
Ranganathan's Relevant Rules

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Guest Columnist

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Some things are timeless: the golden rule, family traditions, and even the more materialistic simple black dress or string of pearls. These classic items are often passed over for a shinier new toy or the latest trend. However, they are timeless because we can always return to and trust them. They ground us. For librarians, Ranganathan's five laws of library science are timeless objectives that put our profession's goals in perspective. If we ever lose sight of why or how we're doing our job, Ranganathan's laws provide guidance and structure. So take yourself back to library school—where you probably first heard of Ranganathan—and explore why his laws are timeless for librarianship and how they help libraries stay relevant.

Shiyali Ramainrita (S. R.) Ranganathan (1892–1972) was an Indian mathematician and library science scholar.¹ In 1931 he published his *Five Laws of Library Science*, which were meant to be essential principles to define a library's function and purpose.² The five laws state:

1. Books are for use
2. Every reader, his/her book
3. Every book, its reader
4. Save the time of the reader
5. The Library is a growing organism

A CLOSER LOOK

1. Books are for use.

In other words, library materials and services should be accessible to users. This law might seem trivial in our day and age, but it harkens back to times when books were often chained to bookshelves and locked in rooms away from the patrons who wanted to use them. Fortunately, we're seeing less and less of this type of restriction to access. However, the digital age does have new repercussions for this first law. One way libraries are making their materials more accessible is by providing free online access to resources where and when the users need them. This means that more and more, our users can access materials when they want and from the location of their choice. An extension of this law is that libraries ensure that their users at multi-campus locations have access to the same resources as at the main location.

A caveat to keep in mind is that electronic access is not always the only way to go for better access. While it seems like most users today prefer online access, it's a careful balancing act. Eliminating free access to print resources in lieu of complete online access for only those users with a login

and password can be viewed as a modern-day equivalent to breaking this first rule, and librarians should take their patrons' habits and desires into thoughtful consideration.

One way that libraries have exemplified this law is interlibrary loan (ILL) service. While librarians tend to overlook this service because we're so familiar with it, it is quite powerful. Often explaining the ILL concept to patrons produces that wow-factor that is sometimes hard to come by. At Penn State, I often hear our student Lion Ambassadors mention ILL to prospective families on campus tours—so you know the concept resonates with them. Recently my sister asked me for “the skinny” on ILL so she could inform a parental support group about the service to help them locate more resources about raising children with autism. ILL is a true manifestation of the adage that there's strength in numbers, and by building networks of information resources, libraries are truly indivisible. Collaborating is something we do well and we should capitalize on it to pass this great service on to our patrons.

While it's easy to think of examples of making materials accessible to patrons, we can also look at this law from a service standpoint. Librarians have strong commitments to service and finding out what kinds of services our patrons want is another way we continue to stay relevant in today's world. For example, we realize that learning doesn't stop after the library's doors close at night, so when possible, libraries increase their hours—often staying open all night. Serving patrons via shared 24/7 virtual reference services is another way libraries are making their services accessible, even if they don't have the budget to keep the physical library open later.

2. Every reader, his or her book

No patron can own all the materials they need. Unlike some who think that libraries are being marginalized because anyone who needs a book just buys it, patrons cannot own *all* the resources they need, nor do they want to. This is especially true in an academic environment where textbooks and research materials can be cost-prohibitive to faculty and especially students. Also, research interests and discoveries change frequently. Libraries are in the business of targeting collections for their user populations and building collections around their users. We talk to our users, attend faculty meetings, and scour book reviews to find out what kinds of materials our patrons are interested in—we'll even buy a book based on a user's recommendation or request. Starbucks and Barnes and Noble do their own research about their clientele in general, but librarians take it a step further. Librarians take into consideration format issues so that the most appropriate form for the patrons using it is available. We also consider preservation issues and do our best to ensure long-term access to the material. Not only do we do this, but we make sure that we provide materials that are credible and reliable. We're happy to help and we take pride in finding a reader his or her book.

The second law speaks mainly to the areas of acquisitions and collection development. However, it also speaks to the very basic materials that libraries supply but librarians tend to forget about, such as photocopiers, staplers, pencils, computers, and reserve items. By providing the basics, we serve patrons throughout the continuum of their quest for knowledge and the research process. First, they can receive assistance and direction for finding resources from librarians and then obtain the actual resources. Often patrons use library printers to print the assignment and our staplers to drive the final staple into the corner of a research paper before turning it in. From beginning to end, the library is there.

