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Striving for Success: Practical Advice for Reference Graduate Assistants (and Other New Reference Providers)

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Introduction

With a little reflection, most librarians can recall the excitement, anticipation, and fear that filled their early days at the reference desk*:*

> *"What will people ask me?"*

> *"What if I don't know how to help someone?"*

> *"What do I need to do to be successful?"*

Many librarians first experienced this emotional turbulence while working as graduate assistants (GAs) in academic library reference departments. Although demanding, working as a reference graduate assistant yields many benefits. An assistantship introduces participants to basics of reference librarianship like customer service, search techniques, and teamwork. Assistantships also help students get their foot in the door of the profession by giving them practical experience that can boost their employment prospects. Furthermore, participants profit greatly from networking with librarians who can offer guidance and encouragement. In view of the potential rewards and challenges of assistantships, we seek to provide current GAs with practical advice that can turn their assistantships into a successful debut into the field of reference.

 In reading about graduate assistants at reference desks, we discovered that LIS graduate students help provide reference service in many American academic libraries. For example, one survey of thirty-six reference departments at universities with MLIS programs found that twenty-six of the departments employed GAs, and eighty-seven percent only hired LIS graduate

assistants.[5] LIS schools sometimes encourage their students to work in reference departments to expand the students' hands-on knowledge, and numerous academic libraries gladly accept the additional labor provided by the GAs. For their part, LIS graduate assistants often seek out positions in reference departments on their campuses because they have hopes of launching a career in information services. Thus, all parties benefit from the arrangement.

While several articles focus on the role of the supervising librarian in these reference assistantships, very few authors concentrate on graduate assistants. In one article, Qi Wu stresses that both the supervisor and the LIS student must work hard toward mutual ends in order to achieve a "win-win" situation. If one party lacks a full commitment, the assistantship will founder:

Graduate assistants may not come into the position with the right kind of motivation, or are not sufficiently motivated while on the job, and thus may not be as committed as much, or perform as well as expected. Sometimes the library is not able to provide the best environment or training program for them to develop in the ways they deserve. When either party is not investing enough, this partnership is doomed to fail despite its perceived glory. This dichotomy will result in the sub-standard services provided by the graduate assistants, the negative impact on patron perception of the library, and

a mutually unsatisfying relationship between the graduate assistants and the library.[6]

Although written for supervisors, Wu's article highlights the responsibility of students in helping to achieve a successful outcome. Supervising librarians have an obligation to create a sound training program, but graduate assistants must put forth their best efforts as well.

While Wu and other authors call attention to the necessity of initiative on the part of GAs, few articles supply advice to GAs about how to actually work at a reference desk. GAs need advice on how to negotiate goals with supervisors to ensure that they have a structured experience tailored to their professional aspirations. They must also grasp the importance of communication, openness to learning, and proactive efforts during their rite of passage into reference. In addition, they should know timesaving techniques for learning the basics of electronic and print searching. Most importantly, they need tips on how to treat patrons and build rapport with librarians and other staff. The present article addresses the scarcity of this advice in the professional literature.

While supervising librarians often have years of experience from which to draw advice, it is also helpful to take into account the perspectives of recent graduates who can readily identify with the challenges facing current GAs. Accordingly, the majority of us worked as graduate assistants in the Information Center of the Amelia Gayle

[5] Kay Womack and Karen J. Rupp-Serano, "The Librarian's Apprentice: Reference Graduate Assistants," *Reference Services Review* 28, no. 2 (2000): 121-122.

[6] Qi Wu, "Win-win strategy for the employment of reference graduate assistants in
 academic libraries," *Reference Services Review* 31, no.2 (2003): 141.

Gorgas Library at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa during the 2002-2003 academic year. In partnership with the Gorgas Library, the University's School of Library and Information Studies offers its GAs the chance to work in various library departments each year. The Information Center's graduate assistant program has characteristics similar to graduate assistant programs at other libraries.[7] GAs provide basic reference service and carry out routine clerical duties. Occasionally, GAs may co-teach a library instruction session or design a web page, but reference service is the heart of the GAs' experience.

Along with our former supervisor, we draw upon our GA experiences at the Gorgas Library to offer counsel for current or prospective GAs in other reference departments. Many of these tips will also assist new reference librarians, interns, and paraprofessionals. While some readers have perhaps already completed a course in reference theory, we can add many unique and practical ideas that will help them learn reference in an on-the-job environment. We hope that GAs and their trainers will find our suggestions creative, helpful, and even fun!

