

Whatever Happened to “Always Cite the Source?”

A Study of Source Citing and Other Issues Related to Telephone Reference

This article presents a study of source citing in telephone reference service at the twenty-five largest public library systems in the United States and Canada. The results showed that in eighty-six out of the 125 total reference transactions analyzed

(68.8 percent of the cases), respondents gave no sources for their answers. The article also discusses a number of additional issues uncovered during the study that are not related to source citing but that have important implications for reference services. The authors conclude that best reference practices are not being followed in many instances of public library telephone reference, and they close with a number of simple suggestions for improving telephone, face-to-face, and digital reference services.

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formation given to users. Source citing is included as one measure of reference excellence in the Reference and User Services Association's (RUSA's) Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers: the librarian “offers pointers, detailed search paths (including complete URLs), and names of resources used to find the answer, so that users can learn to answer similar questions on their own.”¹ Failure to cite sources prevents users from being able to judge the authority of the information they receive and precludes them from being able to return to the sources later to find more information on their own. However, informal observations raised questions regarding how often public librarians cite their sources when answering reference questions via the telephone.

The authors investigated the question of source citation frequency by calling the twenty-five largest public library systems in the United States and Canada and asking a series of five ready reference questions, one question per telephone call, over a period of two months. Although the percentage of correct answers was much higher than previous researchers had generally found in their studies of telephone reference service, the frequency of source citing was surprisingly low.²

This article will present the results of the study and discuss implications for reference practice. It also will discuss additional issues uncovered during the

One of the most basic rules for answering reference questions is to cite the source of all in-

study that are not related to source citing but have important implications for improving face-to-face, telephone, and digital reference services. These issues include librarians’ missing out on the chance to teach users about the nature of modern information; frustration with having to navigate the maze of telephone options employed by the automated messaging systems used by most of the libraries; librarians who did not seem to take the authors’ questions seriously; the infrequency with which respondents asked follow-up questions; respondents who did not identify themselves professionally (leaving the authors to wonder who they were); and librarians who exhibited an alarming lack of confidence in their own answers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Telephones have played a role in public library work since the late nineteenth century, yet there have been relatively few research publications that have discussed studies of telephone reference service.³ As Kern wrote in a comparison of the history of telephone reference to the development of online chat reference, “The telephone is old technology and its use for library reference services is also long-standing. In many ways it lies forgotten in the literature, a ‘been there, doing that’ service that does not merit fresh reflection.”⁴

Telephone Reference Accuracy

Among the published research studies that do exist, many have focused on studying rates of reference accuracy. In now-classic studies, Crowley and Childers, and Myers and Jirjees used public and academic library telephone reference services to investigate the question of reference accuracy.⁵ These studies found roughly a 50 to 60 percent rate of accuracy, which Hernon and McClure famously labeled “The 55 Percent Rule.”⁶

A number of other studies also have found accuracy rates in the 50 to 60 percent range, such as Paskoff’s more recent study, for which she called fifty-one academic health and hospital libraries and asked a series of six “factual questions.”⁷ She found that 63.4 percent of the answers were correct, 25.2 percent of the answers were comprised of references to other information agencies, 3.6 percent of the answers were incorrect, and no answer was given in 7.8 percent of the cases.

However, Hubbertz argued that the consistency of “The 55 Percent Rule” is largely a function of the difficulty of the questions asked.⁸ He called attention to the common practice of eliminating questions shown to have extremely high or extremely low reference response rates, meaning that

accuracy rate findings must consequently fall into this middle range. It does appear that most other studies of telephone reference accuracy that have found either significantly higher or significantly lower accuracy rates have used relatively “easy” or relatively “difficult” questions. As an example of a high accuracy rate study, Partin found an 81 percent correct response rate in rural public library telephone reference using relatively easy questions, such as “Can you tell me the address for the *Wall Street Journal*?” and “What is a nautical mile?”⁹ As an example of a low accuracy rate study, Dilevko and Dolan called twenty-one public libraries in Canada and asked ready reference questions “dealing with current topics of importance, as reported in major newspapers.”¹⁰ They found an accuracy rate of just 34.2 percent, including cases in which referrals to other agencies led to correct answers, and concluded that the extreme currency of the information requested led in part to the low accuracy rate. The questions they used were relatively difficult, such as “Could you give me some information as to whether it is legal to sell the manganese-based gasoline octane booster MMT in Canada?” and “Do you know of any publication that provides a list of abandoned communities (towns, villages, outposts) in Newfoundland?”¹¹