Another service that gains its relevance from Ranganathan's second law is reference services. Librarians know their patrons and collections and provide expertise you will not find anywhere else. Reference questions are more complex than in the past because users often do preliminary research online first. When someone does ask a reference question, they have most likely done some searching on their own and are stumped by the time they come to the library. Through our expertise, we know what kinds of materials best help our users and we know how and when to use them. This is how we ensure that every reader has his or her book.

3. Every book, its reader

This is the complementary reverse of the second law and supports the first law as well—it is all about providing pathways. Although the first and third laws sound similar, they actually support each other. The third law serves to remind us to build more connections for our users so that they can find all the materials that we have made free and accessible. Classification systems are one way to do this. When used intelligently, technology helps to increase connections exponentially through tools like course management systems and Web 2.0 technologies that promote conversations about our materials and services. Technology must be accessible, intuitive, affordable, and simple if it is to be useful to patrons.

Instruction is another often-overlooked way librarians make connections. As librarians, we can provide almost anything patrons need to make the information relevant: hour-long sessions that are expertly tailored to students' needs, one-on-one research assistance, or open sessions on a variety of topics. Instruction entails both connecting the user to available resources and educating them about what we as librarians can do for them. If patrons leave with nothing else but the knowledge that the library can help them, we have done our job and we have taken this third law to heart.

In a similar vein comes outreach. Reaching out to the community and networking is perhaps the quintessential representation of the third law. Through programming that supports information literacy, making contact with groups such as adult learners or immigrant populations, and providing orientation sessions and tours to new users, we are constantly making new pathways to the library.

FOR YOUR ENRICHMENT

4. Save the time of the reader

This law is self explanatory—everyone likes to save time—but how are libraries providing *efficient* access to materials and services? Not only do we staff service desks with trained employees, but our virtual presence through e-mail and chat reference has grown. Of course, these services save users' time by getting them to the information they need more quickly. Virtual and phone reference allows users to stay in their location and not have to worry about physically visiting the library. Soon reference services accessible by handheld wireless devices will make this service even more convenient.

It is no surprise that technology has helped librarians to apply this law. Online catalogs, link resolvers, metasearching, and Z39.50 technology make finding online full-text content much easier. While there are still some kinks to be smoothed out, just try going back to the old ways of searching. Similarly, tools like the Google Library Links program help our patrons save time by allowing them to use an interface they are familiar with to find quality resources that are owned by their local library. At Penn State, we have seen evidence that Ranganathan's fourth rule is much appreciated by patrons. An "I Want It" button in our online catalog is a feature that allows patrons to easily place a hold or recall a book that is not available at their current Penn State location or campus. This feature lets them pick up the item at any other Penn State location, including a branch library that might be closer to their lab or dorm. At a large university like Penn State, this feature can save quite a bit of time for users and the feature gets used heavily. Finally, taking advantage of Web 2.0 technologies like RSS feeds can save users' time by allowing them to get updates for content that they regularly like to see without having to visit a number of sites to get that content. Everyone likes to save time and the fourth law reminds us to do it for our patrons.

5. The library is a growing organism

Libraries are growing by broadening and deepening their collections. Public, school, and academic librarians are planning new outreach initiatives and offering new services such as roving and remote reference services. We are also expanding and reworking our physical spaces by building beautiful new libraries, moving to an information commons model of service, and remodeling spaces to make them more inviting. Ranganathan's fifth law leaves us with this logical conclusion that libraries are, and always should be, changing.

Even though repercussions of today's digital age may seem to cloud what Ranganathan's five laws mean for libraries, his laws are still relevant. No matter which of Ranganathan's laws a new service falls under, libraries always provide services that people value and that remain timeless. Two things that patrons always appreciate are personal attention and a smiling face—those never go out of style. Libraries provide empowerment. Knowledge is power and libraries provide the materials necessary for gaining that knowledge. Libraries provide a place for discovery and serendipity. Perhaps browsing a new-books display leads a researcher to a new area of interest, or a young student discovers a new career path by consulting the career section of the library. The idea that libraries are life-changing places not only provides a great feeling to librarians but to patrons as well—and that is especially timeless.

References

1. "Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan," from Contemporary Authors database, <http://galenet.gale.com> (accessed Jan. 5, 2006).
2. S. R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (Madras, India: Madras Library Assoc., 1931); and (London: Edward Goldston, 1931). Also available at, <http://dlist.sir.arizona.edu/1220/> (accessed Jan. 5, 2006).