Tips for Reference Graduate Assistants

1. **Join forces with your supervisor in planning your assistantship.** Participating in a graduate assistantship differs from taking a formal course that has a syllabus set by the professor; instead, you must take an active role in devising the plan for your work. Here are the

three basic parts of planning for a successful assistantship:

- **Goal-setting**

Negotiate with your supervisor at the *very beginning* of your assistantship to ensure that you have clear, reasonable goals--don't wait until mid-semester to clarify a vague expectation. As a new worker, you have the right to know your supervisor's exact expectations and have these ideas put on paper. In a reference department, you will tend to set service goals rather than productivity goals. Fortunately, you don't have to start from scratch when developing a set of goals because the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) has already established benchmarks for quality reference service known as the "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals."[8] In collaboration with your supervisor, tailor the guidelines to your specific library. RUSA's advice reflects the opinions of thousands of librarians about what makes up top-notch reference service. Thus, if you succeed in providing reference according to these tried-and-true principles, you will develop a style that will win you praises at your current library as well as the library where you will work in the future.

- **Training Program**

[7] Womack and Serano, "Apprentice," 119-129.

[8] Reference and User Services Association, "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals," http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/guidelinesbehavioral.htm (accessed March 18, 2004).

Training equips you with the skills to accomplish your goals. While you'll definitely learn a great deal from your reference desk experiences, you'll also want to allocate an hour or more to training each week. Your supervisor may have training activities planned for you, or you can use some of the self-teaching ideas in this article as a guide. In addition, you might want to "audit" a few instruction sessions taught by librarians at your school to find out about important resources in your collection and how to use them. In planning your regimen, emphasize *progress* rather than *mastery*. For example, an overly ambitious training program might seek to attain a searching mastery of all of the library's databases by the end of the semester. A more realistic training program would aim for an increased skill in searching a few specified databases.

- **Evaluation**

Your supervisor will evaluate you on how well you accomplish your goals. Since you will likely work on the reference desk with multiple librarians, ask your supervisor to ensure that these librarians know your goals and participate in your final evaluation. Involving several librarians in an appraisal of your work will assure you of a balanced, fair evaluation by minimizing personality factors and individual differences. You and your supervisor should also discuss whether you'll receive grades on each of your goals or only a letter of reference describing your accomplishments. At any rate, mapping out your goals, training, and evaluation at the start of your reference journey will chart a clear-cut and realistic course for success.

2. Be a humble apprentice

One of the best practices to follow as a rookie to the reference desk is *to actively learn from more experienced librarians*. You will find that most librarians will gladly let you tag along with them as they assist people. This "shadowing" offers an invaluable way to learn about serving patrons as well as the tools available to you. By watching at an unobtrusive distance, you will witness the verbal and non-verbal interaction that happens during the reference interview and see which sources librarians actually use. If possible, shadow more than one librarian so that you can pick up different search strategies from each.

Know your limitations. As an eager pre-professional, you may want to tackle all the questions that come your way. However, even after you become familiar with common sources, you'll encounter questions that you just cannot answer well. In these cases, always ask a librarian who knows more. Your patron deserves the most accurate and informed answer possible! Remember that even experienced librarians know when to call upon someone with more specialized knowledge. From our own experience, here are a few types of reference questions that you should ask librarians for help with:

- Questions that you have worked on for 10 minutes and have not made any progress toward finding the answer.
- Questions that involve the use of unfamiliar resources.
- Questions that you are unsure of how to even start.

In addition to consulting librarians for help with reference questions, elicit daily informal feedback from librarians throughout the semester by asking

questions like "how would you have handled that reference question?" Asking for frequent feedback will let you know how well you are realizing your dream of becoming a stellar reference librarian. It will also help you earn a great letter of reference by spotlighting weak areas in your service and giving you a chance to improve well before your final evaluation.

3. Find a mentor.

While many reference librarians can help you refine your searching style, you will also want to connect with a librarian who can offer professional guidance. Seek out a mentor—someone who can advise you on what classes to take, how to write an effective resume and cover letter, what to do during an interview, and how to thrive in your first professional job. Some students prefer a fairly new librarian as a mentor because they feel that these librarians can better relate to a student's needs and offer more relevant advice. Others feel that older, more experienced librarians make wiser mentors and "know the ropes." In either case, you will discover that many librarians will gladly build a relationship with you and help you over hurdles that they have already cleared. A mentor can bestow reference advice as well as encouragement, consolation, and often friendship during your assistantship and beyond.