Source Citing in Telephone Reference

There has been less interest in studying source citing than in studying telephone reference accuracy. Those studies that have examined citation practices have generally done so as a by-product of reference accuracy. For example, Partin found “the number of answers that were given without checking any source” to be “disturbing,” but did not provide extensive analysis of citation behaviors.¹² Similarly, in their study of reference accuracy, Roger and Goodwin included “source cited or appropriate referral made” as part of the definition of “correctness,” yet they did not report rates of source citing as an independent measure.¹³

Telephone Reference As a Continuing Service

Despite the growth in popularity of other forms of virtual reference service, such as e-mail and chat, it appears that libraries are continuing to provide telephone reference. Allen and Smith analyzed telephone inquiries for a two-week period at the John C. Hodges Library at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.¹⁴ They found that about one-third of the calls were reference queries, with the remainder being informational and directional

queries. This is the same rate of reference versus informational queries that Brown had recorded nearly a decade earlier at the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Bicentennial Library, a medium-sized public library also located in Tennessee.¹⁵

More recently, Tenopir surveyed the directors of seventy academic libraries about “changes in their reference services over the last three years and how electronic resources have impacted them.”¹⁶ All seventy directors explained that their libraries continue to answer reference questions via the telephone, despite the growth of other forms of virtual reference. It is likely that public libraries also will continue to offer telephone reference on a wide-scale basis.

STUDY METHOD

Selecting the Libraries

The authors reasoned that most large public library systems were likely to have more active reference departments than most small public library systems, and that their study would be less of a burden on busier reference departments. Consequently, the twenty-five largest (in terms of populations served) public library systems in the United States and Canada (according to the *2005 World Book Almanac*), were selected.¹⁷ These twenty-five libraries are listed in the appendix.

The first challenge was to select the phone numbers to call, so the twenty-five library systems’ Web sites were searched for numbers identified as “reference,” “questions,” or “information” lines. Finding an appropriate number often involved extensive searching throughout a large Web site, which proved to be a frustrating waste of time. Seven libraries had no number listed for “reference,” or “information,” or “questions,” so the authors called the main or central library general numbers for these libraries, or the general number for the first branch listed if there was no main or central library. It was especially frustrating to find that many libraries had “Ask a Librarian” pages that enabled users to ask chat or e-mail questions but did not include a number for telephone reference.

Selecting the Questions

The second challenge was to select the test questions. Bunge and Bopp defined the ready reference question as a question that “can be answered quickly by consulting only one or two reference tools.”¹⁸ The decision was made to focus on ready reference, as opposed to more involved reference queries, as “Ready reference questions constitute

the majority of questions received at most reference desks in public and academic libraries,” and because ready reference questions are more suited to the telephone reference format.¹⁹ As a case in point, Kern reported that the University of Virginia’s telephone reference policy states “Normally, telephone [reference] service is appropriate for only factual or referral queries.”²⁰

To use questions similar to the kinds of real questions that real patrons ask via telephone reference, students in a graduate library and information science (LIS) course were asked to provide some of the questions they had asked in the past using public library telephone reference. Five were selected from the resulting list of eight, limiting the selections to those that were true ready reference questions (easily answered using only one or two sources), and selecting questions that represented a range of topics as well as a range of difficulty, although all five seemed to be relatively easy to answer, reflective of the overall simplicity of ready reference questions offered by the students.

The questions were (listed in the order asked):

1. Can you tell me when Valentine’s Day is?
2. Who is the current governor/premier (of the state/province where the library is located)?
3. What is the population of Montana?
4. In which state is the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) located?
5. What is the French word for “chiropractor?”

Each week for five consecutive weeks at different times during the business day, the authors called the libraries and asked that week’s question. After receiving an answer, clarification was not requested; the respondents were simply thanked and the call was ended, even in cases in which the answer was known to be incomplete or incorrect. This was done in order to reduce respondent reactivity, assuming that a real questioner would not know the correct answer to his or her question.

