

Undergraduate Reference Work

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THERE SEEMS TO BE an element of uncertainty in the minds of prospective library school students as to what the reference librarian in an undergraduate college does. This uncertainty is shared by two other groups, namely, students in the midst of professional training and graduates of library schools whose experience thus far has been limited to other departments or other types of libraries. Representatives of all three groups have frequently asked me what reference librarians do. Strange as it may seem, there is usually a gleam in the inquirer's eyes as if he strongly suspected us of spending our days doing nothing more constructive than straightening the shelves.

There are two possible explanations for this attitude. First, the questioner may have come from a college where there was no well-defined reference service or if such service did exist, this individual may have met requirements without it. Second, the questioner may be one who has done that nebulous quantity of graduate study, after which some people come to the conclusion that all undergraduate work is insignificant. It follows naturally that this second person is convinced that there is no such thing as undergraduate "research" even in the broadest sense of the term.

It is likely that those considering library service as a vocation and those wishing to

determine their aptitude for a certain branch of library science might profit by any description of college reference work which explains it, not in terms of theory but of experience. At the same time, professional people unfamiliar with college reference work or doubtful of its value might inferentially gain some understanding of its functions.

Reference questions asked by undergraduates might be divided into two groups, one headed term-paper or bibliographical questions; the other, curiosity or information questions. The latter type usually presents a specific problem, the explanation of which is necessary for a student's understanding of a written passage, a chance remark in class, or something less academic in the realm of his experience. The curiosity which engenders such questions must be recognized as pedagogically significant, for as Samuel Johnson perspicaciously remarked, "Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous mind."¹ Furthermore, I find that although the time required to answer such questions may be relatively short, the problems themselves are of considerable interest.

Information Questions

Aldous Huxley's erudite vocabulary set one young man on a dictionary hunt in order that he might explain a passage from

¹ *The Rambler* no. 103, March 12, 1751.

Eyeless in Gaza. According to the context, the term ("seccotine") might have been medical. As the word was not in *Webster's New International Dictionary* . . . , the next logical source seemed to be a good scientific dictionary. Both medical and chemical reference books failed to include the word, but *The Oxford English Dictionary*, IX, 347, gave a very satisfactory definition, one, incidentally, which entirely changed the student's first interpretation.

Two students came in one day with apparently nothing in common but a great deal of noise and a difference of opinion. They hurried to the encyclopedias and began a vigorous inspection of carefully chosen volumes. After a preliminary survey the two seemed dissatisfied and approached the desk. They were interested, one of them said, in the attempted Lenin assassination of the fall of 1918. They had discovered the date and some of the details but the most important fact—the name of the would-be assassin—was still unknown. Could I help them? We turned to *The New York Times Current History; the European War* . . . XVII (Oct.-Dec., 1918), 74. The person in question, we learned, was a woman, one Dora Kaplan.

The nineteenth century inclination to personify, adequately illustrated in the writings of Carlyle, Arnold, and Ruskin, led one student astray. He was reading an essay by Matthew Arnold in which there was a reference to the "Goddess Aselgeia." Not being familiar with this addition to the realm of allusion, the student and I began to consult dictionaries of mythology. A complete lack of any citation made me suspicious, so we turned to *Webster's New International Dictionary* . . . 2d ed., un-

abridged, p. 161. The entry we found was:

aselgeia. N. [Gr.] Lasciviousness. *M. Arnold*

In a sense it is rewarding to answer questions like these because one can be almost certain when he has the right answer and the piece of work is done. However, there are reference questions about which one cannot have such definite feelings. One may not be able to lock this other genre in the drawer at the end of the day and say it is finished. But these requests—comprising mainly bibliographical problems—are the more important in the last analysis.

Bibliographical Questions

In several ways, I believe it is more difficult to handle this second classification of reference work with undergraduates than with scholars. Younger students have not had time to learn as many languages nor to obtain a subject knowledge necessary for such exacting work. As a first requisite, therefore, college reference librarians must provide sources principally in English, a task not always easy or possible. A few students, it is true, are willing or able to attempt additional work in one of the two important modern languages, French or German. Likewise, college reference librarians must be constantly aware of the difficulty and number of their references. In the upper college, to be sure, students occasionally write papers of twenty-five thousand words which demand extensive work on quite a mature level. After one has pointed the way bibliographically, these students proceed to evaluate sources and select the best ones for their purposes. But most papers, I find, are from two to five thousand words in length.

It is from the writers of this latter type that one gets requests for "a few of the best references" on subjects.