4. Keep a journal.

Keeping a journal provides another effective technique for maximizing your learning during your trial run in reference. Log unusual or challenging reference queries (as well as questions that you have about procedures) in your journal each week and share these with your supervisor as well as two or three other librarians. This debriefing technique allows you to tap into librarians' knowledge by seeing how

they handle the tough questions. A journal can also prepare you for professional job interviews by reminding you of notable anecdotes that you can recount to a search committee (such as a time when you defused a difficult patron or nailed the answer to a particularly hard reference question).

5. Develop flowcharts for common reference queries.

As you begin your reference work, you will probably feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of resources and wonder where to start searching when a patron poses a question. Ask librarians to help you devise flowcharts for common reference requests so that you will know how to launch your searches. Starting with a broad question that you might ask a patron, flowcharts steer you to appropriate resources by grouping the resources according to the type of information they offer (biographies, book reviews, primary sources, secondary sources), the level of information needed (consumer, scholarly or reference), or by the time periods covered in each resource. For example, the flowchart in Figure 1 offers a plan of action for finding historical information.

6. Create a "Quick Guide" for Databases.

We also found it helpful to build a table comparing databases that can serve as a "quick guide" whenever you need to know the Boolean operators, truncation and wildcard symbols, limiters, and any other searching features for a database. Librarians may have already created tip sheets for each database, and most databases do offer extensive help menus that you can browse through. However, a handy chart listing just the basics of each resource can quickly give you pointers during a search. Plus, the

act of creating such a guide orients you to the databases. A word of caution: databases constantly change in today's highly-wired world. While librarians often receive emails when the library purchases new databases or changes occur to existing databases, students are often left out of the loop. Ask your supervisor to forward these emails to you.

7. Make a list of "magic" words.

In stepping out onto the stage of reference services for the first time, we sometimes feel like magicians trying to pull information out of a hat, particularly when searching OPACs for specific types of information such as primary sources, literary criticism, pictures, or speeches. Compiling a list of "magic words," or cataloging descriptors that can be used as keywords in searches, will help you conjure up the call numbers for these kinds of materials. Some of the most common descriptors found in catalogs include:

- **Sources, accounts, or memoirs** for primary sources in history
- **Criticism** for literary criticism
- **Ill.** for illustrations
- **Speeches, orations, or addresses** for speeches.

Ask librarians for help in developing a list for your library since cataloging descriptors vary from place to place.

8. "Memorize" your library's classification system.

Perhaps the easiest way of learning to navigate the reference collection is by memorizing the broad headings of the Library of Congress Classification System. Relax, though--you do not have to memorize every subdivision (just the broad headings), and learning the classification scheme can be fun if you

use a memory aid like the one found in Figure 2. After you master the subject headings, you will have the ability to walk to an appropriate section of the reference stacks, scan the shelves, and retrieve relevant books for a patron. Just imagine how you'll dazzle patrons by laying your finger on just the right information without even going through an OPAC search! In our experience, knowing the Library of Congress headings has proven much more effective than trying to remember the physical location of reference books since most libraries shift their books periodically. By learning the standard classifications, you will also gain knowledge that you can apply across libraries, including the library where you will work after graduation.

9. Hone in on the library's key reference books.

A select few of the reference books in your library will answer most of the questions that you receive. In consultation with experienced librarians, identify these key tools and write their titles on separate note cards along with the scope and searching tricks for each book. Remember, the title of a reference book often fails to reflect the full range of information within the book, so make special note of any content that is not obvious at first glance. Another not-so-obvious point for newcomers to reference: make sure you remember the *exact* titles of sources so that you can plug the title in the catalog and pull up the call number. Otherwise, you will find yourself leading a patron on a wild goose chase looking for that big orange book that you just know has the answer! During your assistantship, note reference questions that you see answered by each book on the back of the respective note card. Tracking how librarians use a reference book at your particular library will help you garner practical knowledge about the title--instead of just the generalized,

theoretical understanding that comes from a formal reference course.

10. Stay on top of the nitty-gritty work.

While you will concentrate on learning reference during your fieldwork, you will also have to perform various clerical duties, such as re-shelving books or replenishing paper in printers, during slow times at the desk. Don't think that these activities are beneath you! Make these chores a priority, and ask your supervisor to create a checklist of duties so you won't be left guessing about what to do. Offer to re-shelve reference books as this activity will acquaint you with the collection, especially the books that your library's patrons use the most. Also, to add a really nice touch to your work, ask librarians if they have any work that they want you to do as soon as they arrive for their shifts. Avoid letting personal work interfere with your desk duties (even if you see undergraduate workers doing homework). Overall, take responsibility for whatever happens in the reference area and strive to make the place run as smoothly and efficiently as possible. Identify any problems, like low toner in a printer, and fix them before they impede patrons.