RESULTS

Aggregate Results

Of the aggregate 125 reference transactions, 117 (93.6 percent) of the answers provided were correct, 7 (5.6 percent) were incorrect, and the accuracy of 1 (0.8 percent) was unclear. These results represent a much higher frequency of correct answers than most previous researchers have found in their studies of telephone reference service, with previous accuracy rates hovering somewhere within the 50 to 70 percent range.²¹ It is likely that the simple

nature of the questions led to this higher rate of accuracy; were more difficult questions posed (as with most previous researchers), the accuracy rate would probably have been significantly lower. As Hubbertz wrote, “Clearly, the overall score [reference question accuracy rate] is a function of the questions asked: easier questions and the scores go up, harder questions and the scores go down.”²² The questions that were used were real questions that had been asked by real patrons, so perhaps much of telephone reference work involves answering these types of simple questions. (A larger, more formalized study of the common types of telephone ready reference questions would be necessary to be sure.) In any case, this high accuracy rate indicates that, in terms of providing accurate answers, telephone reference can be a successful format for answering simple ready reference questions.

On the other hand, the frequency of source citing was disappointingly low, with complete citations provided just seven times (5.6 percent) out of the 125 total reference transactions, and with partial citations given an additional thirty-one times (24.8 percent), and an incorrect citation given once (0.8 percent). This means that in eighty-six (68.8 percent) of the 125 cases, no source was mentioned whatsoever. These figures are especially poor considering that the authors’ standards for deeming a citation “complete” were relatively low. A “complete citation” was defined as the minimum information required for users to be able to find the information again on their own:

- **For a Web site**—the complete URL (title and sponsor of the site not required).
- **For a digital database**—the database title and the title and year of the specific item (author, publisher, page number not required).
- **For a print resource**—the title and year (author, edition, page number, publisher, and place of publication not required).

Had the authors defined “complete citation” as including all of the elements necessary for inclusion in a formal bibliography, the results would have been much worse; a complete citation rate of 0.0 percent would have been found.

RESULTS BY INDIVIDUAL QUESTION: CITATION FREQUENCY

These results are more meaningful when they are broken down by individual

questions asked. The authors postulated that the easier it would be to answer a question using one’s own personal knowledge, the less likely respondents would be to cite a source. That is, if respondents thought that they knew the answers, they would be inclined to answer based on personal knowledge and there would be no source to cite. Of course, optimal reference practice dictates that librarians verify their own knowledge with an authoritative source.²³ Questioners are not asking librarians if they *know the answers* to the questions; instead, questioners are asking librarians to *locate an authoritative source that contains the answer*.

Thus, the list of five questions was distributed to twenty graduate LIS students who were asked to rank them in order from easiest (a score of “1”) to hardest (a score of “5”) to answer from one’s own knowledge without consulting any type of information resource. The results appear in table 1.

Table 2 shows the frequency of source citing for each of the five questions. The order from the most complete and partial citations given to the least does follow the order of easiest to hardest to answer without consulting a source based on the students’ rankings, although the order of SPLC and the French translation questions are reversed. Closer analysis of the responses to each of the five questions shows some common source citing behaviors among the respondents.

“Can you tell me when Valentine’s Day is?”

Ranked as the easiest of the five questions to answer based on one’s own knowledge, none of the respondents provided full citations, for a 0.0 percent rate of correct citing. Two respondents (8.0 percent) provided incomplete sources, saying that their answers came from *Chase’s Calendar of Events*.²⁴ *Chase’s* is generally considered to be a highly authoritative

Table 1. Difficulty in Answering Without Consulting an Information Resource (1 = easiest; 5 = most difficult) (n = 20)

Question	Mean	Mode	Rank
Can you tell me when Valentine’s Day is?	1.45	1	1
Who is the current governor?	1.80	1, 2	2
In which state is the Southern Poverty Law Center located?	3.25	3	3
What is the French word for “chiropractor?”	3.75	4	4
What is the population of Montana?	4.75	5	5

source for information pertaining to holidays and is therefore an excellent choice for this question. The remaining twenty-three respondents (92.0 percent) provided no source at all, although six of them did respond with either “Let me check” or “Hold, please,” a pause, and then the correct answer. Another said, “Let me check with my coworker” before offering an answer. This indicates that these seven respondents either did not know the answer (unlikely) or wanted to confirm their own knowledge (more likely), yet they still did not reveal their sources to their patrons.

