
What's in a Name?

Toward a New Definition of Reference

Anne Houston, RUSA President 2015–16

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Do you refer to yourself as a reference librarian? If so, what does the word reference mean to you? RUSA's members are less often called reference librarians than they were in the past, and they do work that is different from what reference work was once thought to be. Our job titles and duties have changed, and while many of us still do some traditional reference work, the way we go about it is different from it was ten or fifteen years ago. Given this, should we still be called the Reference and User Services Association and use the word "reference" to describe our scope and focus as a group? If not reference, what terminology should we use?

In 2014 we posed this question to our members as part of the survey done by the RUSA Review Task Force. We asked, "Do you think the name Reference and User Services Association clearly describes the scope of the association, or is it time for a name change?" Of the 396 members who responded to the question, 45 percent indicated a preference for retaining the RUSA name. About 30 percent of respondents indicated no opinion on the question. The remaining 25 percent voted for considering a name change. The survey gave the option to leave comments, which ranged from a preference for dropping "reference" from our name in favor of simply "user services" to dropping "user services" entirely as lacking specificity. Suggestions included replacing "reference" with "research" or "resources," though many respondents cautioned against dropping the word "reference" entirely, noting its historical importance in libraries. A few responses mentioned a preference for going back to our former name, the Reference and Adult Services Division (RASD), which was used until fall 1996 when we renamed ourselves as an association in keeping with other ALA divisions, and dropped "adult" from our name to clarify that we serve patrons of all ages (for more about the RASD to RUSA name change, see www.ala.org/rusa/about). Other responses expressed concern that any name change would be expensive to implement and would at least initially cause confusion. In summary, the survey showed no consensus on keeping or changing our name and no groundswell of feeling toward one terminology over another.

The issue was taken up again at RUSA's strategic planning retreat in January 2015. While this discussion was no more definitive than the survey, some participants suggested that RUSA focus on changing the way reference work is defined within libraries and by library patrons rather than looking for new words to describe the work that reference librarians currently do. The word "reference" has strong associations with concrete library places and functions: the reference

desk, the reference collection, and the reference question are all tangible and place-based. As these functions change or disappear should we drop the word “reference,” or can we refresh it through a conversation about the changing nature of our work?

RUSA's Reference Services Section (RSS) last revised our formal definition of reference in 2008 (www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/definitionsreference). The 2008 definition includes two parts, the first focused on the reference transaction:

Reference transactions are information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs. Reference transactions do not include formal instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with locations, schedules, equipment, supplies, or policy statements.

This definition reflects the need that libraries have to quantify or count reference transactions for reporting purposes and also distinguish them from other types of transactions—hence the inclusion of what is not a reference transaction as well as what is. The focus is on a direct one-on-one transaction in which the librarian connects the user to information through recommending, interpreting, evaluating, or actually using a source. The 2008 statement also includes a definition of reference work to distinguish between the transactional and the overall scope of work of reference librarians:

Reference work includes reference transactions and other activities that involve the creation, management, and assessment of information or research resources, tools, and services.

- *Creation and management of information resources* includes the development and maintenance of research collections, research guides, catalogs, databases, websites, search engines, etc., that patrons can use independently, in-house or remotely, to satisfy their information needs.
- *Assessment activities* include the measurement and evaluation of reference work, resources, and services.

This definition includes behind the scenes tasks, acknowledging that librarians also connect users to information by building the tools that they need to find information. It reflects the changing world in which people now predominantly find information on their own without asking for help or needing our intervention, in which our role has evolved to being the creators or managers of information tools used by patrons. The definition also reflects the growing importance of assessment to our field. We are increasingly called on to justify our value through statistics, surveys, and other kinds of data, and we are ourselves interested in whether

our services are effective and how to improve them. Data are easier than ever to collect through online surveys and statistics-keeping tools and most libraries now engage in regular assessment.

The 2008 definition reflected how reference had evolved to that point. A new definition for 2016 should consider how the past decade has changed what our patrons want, need, and ask for, and how we provide it. The past eight years have seen social media become more prominent as a source of information, and there are more options for seeking out and using information for educational or entertainment purposes. Our users are inundated with information but need help with using technology to use information effectively. They are seeking lifelong learning experiences that match their needs. To help our users in this environment, reference librarians use skills that go beyond those included in traditional reference training: these include consulting and advising, teaching, interpreting, advocating, programming, and the ability to analyze the user experience and engage in design thinking. These skills, which have always been useful, are becoming essential to the reference librarian's toolkit:

- *Consulting/advising*: The reference librarian has always been an advisor of sorts, pointing people to the right information to meet their needs. This role has expanded to include advice and consulting services to assist users throughout complex tasks that require managing, formatting, storing, using, or displaying information. We might demonstrate software tools for citation management or recommend the best app for sharing slides. We might help a user locate a place to publish their work, or help them understand the copyright implications of reusing information. We might do all of these things for the same patron throughout the course of completing a project. Where does the reference desk fit into this more complex model of consulting and advising? The decline in reference questions has already shown us that patrons have fewer factual questions and are less in need of the kind of walk-up help that the desk provides. For more in-depth consultations, private spaces that create a safe, quiet environment are preferred.
- *Teaching*: We're becoming a self-service society and people want to learn the tools that enable them to do for themselves. This means that the role of the reference librarian is, more than ever, to teach. Users are particularly in need of life skills related to technology and information management and we are in a unique position to help them learn. The library serves as a neutral, nonjudgmental space for personal enrichment, where learning can take whatever direction the patron needs or wants. This ability to explore at will makes the library different from the classroom and makes the librarian a unique kind of teacher. Teaching can take many forms in the library: it can be planned class sessions, drop-in workshops, one-on-one spontaneous interactions, or

self-learning facilitated by librarian assistance. Librarians need a deep understanding of how people learn, what motivates learning, and how each learner is unique.

- *Interpreting:* Our work requires heightened interpersonal skills and an ability to communicate across an increasingly diverse population. Reference librarians need the analytical skills to recognize how our systems are specific to a unique Western-based library culture and how that culture may be difficult for a user to understand, and to explain culturally bounded systems with patience and understanding. We are translators who explain the library to its external audience. Having been trained in the reference interview, we are already skilled in how to ask the right questions to understand a user's information need. The teaching moment when we communicate back to the user requires skills in translation and interpretation as well as listening skills to ensure that the conversation leads the user to a point where they are comfortable with the advice provided.
- *Advocating:* In this era of social media, front-line staff increasingly serve as advocates for their libraries. Librarians need the skills to speak positively and forcefully within their communities, and to know what not to say, recognizing that the library's image can be negatively as well as positively affected by one's words and actions. Advocating can take many forms. Librarians may choose to use social media tools to build the library's image and support for its programs. They may use daily interactions to build a positive image and rapport with users or speak persuasively at events where they represent the library. Advocacy on behalf of patrons involves working with vendors to improve systems design. Librarians must also be good listeners who hear what users say and know how to respond diplomatically. Either way, front-line librarians are constantly advocating for their libraries and their patrons in one way or another.
- *Programming:* We don't always think of library programming as being a necessary part of reference work, but programming is one of our most effective ways to connect users with information. Programs include workshops, book talks, lectures, displays, and exhibits, all of which are teaching tools and ways to advocate for lifelong learning. Increasingly, reference librarianship requires the skills to create effective programming such as event planning, contract negotiation, space planning, graphic

design, and facilities management. Excellent organizational skills are essential, as is the ability to connect with one's community and understand what programs are most valuable to users and most likely to be worth the investment of time and resources.

- *User experience:* A revised definition of reference should also take into account new ways of looking at assessment that consider the user experience (UX) as foremost in importance. Some librarians are user experience specialists, but a knowledge of UX is essential to all reference librarians. As the front-line staff we are in a unique position to observe where the UX fails and where it can be improved. We also need the ability to talk to UX specialists and application developers about how to design systems that serve user needs—or to become UX designers ourselves.
- *Design thinking:* Design thinking is an iterative approach to problem solving that emphasizes the needs of people and favors rapid prototyping. Design thinking can be used to address almost any problem that requires innovation and encourages local solutions that fit unique user needs. Design thinking encourages creativity and the willingness to explore and is well suited to the rapidly changing environment in today's libraries. Rather than fixed shelving for collections, why not design a collections space that can adapt to changing user interests? Rather than repeating programs from year to year, why not reboot with more flexible options that dynamically evolve on the basis of user feedback? These are just quick examples of what design thinking can achieve.

The skills listed above are complex and challenging and argue for better training and professional development so that reference librarians can fully develop the skills package needed to succeed. By acknowledging the complexity of the work that reference librarians do, we can make a better case for training and resources. RUSA can help by providing more professional development around relevant skills and by developing a new conception of reference that encompasses the challenging nature of our work. RUSA may not need a name change, but it needs to lead a conversation about the evolving role of reference librarians as professionals in an increasingly complex library environment.

If you have opinions on this topic, I would love to hear from you. Feel free to reach out to me at annehouston2@gmail.com.