Topic: Reference, access, and information literacy in an archival setting.

The topic of reference is very important to the archives profession and often doesn't receive as much attention as traditional library reference. Most archivists are introduced to reference in library school and learn techniques and practices that work best for the general questions that a reference librarian will get sitting at the reference desk. But archival reference is quite different and requires a special set of skills in order to best meet inquiries. Description, appraisal, and access policies affect archival reference. Reference transactions and researchers can inform these same archival practices. In short, the principles of access are inextricably bound to archival practices.

First and foremost a reference archivist should be well versed in the materials his or her repository collects and know all the policies and be able to explain these policies. Additionally, the reference archivist will often develop a relationship with the patron as they might spend days, weeks, or months working in the reading room. There is more of a collaborative spirit to archival reference as the archivist stands between the researcher and the materials. Archival reference is further complicated by the fact that users are not always educated about how to conduct primary sources research and are often intimidated about approaching the repository.

I have focused this annotated bibliography in such a way as to cover all the main aspects of
archival reference. I have included seminal works and studies that address topics such as user perceptions of archives and archivists, archival retrieval, primary source research education, information literacy for primary sources, and virtual reference or "e-reference." I have also included works from prominent archival scholars in this area, including Elizabeth Yakel, Mary Jo Pugh, Randall Jimerson, and Paul Conway.

Overall, a consistent theme is that archivists have to be more proactive in educating users and promoting collection use. Also, archivists should engage in user studies more often as a way to assess the needs of their user community.


This is a seminal work by archivist Paul Conway. In this article, Conway explores the unique issue associated with conducting user studies in an archival setting. His argument is that studies on user patterns and behavior are especially important in an archival setting where reference interactions are so varied, but also complex. He also states that the problem archivist have understanding their user populations is "less a problem of will than a problem of method." Conway feels that user studies will benefit repositories and help direct reference programming, descriptive practices, and outreach activities. His method focuses on the following principles: quality, integrity, and value. The archivist must ask questions of their services in terms of these principles to evaluate how well archivists meet user need and balance other responsibilities and concerns inherent in the job. He also offers professional archivists practical ways to begin studying their users by using tools such as a reference log, orientation worksheet, and a registration book. The article is very practical to implement and includes sample questionnaires.
and surveys. The practical element combined with the theoretical discussion of the issues facing reference archivists make this article extremely useful for professionals looking to begin a user study.


This paper reveals the results of a content analysis study that considered hundreds of reference emails from varying archival repositories for information on how users seek information. The authors operate from the assumption that archival materials are described and arranged based on archivists' perceptions rather than researcher perceptions. The study is well presented and their literature review is excellent. The authors also do a good job of describing the inherent complexities of e-reference in an archival setting and how there are certain disadvantages from not speaking with users over the phone or in person. They argue that the goal of archival description and access is to allow for researchers to work as independently as possible. This may be an overstatement and while I do think it is important, a researcher will always have to work with someone to a certain extent. They would do well to try to find common ground between the researcher and archivist, as Yakel and others have put forth. Overall, this study is quite good and is an excellent starting point and methodology from which other professionals can begin to assess the user needs of their organization.


In this article, Jimerson outlines the reasons why knowing your user community is the most important aspect of running a successful archival or manuscript repository. On his view, all the work that archivists do is to promote use and to make use as easy as possible. He argues that
archivist need to maintain physical as well as intellectual control over collections. Both of these aspects aid in the reference process. Successful reference transactions begin, for Jimerson, with a solid understanding of the user population; how and why they use collections, the language they use to ask questions, and how they learn about a repository's holdings are essential bits of information for an archivist. This piece is a brief overview of the importance of user assessment and the myriad ways access is requested by users. He also adds a brief discussion about how the Internet age is affecting access. In short, this paper outlines the importance of assessment and calls for a large scale study of archives and manuscripts users.


This is an excellent study of remote reference transactions that responds to the earlier cries for archives to do more to understand their user community. The author analyzes reference requests sent via email, mail, fax, and phone as a way to make suggestions for how archivists and repositories can improve upon reference services as a way to meet the needs of remote users. Martin points out that there has been a dramatic shift from in-person to remote reference transactions with most requests happening over the Internet or the phone. Very few remote users ever enter the physical space and this complicates the reference transaction. However, this seems to be the way archives are heading so archivists need to be prepared to meet the needs of users, no matter what form the transaction takes. Not only are more users contacting repositories via email and never setting foot in the building, the Internet has also created a larger variety of users. This new class of user also brings a new type of information seeking behavior that Martin is at her best when she describes this new type of user. Overall, this is an excellent article both for its presentation of findings and history on the subject, but also for the practical suggestions that
author provides through her analysis of the findings. In the end there is not one simple method, but she isolates the aspects of remote reference that archivists must not overlook in order to meet research requests. In doing this, Martin is able to predict certain trends about the future of archival reference. Even though this article was written almost a decade ago it remains relevant and sets a repository in the right direction to focus reference services.