Various suggestions may aid students in finding these "best references." First, is the author recognized as an authority? Critical bibliographies such as those which appear in the *Dictionary of American Biography* are extremely useful in determining this. Of course, biographical dictionaries or book reviews, when available, are also pertinent. The recency of an article or book, e.g. on television, may be significant. This requires attention to dates on catalog cards, in bibliographies, or in indexes. Chronological or subject scope may often be determined by the book's full title, the contents on the catalog card, or the subject tracing on catalog cards. The author's point of view and style must usually be learned from handling a given book.

A request for a bibliography on business conditions in Florence at the end of the Middle Ages illustrates how important a knowledge of foreign languages may be. Summerfield Baldwin in his *Business in the Middle Ages*, p. 100, impressed the reader with the national bias of works in various foreign languages and stated that there was no representative Italian work on medieval economics in translation. The wealth of Italian citations in the *Cambridge Medieval History*, VIII: 867-68, seemed to support this contention. There was a standard French work which covered the period, F. Perrens' *Histoire de Florence Depuis Ses Origines Jusqu'à la Domination des Medicis*, Paris, 1883, and, fortunately, French was the one foreign language the student could read. James Westfall Thompson's *Economic and Social History of Europe in the Later Middle Ages (1300-1500)* had some textual

value and limited bibliographical apparatus but the same author's *Reference Studies in Medieval History* was quite useful. Henri See's *Modern Capitalism; Its Origin and Evolution* made significant contributions to our work as did also Roy C. Cave and Herbert H. Coulson's *A Source Book for Medieval Economic History*.

I have said nothing so far about the amount of help one should give to students and how much they should be expected to do for themselves. In the lower college, I believe, the reference librarian must provide a great deal of aid supplemented by rather detailed instruction. He may suggest the types of material which have probably been written on the student's subject. It is frequently necessary to explain why there are no books on a current topic whereas there may be excellent periodical or pamphlet material.

Nature of Problem

If the nature of the problem is such that one begins with an encyclopedia, it is possible to emphasize that this is just the first step and to encourage the student to use the bibliography, if any, which accompanies the article. This may lead to a variety of succeeding steps including the use of periodical indexes, the card catalog, the *Essay and General Literature Index*, catalogs of public documents, etc. Throughout this process, the student has the opportunity of perfecting the techniques for using familiar tools and of learning about new ones. Ultimately, this will lead to more and more independent work.

With students of the upper college, one should continue the educative process but with more advanced sources such as subject bibliographies. These students some-

times have purely bibliographical problems. They are not always asked to write papers as assignments but are frequently instructed to compile a bibliography from which a paper might be written. If the reference librarian is not careful, he will spoil the value of these projects. Even more than usual, he must restrict his help to that of a directional nature.

This brings us to the very important subject of cooperation with the faculty. Those professors who have a genuine interest and understanding in our problems may supply, upon request, a list of term paper subjects. One economics professor was particularly cooperative in providing this information. His whole course displayed careful organization. To each member of his class he handed a mimeographed list of topics with general suggestions for proceeding. It was announced in class that students might obtain additional aid from the reference assistant in the college library. Before students actually began to ask for help, I had had sufficient time to prepare several additional references on each topic.

The reader may well ask, "How does one get this cooperation from disinterested faculty members?" The answer is, "Get them interested in some way—even if only generally—in the library." Several government and history professors were "invited," if one may use the term, to the library to view exhibits of government publications and charts explaining catalogs and indexes of government documents. Several months later one of them very unexpectedly telephoned to ask if he might borrow one of the charts for a short time.

Under another occasion we prepared an

annotated bibliography of State Department publications quite independent of any faculty request. When informed of it, one of the government professors was more than willing to distribute the mimeographed list to his classes. It is hoped that the time may come when we will be *asked* to do just such work as this for the faculty.

Instruct Students

Space does not permit a lengthy discussion of another important function of the reference librarian. That is the responsibility, partial or complete, to formally instruct freshmen or sophomores in the use of the library. Informal instruction has been suggested in all reference work. Last year the librarian and reference assistant of the Columbia College Library gave a series of two lectures, illustrated by lantern slides, to the sophomore class in cooperation with the contemporary civilization faculty. Each group to which we lectured comprised about twenty-five students. This year we are doing similar work but this time in connection with one of the English courses. We expect the results to be more productive because the instructors are giving the students definite assignments which will require them to use the information presented in the lectures.

It is hoped that those persons to whom this paper is addressed will have acquired a general outline of some of the responsibilities and duties of a college reference librarian. No one who has participated in the actual answering of questions or in any of the other activities described will ever call this phase of library work anything but challenging.