11. Be a missionary—not a Buddha
Instead of sitting at the desk like a wise Buddha, waiting for pilgrims to come to you, put on your missionary hat, go out to your patrons, and zealously "save" them from their information problems. Many times, patrons do not know who to approach for questions or think librarians are too busy to help them. For this reason, the Reference and User Services Association suggests that librarians should "rove through the reference area offering assistance

whenever possible."[9] Don't ignore your desk duties by wandering around the stacks for long periods of time. However, do take the time to scout around a bit and look for patrons who need help, perhaps at a consistent time each hour. Try to make eye contact with patrons and look for red flags that might reveal confusion or bewilderment. Wear an identifying badge if your library offers one, and cue the other staff about your intentions whenever you leave the desk to rove.

12. Ask, listen, and consult students' assignments.
As we learned (sometimes the hard way), newcomers to reference often overlook a vital part of the reference transaction, the reference interview. The reference interview means asking a patron plenty of questions, both before and during your search, to discern what they need. Developing a personal set of questions, perhaps similar to the newspaper writers' list of who, what, where, when and why, can keep your searches from going astray.

However, the reference interview question that we recommend the most is: "Can I see your assignment?" This simple shortcut often saves a great deal of time and frustration for both you and the student. When explaining their reference requests, students often overlook a key element of the assignment. For example, a patron may say that they need articles on heart disease and so you find articles from *Time* and *Newsweek*. Then, the patron suddenly remembers that the articles should come from scholarly journals so you must go back to start anew. Simply asking for the assignment at the beginning of the conversation speeds up the searching process.

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[9] RUSA, "Guidelines," "Approachability," Point 1.7.

13. Coach your patrons along in their searches.

When helping a patron with a search, try to coach and let the patron do the actual page-flipping or mouse-clicking. Simultaneously searching two computers (or two different volumes from the same series of reference books) with them offers the best way to train patrons. Explain each step of the research process as they work their way along, instead of giving multiple instructions at one time (people often only remember the last suggestion you made). Pump up your patron's searching confidence with cheers like "great idea" or "you are really getting the hang of this!" Point out the help screens and tip sheets. Before you leave them, ask what they intend to try next and redirect their search if needed. Always end the scrimmage by encouraging the patron to return for more help if they need it, and ask them to let you know what they find before they leave. This follow-up communicates to the patron that you have a strong interest in their success, lets you see whether your suggestions worked, and (if you are like so many of us) allows you to share that fantastic idea that you had right after the patron left the reference area.

As a library coach, you should take pleasure in the opportunity to help patrons develop research skills that will benefit them throughout their lives. As former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once said, "You cannot live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you."[10] That truism brings us to our next point.

14. Keep the Patron Paramount

[10] Michael Moncur, "The Quotations Page," Quotations by Author: John Wooden," accessed on July 28, 2004, at http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/John_Wooden/.

Even though you might have taken an assistantship to further your career, remember that your ultimate obligation is to the patrons at your library. As a reference provider, you have the responsibility for corralling a dizzying array of library resources (catalog, reference books, databases, web sites) into meeting the unique needs of each person who approaches you for help.

Remember, even if you cannot find the answer to a question, you will please many patrons if you serve them in a gracious, well-mannered way and go the extra mile for them. *Friendliness and helpfulness* are the keys to a successful assistantship and professional career. While it may seem trite, remember to pepper your conversation with polite words like "thank you" and "please." Also, learn to discern your patron's underlying needs and exceed their expectations. If you help a patron find literary criticism, go a step further and point out an MLA handbook so they can cite their sources. If you help a patron find a book for a seminar, volunteer to show them how to find reviews of the book as well. In essence, apply the Golden Rule to reference by treating people in a way that you would like to be treated during an information search. If you have a wholehearted desire to help people, your attitude will shine through in all that you do for patrons.

Conclusion:

If you are an LIS student participating in a reference assistantship, you should realize that the success of the experience lies in your own hands. The partnership that you forge with your supervisor and the proactive approach that you take toward learning provide a firm foundation for success. As a new reference provider, you should also strive to develop flowcharts, memory aids, and other personal strategies that can guide your initial searches. Bear in

mind that searching skills seem very important, but people skills—such as reference interviewing and good communication—rank equally high in importance.

