



Reference Librarianship: Notes from the Trenches

Peter Sprenkle, Charles R Anderson

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A daily diary of actual interactions between a reference desk librarian and his patrons

Reference Librarianship documents a year in the life of a young librarian working in the “trenches” at a library in the Midwestern United States. This one-of-a-kind book provides a daily diary of every librarian/patron transaction—no matter how mundane or absurd—to demonstrate not only how advances in technology have affected the reference librarian’s job, but how the public’s expectations have changed, as well. The book also includes observations by a now-retired reference librarian on the current state of the field based on these unedited interactions.

Over the past two decades, the job of reference librarian has seen many changes. But in many ways, reference desk work hasn’t changed a bit, with its mix of odd, humorous, routine, and ridiculous requests that capture what it’s like to deal with patrons day after day. *Reference Librarianship* paints a clear picture of the field for library school students, provides emotional and philosophical support to practitioners, and reminds library administrators of what life was like on the “front lines.”

A sampling of the daily transactions documented in *Reference Librarianship*:

Monday, May 19, 2003:

- pencil
- pencil
- network down
- I tell people that I can’t sign them up for an Internet terminal because the network is down and they just stand there, staring into space
- One of them asks for three days worth of newspapers
- microfiche machine explanation
- Sorry, Sir, the network is still down (multiply by twenty and insert randomly into the remainder of the day)
- magic tricks, but he pretty much knew where they were
- One of our large interior plate glass windows shattered. No one was hurt and it made a fascinating noise, like a crystal waterfall landing on soil.
- “Books on prostitution, you know—whores?”
- Someone from the County called to ask if any criminal activity had occurred on a particular street.

Someone else referred her to us. She was dubious—with good reason.

- “Math puzzles.” Okay. I show him the books.
- “Just math.” Certainly. I show him the books.
- “I need them in Spanish.” Grrr ...

Reference Librarianship is an enlightening, educational, and entertaining look at the real world of reference desk work. It’s an essential read for reference librarians (both public and academic), library administrators, and library school students, as well as anyone who works with the public.

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