“Who is the current governor?”

Ranked as the second easiest to answer based on one’s own knowledge, none of the respondents offered a complete citation (0.0 percent rate of correct citing). Four others (16.0 percent) provided partial citations, all of which were apparently Web sites or Web pages. Respondents cited: “the governor’s Web site,” “the page for the governors,” “the official [state name] Web site,” and “the [state name] page.”²⁵ One respondent did give the URL of the Web page he accessed; however, the URL he gave was incorrect, for a 4.0 percent rate of incorrect citing. The remaining twenty librarians (80.0 percent) offered no sources for their information. While state government-sponsored Web sites are highly authoritative, up-to-date sources and good choices for answering this question, it is unclear if the official sites were used as no URLs were provided.

“In which state is the Southern Poverty Law Center located?”

The students ranked the question concerning SPLC’s location third in difficulty in answering without any reference sources. For this question, SPLC’s homepage is an authoritative, quickly accessed site, making it the most logical choice to consult in a ready reference situation. Indeed, it was the only source that any of the respondents cited. Two (8.0 percent) offered full citations, including the homepage URL (www.splc.org). Six others (24 percent) gave partial sources, crediting their answers simply to “their Web site” (presumably the SPLC Web site), without providing a URL. The remaining seventeen respondents (68.0 percent) did not provide a source.

“What is the French word for chiropractor?”

Ranked as the fourth easiest to answer based on one’s own knowledge, none of the respondents (0.0 percent) provided complete citations. Seven (28 percent) offered partial citations. Six of these seven respondents offered just the title of a print source, including the *Larousse French-English Dictionary*, *The Collins Robert French Dictionary*, *HarperCollins French Unabridged Dictionary*, *The HarperCollins French-English Dictionary*, *Harrap’s French-English Dictionary*, and *Cassell’s French Dictionary*. The seventh cited “BabbleFish” but did not explain that it was a Web site or provide its URL.²⁶ The remaining eighteen respondents (72 percent) did not offer sources for their answers.

“What is the population of Montana?”

It is not surprising that the student group ranked the question concerning the population of Montana as the hardest to answer without consulting a reference source, as it requires a specific number in response. It seems a logical extension that the combined complete and partial citation rate was markedly higher for this final question. Five respondents (20 percent) offered complete citations. Four cited *The 2005 World Almanac*. The fifth cited *The Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 2004–2005*. Twelve others (48 percent) provided incomplete citations,

Table 2. Citation Frequency

Question	Complete Citation		Incomplete Citation		No Citation		Incorrect Citation	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Can you tell me when Valentine’s Day is?	0	0.0*	2	8.0	23	92.0	0	0.0
Who is the current governor?	0	0.0	4	16.0	20	80.0	1	4.0
In which state is the Southern Poverty Law Center located?	2	8.0	6	24.0	17	68.0	0	0.0
What is the French word for “chiropractor?”	0	0.0	7	28.0	18	72.0	0	0.0
What is the population of Montana?	5	20.0	12	48.0	8	32.0	0	0.0

*Indicates percent of the twenty-five reference interactions involving each question.

including simply “the 2000 Census” (two respondents), *The Almanac for 50 States*, “The U.S. Census Bureau Montana Facts,” “the U.S. Census Web site,” “the U.S. Census Bureau” (two respondents), *The World Almanac* (no year, four respondents), and “my commercial atlas.” One librarian offered two partial citations, *The World Book Encyclopedia* for a United States 2000 census figure, and *World Almanac* for a 2003 population estimate. The remaining eight respondents (32 percent) provided no source at all, even though they almost certainly had to consult some type of information resource in order to produce the correct answer.

