a college or university, there are some other tricky kinds of questions. For instance, the reference librarian should not try to interpret catalog descriptions of college
courses. The student should be sent to the professor concerned and let him tell what the course is about. It is also treading on dangerous ground to recommend books for cramming, particularly around examination time.

College and university libraries are less annoyed by puzzle fans and persons participating in contests of all kinds than public libraries, but there are a certain number of them even in university libraries. A year or two ago, the reference collections of some of the libraries in New York City were almost wrecked by thousands who participated in contests sponsored by the New York Herald Tribune. It often happens that the reference librarian will not be told and does not know that questions are concerned with puzzles or contests and so spends considerable time looking up the information requested. Assuming, however, that the reference librarian does know the purpose of the question, should he or she spend any time on it? Opinions differ. Some librarians feel that most contests have a certain educational value and that giving help encourages people to use the library and perhaps leads them to more worthwhile reading. A limited amount of assistance may be justified if it does not interfere with other activities. In any case, possible sources of information might be pointed out to the inquirer, after which he could be left to do his own searching.

Another category that causes trouble in the reference department are foolish and trivial questions. Again, these may be more characteristic of public than of other types of libraries. Regardless of how absurd or unimportant a question may appear to the reference librarian, it should be remembered that it is nearly always important to the asker, and the library cannot very well refuse to answer it without explanation.

This writer's first reference question about astrology caused him amusement. However, he was informed indignantly that astrologers number among their followers several million Americans, including governors of states, U.S. Congressmen, and other prominent personages. The people who believe that Francis Bacon, or the Earl of Oxford, or Sir Walter Raleigh, or Christopher Marlowe, or anyone except William Shakespeare actually wrote the Shakespearean plays, are always with us. There are perhaps more crackpots in the field of religion than any other, though fortunately for the rest of us, most of them sooner or later move to California. These and many other members of the lunatic fringe the reference librarian must suffer with patience and fortitude, and even try to greet with a smile.

Another aspect of the reference field which should be con-
sidered briefly relates to organization. Of course, if the total library staff amounts to one professional person, as it does in many school and small public libraries, the matter of organization is not particularly significant. The librarian does reference, circulation, cataloging, and anything else that needs to be done. As the staff grows, however, questions about the most efficient type of organization arise. In recent years, the divisional arrangement has become predominant. Almost without exception, the new college and university library buildings that have been erected since the end of the war are designed to be organized along divisional lines, typically a humanities division, a science division, and a social science division. Along with the divisional set-up have come changes in staff requirements. For example, in reference work, the divisional library for science does not want a specialist, say, in chemistry, nor a general reference librarian who knows something about everything but has no exhaustive knowledge of any area. What is needed is something in between, what might be called a generalized specialist, a person who has some familiarity with all the principal branches of science, without being an expert in any particular branch. What is to become of the general reference librarian under these conditions—that paragon of a walking encyclopedia, who sees all, knows all, and tells all? Some have suggested that the species is headed toward extinction. This is doubtful because the generalist will continue to be needed in the library in the same way that the general practitioner is needed in medicine, not only to serve the one-man library or small community, but to see the whole as opposed to the parts. The time has passed undoubtedly when it is possible, as Francis Bacon and John Milton imagined in the seventeenth century, that a single human brain could comprehend and hold all existing knowledge. As long as libraries attempt to cover the universe, however, taking all knowledge to be their province, we shall need a synthesizer, the person who can take the broad view, the kind of person who is best represented by the highly competent general reference librarian.

It is not implied, though, that the specialist is not essential also, and the more expert knowledge the library staff as a whole possesses the better will be its reference and all other services. Even if there are only two people on a staff, it is desirable for each of them to have one or more subjects on which he knows more than the average person, and to go on extending his knowledge as opportunity offers. This will help to keep him intellectually alive—a must for a good reference librarian.
Thus far this paper has touched upon practically every feature of reference work except the materials with which reference librarians deal, though Mr. Mearns' statement that the best reference librarians have a "sense of media" is close to what this writer has in mind here. There is an inclination among lazy, inexperienced, or poorly trained reference workers to regard the reference collection proper as the only tools with which they have to deal. After they have exhausted the encyclopedias, dictionaries, indexes, and similar standard reference sources ranged around the reference desk, they consider their job finished. For a first-class reference librarian, these works are merely the beginning. He looks upon the entire library collection as part of the reference department's resources, and if this does not produce the answer, he is likely to turn to other libraries or even informational sources outside libraries. He knows that the information he seeks may be buried in government reports, files of periodicals, newspapers, in pamphlets, mimeographed or other near-print publications, in a novel, a play, an essay, or in any of a thousand other places, none of which may be included in the traditional reference collection. Here is the difference between the routine reference worker and the dedicated, enthusiastic librarian who won't accept defeat as long as he believes the information he wants is in existence and may possibly be found. For him, every book, every scrap of material in the library is a reference tool.

A fitting conclusion for this discussion is a statement from a French librarian written nearly 200 years ago. In an address entitled "The Duties and Qualifications of a Librarian," delivered before the Sorbonne in 1780, the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Cotton des Houssayes wrote:

Neither cold nor heat, nor his multiplied occupations, will ever be to him a pretext for evading the obligation he has contracted, to be a friendly and intelligent guide to all the scholars who may visit him. Forgetting himself, on the contrary, and laying aside all occupations, he will lead them forward with a cheerful interest, taking pleasure in introducing them to his library. 4

These words might well serve as the reference librarian's credo.
References