Most importantly, don't panic because you don't know everything right away. Help the patron to the very best of your ability and then refer them to someone who knows more. Stay and watch the rest of the reference transaction so that you can learn from a seasoned reference professional. To sum up using one last analogy, you will sometimes find yourself in a sink or swim situation during your assistantship. While we have shown you some basic strokes, always feel free to call the "lifeguard," the reference librarian, who can save you and the patron from getting in over your heads in a search.

Please view the assistantship as a learning experience: becoming a good librarian does not happen overnight. However, by taking our experience into account, you will surprise yourself at how much you can accomplish during your first stint at a reference desk. Along with working side-by-side with librarians, our tips will help you forge a real-world reference skill-set and accelerate your growth as a librarian. Reflecting back on our experiences, we have found that our assistantships helped not only develop search skills but also establish a lasting professional rapport with other librarians and each other.

Although GAs can use the tips in this article as part of self-teaching efforts, supervisors can also apply our ideas in their training program to create a "win-win" situation for themselves and their
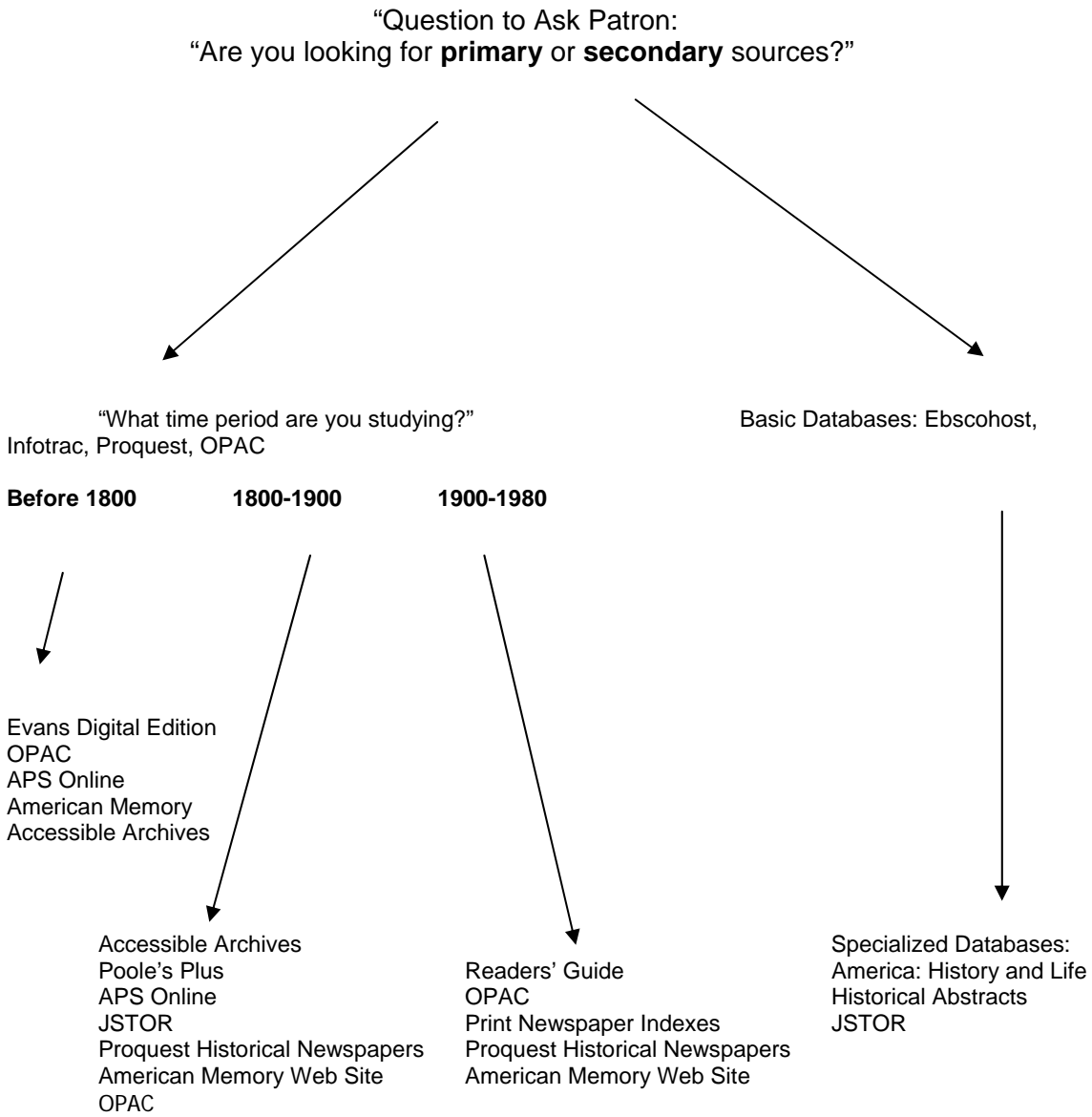
GAs as Wu suggested.[11] Everyone—students, supervising librarians, and LIS faculty--should remember that an investment in a graduate assistantship is an investment in the future. GAs will blossom into the reference librarians who will lead the profession in meeting the needs of patrons in the twenty-first century. Most librarians would agree on the necessity of working on the frontline in mastering reference service: earning an MLIS degree without any practical experience leaves students woefully unprepared for providing reference in the real world. Developing foundational search skills and establishing sound service precedents are vital tasks that librarians, students, and all others concerned should approach with sincerity.