Mary Jo Pugh is perhaps the most well-known and important voice in the archival reference discussion. She has written widely on the subject and has an acute understanding of what makes archival reference different than traditional library reference and how archivists need to learn a unique set of skills to meet user needs. This article, written in 1982, is an important work that all reference archivist should be familiar with. Here she outlines the foundational differences between library and archives reference and specifically Pugh isolates "subject access" as the main difference between the two. Subject access is primarily the way libraries are organized and primarily the way patrons approach information. But archives are arranged according to provenance and subject alone is rarely an affective way to access materials. Pugh argues that archival methodology of appraisal and arrangement further complicate the reference transaction and that what is required to mediate between the patron and the material is a highly-skilled reference archivist. For Pugh, a reference archivist should have firsthand knowledge of a repository's holdings in order to best assist researchers. She also argues that current (for 1982) arrangement and other practices do not consider how users access materials. As in other articles, Pugh suggests conducting user studies as a way to glean information about how to organize and describe materials. She is most successful in guiding this process by isolating the key features of
archival reference that make it such a difficult and essential part of archival practice.


In this article Ruth critiques archival education and how there is little attention given to the unique nature of archival reference. While this article is rather dated, her criticism is still valid. Through a content analysis of existing materials on the subject she argues that the skill and expertise needed of a reference archivist is rarely mentioned. On her view, the important personal traits and unique aspects of archival reference are glossed over in favor of general statements that do little to describe the issues facing a reference archivist. Ruth also suggests conducting user studies and is in favor of the survey method and is adamant that understanding how and why users approach archives is essential in order to craft reference services. Additionally, this article contains a thorough overview of information literacy and how archivists often assume that patrons know more than they actually do. This line of thinking meshes well with her overall theme that archivists need to be better trained to address the unique and varied reference requests that they will surely encounter.

**Yakel, E. (2004). Information Literacy for Primary Sources: Creating a New Paradigm for Archival Researcher Education. OCLC Systems and Services, 20 (2), 61-64.**

Like Mary Jo Pugh, Elizabeth Yakel is a well-known and respected expert on the topic of archival reference and archives-specific information literacy. In this article she tackles the current situation facing archivists: online users. More than this, she addresses how online access has changed the way users approach information and has in some cases completely eliminated the archivist as a mediator. Her argument rests on the assumption that archivists have not developed guidelines for teaching primary source information literacy. Yakel thinks that
archivists need to do more to teach users about using primary sources so that they are able to get the most from the material. Yakel maintains that archival research requires a different set of skills than traditional library/book research. Echoing Pugh, she states that the subject access paradigm is not an effective means of conducting research on primary sources. Her literature review is excellent and includes works of psychology and behavioral science. She concludes with a call to action from archivists to ask more probing questions of their user communities and to conduct assessment that gets at the essential information literacy required in order to conduct successful primary source research.


As a way to compliment the other piece from Yakel described here, I selected a qualitative study she published around the time of her article OCLC Systems and Services. In this study, Yakel attempts to understand how users perceive archives, archival research, and reference archivists. Her main argument is that users know very little about archives as profession and reference archivists make assumptions about the expertise and experience of their users. In short, both sides are in the dark about the other. Yakel collected interviews from undergraduate students and professional scholars all of whom were based in or used the University of Michigan archives and manuscript repositories. While, the sample is rather small the information is quite enlightening and those with experience in archival reference will recognize similar patterns and ideas as expressed by those in this study. Yakel concludes that in order to remedy the disparity between archivists and users common ground must be sought. It is her view that the archivist has to make the first gesture in this direction and not miss a single opportunity to educate users. For Yakel, archivists must do a better job of listening to reference requests and not assume that users understand the language and schemes that we use to describe and arrange materials.

In this paper, Zhou observes students' archival research activities over one semester at the Bentley Historical Library. The purpose of the study is to examine the role of classroom instructors and reference archivists in shaping students' engagement and thus understanding of primary sources. Zhou also investigates the needs of students in archival research and how they approach materials. The results not only provide insight into the needs of student researchers but the role of reference archivists in guiding and assisting students. Zhou is most helpful in tracing the process of research for the typical undergraduate student. It begins, for Zhou, with the classroom instructor who describes archives and primary source research. This first step dictates how well-prepared or not the student will be when he or she reaches the archives. Their first encounter is called "archival orientation" and as the site at which the expectations set by the instructor meet (or collide with) the archival world. The instructors and their critical role in managing expectations and setting standards for information seeking behavior is an interesting point of view not considered in much of the other literature. Students in Zhou's study often complained that they would have benefited from more preparatory time in the classroom before being sent off to the archives. Zhou reveals other insights about the archival exchange once the initial reference interview is over and the role the archivist plays in assisting researchers. But the defining insight of the study is the description of the role of the instructor and the possible ally that archivists have to aid in improving information literacy.