RESULTS BY INDIVIDUAL QUESTION: ACCURACY

As stated above, widespread inaccuracy of responses did not prove to be a significant issue in this study. Table 3 shows the number of accurate answers for each of the five questions. The number of total correct answers per question is quite high, ranging from twenty (or 80 percent, for the chiropractor question) to twenty-five (or 100 percent, for both the Valentine’s Day and SPLC questions). In light of these very high levels of accuracy, perhaps source citing is not crucial to ensuring accuracy for relatively simple ready reference questions. On the other hand, users still have no way of judging the authority of answers without knowing the sources, other than relying on the cognitive authority of the librarian as an information expert, and they still are not able to return to the sources for more information or for future queries.²⁷

Some of the incorrect and unclear answers merit discussion. One respondent mispronounced the governor’s name, offering instead a nearly unrecognizable version, and providing no source or spelling.

Another librarian responded to the French translation question with a worried-sounding, “Uh-oh! I hope I can find a French dictionary.” After checking the shelves, she added, “The dictionary I have here is pocket-sized, so there is no entry. You try some other large-sized library, and they will have the unabridged version. OK? Thanks for calling.” She concluded the call without providing an answer or even a referral to another library or source.

For the Montana population question, “correct” answers that were received included 902,195, and 917,621, and 926,865, which are the U.S. Bureau of the Census figures for 2000, 2003, and 2004 respectively; as well as 909,453, which the authors were able to verify with the WorldAtlas.com Web site (a commercial site with questionable

authority and no explanation of the source of its population figures).²⁸

As for the incorrect or unverifiable answers to the Montana population question, one librarian gave the population as 281,421,906, and “the 2003 estimate” as 290,809,777, which are actually figures for the entire population of the United States.²⁹ Another librarian quoted a population figure that was reasonably close to the census figures, but she did not provide a source, and the figure was not able to be verified.

DISCUSSION: ADDITIONAL ISSUES NOT RELATED TO SOURCE CITING

In addition to the infrequency of source citing, a number of other issues related to the RUSA Guidelines and the provision of optimal reference service arose during data collection.

Lost Opportunities to Educate the Public about Information

Not only did the majority of the respondents in this study fail to cite their sources, a large number seemed to have forgotten that they possess a specific “catalog” of *information about information*, knowledge that many members of the public lack in part or in whole. Answers such as “the page for the governors” and “the state page” indicate that

Table 3. Accuracy of Answers

Question	Correct		Incorrect		Unclear	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Can you tell me when Valentine’s Day is?	25	100.0*	0	0.0	0	0.0
Who is the current governor?	24	96.0	1	4.0	0	0.0
In which state is the Southern Poverty Law Center located?	25	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
What is the French word for “chiropractor?”	20	80.0	5	20.0	0	0.0
What is the population of Montana?	23	92.0	1	4.0	1**	4.0

*Indicates percentage of the twenty-five interactions involving each question.

**One respondent offered a population figure for Montana that was reasonably close to figures given on the U.S. Bureau of the Census Web site (www.census.gov) indicating that it might be “correct.” However, the respondent did not provide a source, making it impossible to verify the accuracy of the answer.

the respondents assumed the callers knew about the existence of official state government-sponsored Web sites, an unrealistic assumption for much of the general public. Similarly, the librarian who did not explain that BabbleFish was a Web site or provide its URL for future reference seems to have been crediting a member of the general public with a librarian's wider familiarity with information sources.

Another area of lost opportunity in educating the public about the nature of modern information seems to be these librarians' heavy preference for information in digital form, as opposed to selecting the most authoritative and most easily accessed information based on the particular information needed. In nearly all of the transactions for which the respondent consulted a source, the first reaction was immediately to type something into a computer, even when the information requested likely could have been found more quickly and more easily in a print format.

For example, the authors found it to be much easier and much quicker to answer the chiropractor question using a print French/English dictionary than by searching the Web, yet only six of the twenty-five respondents mentioned having used a print dictionary, and most of these six resorted to print only after repeated Web searches proved unproductive. One librarian even said: "It cannot be translated. I did it through Google. I tried 'chiropractic.' Let me try 'chiropractor.' Oh. It can't be translated." While much information of the highest authority is available in digital format, and often consulting a digital resource is quicker than using a print item, frequently still the quickest and most authoritative information is located in standard print reference tools.