As a profession, we should focus greater efforts on nurturing new reference providers. Conference forums or special journal issues might help call more attention to the training of graduate assistants or interns. LIS faculty should also encourage greater numbers of students to take assistantships in libraries. Finally, more reference librarians who have recently mastered the trade themselves should share their experiences with graduate assistants, interns, and new reference professionals—the often overlooked voices of the library profession.

Special Note: The authors originally presented this paper as a poster session at the Alabama Library Association Conference in Mobile, AL, in April 2003, and as a poster session at the American Library Association Conference in Orlando, FL, in July 2004.

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[11] Wu, "Win-Win," 141.

Figure 1: A Flowchart for History Topics

"Question to Ask Patron:
"Are you looking for **primary** or **secondary** sources?"

"What time period are you studying?"
Infotrac, Proquest, OPAC

Basic Databases: Ebscohost,

Before 1800   **1800-1900**   **1900-1980**

Evans Digital Edition
OPAC
APS Online
American Memory
Accessible Archives

Accessible Archives
Poole's Plus
APS Online
JSTOR
Proquest Historical Newspapers
American Memory Web Site
OPAC

Readers' Guide
OPAC
Print Newspaper Indexes
Proquest Historical Newspapers
American Memory Web Site

Specialized Databases:
America: History and Life
Historical Abstracts
JSTOR

**Backtracking:
Remember that one of the best ways to find primary sources is to find
relevant secondary sources—and then look in the bibliographies for primary
sources.**

Caption: Starting with a broad question that you might ask a patron, flowcharts steer
you to appropriate resources by grouping the resources according to the type of
information that they offer. This flowchart is based on resources available at the Gorgas
Library. You will want to consult librarians for help in creating a customized flowchart for
your library.

Figure 2: Library of Congress Memory Aid

A=Anything (general works, encyclopedias, almanacs)

B=Bible (religion, psychology, supernatural, philosophy)

C=Classical Stuff (auxiliary sciences of history such as classics, archaeology, genealogy, heraldry, archival science, civilization, biography)

D=Datelines (history of Europe, Asia, Africa, Gypsies)

E=E Pluribus Unum (general U.S. history)

F=For every other kind of history (history of U.S. localities, Canada, and Latin America)

G=Geography (atlases, anthropology, fashion, costume, human culture, holidays, sports)

H=How Society Works (sociology, social statistics, social work, criminal justice, women's studies, social pathology, social classes)

J=Jurisdictions (political science and government)

K=Kourts (Law)

L=Learning (preschool-college education)

M=Music

N=Fine Arts (artists, painting, drawing, architecture, pottery, antiques, handicrafts)

P=Poetry and Stuff (language and literature)

Q=Quest for Knowledge (hard sciences)

R= Rx (medicine)

S=Seeds (agriculture)

T=Technology

U=Uniforms (army, air force)

V=Voyages (navy, marines, coast guard, shipping)

Z=Bibliographies and Librarianship

Caption: A memory aid like this one can help you remember the Library of Congress subject headings. The authors would like to credit Barbara Dahlbach, Reference Librarian at the Gorgas Library, for giving us the idea for this memory aid.

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Further Reading

The professional literature offers few current articles tailored to the needs of reference graduate assistants. The following list highlights older works about GAs, studies of the role of supervisors, and articles about interns, student workers, and new reference librarians that might have some applications for current GAs.

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