Stuck in the Telephone Labyrinth

When calling the libraries, the authors experienced great frustration with the maze of telephone options within the automated messaging systems at most of the libraries. In many cases, the options were divided according to academic disciplines, but the sample questions did not clearly fall into one of the categories. For example: "Select '1' for a science-related question, '2' for a humanities question, '3' for a business question, and '4' for an education question." Does the question about Valentine's Day fall under science, humanities, business, or education? The authors didn't—and still don't—know.

Some of the telephone navigation systems necessitated making long series of selections, totaling five minutes or more on the telephone just to reach

an actual person. And often, instead of a person, at the end of this frustrating process came a recorded message saying that all staff were busy and the call should be tried again later—thereby requiring the waste of still more time later having to renavigate the same system. A number of times, it was felt that had the calls been placed for personal reasons, rather than for the study, the transaction would have been abandoned without a live person ever having been contacted.

Every Patron Deserves Respect— or Not?

The cavalier attitude of some respondents was another source of frustration. In some of the cases, the respondents seemed to take little interest in the questions; in fact, they didn't seem to think that answering them was worth their time. For example, one respondent's immediate response to the Valentine's Day question was to laugh rudely at the caller. Another snapped, "February 14th!"—obviously annoyed by the question. Still another librarian responded with a terse "Take a look at any calendar," a cumbersome directive for those who do not know which one of the 365 days of the year they are looking for.

Perhaps these respondents felt that the caller "should" have known the answer to such a simple question. However, the original question came from an immigrant who was unfamiliar with the holiday and did not know the month or day in which it occurs. For optimal reference service, a librarian should take all questions seriously and treat each patron with respect. According to the *RUSA Guidelines*, the model reference provider "maintains objectivity and does not interject value judgments about subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction."³⁰ The *Guidelines* further suggest that librarians should exhibit "interest" in all reference queries:

A successful librarian must demonstrate a high degree of interest in the reference transaction. While not every query will contain stimulating intellectual challenges, the librarian should be interested in each patron's informational need and should be committed to providing the most effective assistance. Librarians who demonstrate a high level of interest in the inquiries of their patrons will generate a higher level of satisfaction among users.³¹

Another good example of these cavalier attitudes is one librarian's response to the chiroprac-

tor question. After typing on a computer keyboard for a while, she responded: “My online database of French dictionaries says it’s pretty much the same in French as it is in English.” Then without offering the French pronunciation, the French spelling, or even offering a source for her pronouncement, she said, “OK. Bye-bye.” And then she hung up the phone.

It might be the case that these unpleasant attitudes were due partly to respondents’ being faced simultaneously with face-to-face patrons whose questions they felt were more deserving of responses than those posed by the authors.³² If this was the case, the respondents could have stated that they were busy and offered to return the call (or e-mail) with an answer at a more convenient time. This happened in only one of the 125 cases. In response to the chiropractor question, one librarian explained that she was busy, but that she would be happy to send an e-mail with the answer. The following e-mail answer was received later that same day:

French nouns are usually given by gender. According to the *Larousse French-English/English-French Dictionary* (unabridged edition), there are two male noun spellings for chiropractor: chiropracticien, chiropracteur, and one female noun: chiropracticienne.

Hope that helps.

The citation was incomplete; had the authors been students needing to use this information in a school report, there would not have been enough bibliographic information to include it in a reference list. Nonetheless, the information was accurate and relatively extensive, and the “Hope that helps” tagline made the answer pleasantly personal. As patrons, the authors felt satisfied that this respondent had taken their request seriously and provided useful and authoritative information.

A Firm End to the Librarian’s Willingness to Help

While it was felt that the e-mail response discussed above was a reasonably authoritative, complete, and accurate answer to the authors’ question, the librarian’s lack of an offer for further assistance if needed signaled a firm end to her willingness to help. Gers and Seward’s finding that the use of follow-up questions greatly improves reference efficacy is widely accepted within the reference research literature.³³ The RUSA *Guidelines* suggest that librarians use “open-ended questioning techniques to encourage patrons to expand on the

request or present additional information.”³⁴ But as the e-mail response shows, the study respondents largely ignored this recommendation for best reference practice. In only six (4.8 percent) of the 125 transactions did a respondent offer to locate additional information if necessary.

Are You Sure about That?

The authors were surprised to find that, based primarily on verbal intonation and tag questions, a number of the respondents seemed unsure if the answers they were providing were correct, and yet they still did not seek an authoritative source for verification. For example, a number of the respondents answered the questions with another question. In response to the governor question, one respondent supplied the correct name, but did so as a question (such as, “Charlie Brown?”) as if she were expecting the patron to tell her if she’d gotten a quiz question right. Another asked, “Do you mean other than [the person’s name]?” In a real reference situation, the patron would not know the answer (hence the impetus to call), and consequently would not know if the answer provided was correct. Perhaps this lack of confidence stems from the fact that the respondents lacked confidence in their sources (which in both cases were apparently their own heads), but as they did not cite their sources, it is difficult to know for sure.

Another example of this lack of confidence in their answers is the chiropractor translation question. After giving the translation for the word “aromatherapy” instead of “chiropractor,” one librarian asked the caller, “Does this sound right?”

Librarians—or Not?

In only thirty-one (24.8 percent) out of 125 interactions did respondents identify themselves as librarians, or even as members of the reference staff. The term “librarian” has been used to refer to the study respondents in many places throughout this article, but it could be the case that some of the people with whom the authors spoke were not reference librarians or librarians at all (that is, they did not hold master’s degrees in library science, LIS, or the equivalent). Wilson has argued that certain professions impart cognitive authority based on the education or training necessary to become a member of the profession.³⁵ Librarianship is one such profession. Similarly, many of the students who asked reference questions in Dewdney and Ross’s study were unable to determine who the librarians were at many of the libraries they visited, a fact they found disconcerting.³⁶ The perceived

authority of the answers received by the authors could have been greater if the respondents had identified themselves as librarians or even as reference staff. For the seven libraries that did not have specific reference numbers listed on their Web sites, the authors simply did not know whether they reached members of the circulation staff or other non-reference staff.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the authors concluded that the RUSA *Guidelines* are not being followed in many instances of public library telephone ready reference service, including the source citation rule.³⁷ This lack of adherence to best reference practices was instead replaced by the frequent use of “negative closure” techniques on behalf of the respondents, leading to frustration on behalf of the “patrons.”³⁸ Many times the authors were tempted to hang up and abort the reference process entirely, prevented only from doing so by the exigencies of the study.

The RUSA *Guidelines*

The RUSA *Guidelines* feature five major categories of behaviors intended to increase reference service efficacy and user satisfaction.³⁹ The five categories include approachability, interest, listening and inquiring, searching, and follow-up. Throughout this article, the authors have recounted a number of instances of failure to employ these five behaviors.

In a meticulous quantitative study, Saxton and Richardson confirmed the validity of the *Guidelines*, showing that they really do lead to the best possible reference service.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, this study indicates that, at least in the case of telephone ready reference, the *Guidelines* often are ignored. If libraries are going to continue to offer telephone reference, they need to ensure that these best practices are followed during telephone reference interactions.

Negative Closure Revisited

Ross and Dewdney offer ten “strategies . . . that library staff use to end the reference transaction, apart from providing a helpful answer” that they call “negative closure” techniques.⁴¹ Although it was not the intent of this study to examine the prevalence of these behaviors within the telephone reference format, the respondents were found to have employed five of the ten at least two or more times. These five strategies were:

- **Strategy #1**—“The librarian provides an unmonitored referral,” meaning that the librarian provides a vague starting point and then ends the transaction without any follow-up.⁴² An example from the current study is the “Take a look at any calendar” response, as explained above.
- **Strategy #2**—“The librarian immediately refers the user somewhere else, preferably far away—to another floor within the library itself or to another agency altogether.”⁴³ This strategy primarily took the form of “Hang up and try this number” (the phone number of another part of the library).
- **Strategy #5**—“The librarian warns the user to expect defeat because the topic is too hard, obscure, large, elusive, or otherwise unpromising.”⁴⁴ For example, there is the librarian who immediately responded to the chiropractor translation question with, “Uh-oh! I hope I can find a French dictionary.”
- **Strategy #7**—“The librarian signals nonverbally that the transaction is over by tone of voice, turning away, or starting another activity.”⁴⁵ In many cases, the respondents ended the transactions with a hurried goodbye, precluding the caller from requesting additional or clarifying information.
- **Strategy #9**—“The librarian claims that the information is not in the library or else doesn’t exist at all.”⁴⁶ For example, one librarian responded to the chiropractor translation question by saying, “I don’t have that big French-English dictionary,” and then not bothering to locate another source.

Suggestions for Improving Reference Service

To conclude, the following simple suggestions for improving telephone, face-to-face, and digital reference services are offered, based on the findings from this study:

- List reference department contact information on the library’s homepage, not deep within the Web site, as negative reactions to the “frontpages” of Web sites tend to turn users away from the entire sites.⁴⁷ Also, include telephone reference numbers on “Ask a Librarian” pages.
- Stress the importance of source citing in library in-house reference training, both formal and informal, and in graduate school reference courses as well.
- Remind reference staff that for print resources, standard citation elements include title, author, publisher, and year; and for Web sites,

standard citation elements include title, author (if there is one), and URL.

- Promote the role of reference librarian as information educator. Reference can be more than just providing a correct answer or starting patrons on the path toward finding relevant information; it also can teach users about the nature of information in our modern world.
- Encourage reference staff to select the best resource for each reference question based on the questions themselves rather than automatically relying on any other single source, such as Google (the apparent habitual crutch for many of the respondents).
- Remind reference staff of the value of subscription databases, state and federal government Web sites, and other highly authoritative digital resources.
- Remind reference staff that print resources still sometimes offer the most authoritative and most easily located ready reference answers.
- Simplify telephone routing mazes! While a detailed routing system might save staff some time by not having to transfer calls as frequently, these complicated systems are a barrier to service, especially for users with low levels of education or with language comprehension difficulties.
- Encourage reference staff (and all library staff) to take all patron queries seriously, even if they themselves judge the questions to be simplistic.
- Teach reference staff to make the use of clarifying and follow-up questions habitual. Both are a crucial part of the reference process, even in the case of ready reference.
- Encourage reference staff to identify themselves as such, either with name tags (for face-to-face service), or by stating their job titles (in telephone and digital reference).
- Make the RUSA *Guidelines* available to all reference staff. Also include the *Guidelines* as a resource in basic LIS reference courses.

This study shows that simply providing an accurate answer does not equal good ready reference service. An accurate citation also is important, as is determining that the patron is satisfied with the response. An important part of the reference librarian's role in the digital age is assessing the quality of information, especially digital information. If librarians fail to cite their sources, they miss out on the opportunity to teach users how to assess information quality.

Above all, reference and information service providers should treat all patrons with respect.

Three respondents actually laughed at the authors' questions. Once the caller had to wait to ask her question while the respondent chatted (presumably with a colleague) about the sweater she was wearing. The authors were left feeling that their information needs were trivial, and that the library was not a welcoming institution, feelings that contradict the basic goals of reference service.

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APPENDIX. THE TWENTY-FIVE LARGEST PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA, 2004 (BASED ON POPULATIONS SERVED)

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Los Angeles Public Library 2. Los Angeles Public Library, County of 3. New York Public Library 4. Chicago Public Library 5. Toronto Public Library 6. Brooklyn Public Library 7. Queens Borough Public Library 8. Houston Public Library 9. Miami-Dade Public Library System 10. Broward County Public Library System (Florida) 11. San Antonio Public Library 12. Philadelphia, The Free Library of 13. Orange County Public Library (California) 14. Phoenix Public Library 15. Carnegie Public Library of Pittsburgh 16. San Diego Public Library | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Las Vegas-Clark County Library District 18. Sacramento Public Library 19. Hawaii State Public Library System 20. Harris County Public Library System (Texas) 21. Dallas Public Library 22. King County Library System 23. San Bernardino County Library 24. Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library 25. Providence Public Library |
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From: "Top Fifty Public Libraries in the United States and Canada, 2004," *World Almanac and Book of Facts 2005*, p.705. New York: World Almanac. (*World Almanac* credits these data to: Public Library Data Service, Statistical Report 2004, Public Library Association, as ranked at the end of 2003 fiscal year by population served.)