Negative Closure
Strategies and Counter-Strategies in the Reference Transaction

In this paper, we analyse accounts of the experiences of one hundred M.L.I.S. students who visited a library of their choice and asked a question that mattered to them personally. The focus of analysis is on the ways in which the reference transaction was brought to an end, apart from providing the user with an acceptable answer. We argue that the commonly observed problems of bypassing the reference interview, failure to ask a followup question, and unmonitored referrals occur when the primary goal of the library staff member is to satisfy system demands by moving on to the next question. Analysis focuses on ten strategies of “negative closure” that library staff use to end the reference transaction and eleven counter-strategies that users employ to prevent the reference transaction from being terminated before an acceptable answer is found.

Using Hermon and McClure’s 55-percent rule, which states that reference librarians on average provide correct answers to only 55 percent of the questions they’re asked, it is plausible to hypothesize that some unrecognized but stable explanatory factor accounts for the stubborn persistence of this relatively low success rate. The troublesome fact remains that whether we examine public, academic, or special libraries, or whether we measure reference success by accuracy of the answer or by willingness of the user to return, the success rate for information service hovers in the 50 to 60 percent range.

The explanation for this high rate of reference failure is not that the library profession lacks knowledge about what makes for an effective reference transaction. We know that a well-conducted reference interview and the strategic use of the followup question are factors strongly associated with a successful reference transaction. Ger’s and Seward’s report of the Maryland study confirmed the crucial role in the reference transaction of the followup question (e.g., “If this isn’t it, get back to me and we can try something else”) and concluded that the followup question “may be the single most important behavior because it has the potential for allowing one to remedy lapses in other desirable behaviors.” We also know that the unmonitored referral more often than not results in reference failure. Murfin and Bunge determined that a factor strongly associated with underperformance is the unmonitored referral, a situation in which the reference librarian gives the patron a call number or refers the patron to a source within the library but makes no effort to check that the source is ever found or, when found, actually answers the question. In the five libraries Murfin and Bunge studied, the average success rate dropped from 69 percent to 22 percent when the librarian was busy and therefore made suggestions that were not followed up.

In short, the elements of a successful reference transaction are well known: they have been thoroughly discussed in the library literature; are taught in programs of library and information science; are the subject of training programs and workshops; and are the focus of methods to evaluate reference performance.


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What Happened to the Reference Interview?

So why are these well-known skills of using welcoming body language, asking open questions in a reference interview, using the followup question, and monitoring referrals not universally practiced? Why do transactions such as the one reported below still routinely occur in academic and public libraries? The following example was reported by a MLIS student who was completing a practical assignment routinely given in an introductory information sources and reference services course in the Graduate Program of Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario. Early in the course, students were to visit a library of their choice and ask for help from the reference staff in finding an answer to a question of personal interest. As part of the assignment, the students completed a questionnaire evaluating various dimensions of their reference experience, including their willingness to return to the same librarian. They also were instructed to “write an account of what happened, step-by-step, when you went to the library to ask your question. Include everything you did, said, and thought as well as everything that others said and did.” (We have written a full report of the study of seventy-seven library visit transactions, its methodology, and findings, in an article entitled “Flying a Light Aircraft.”) The following account described what happened when one of the students visited a branch of a public library:

At the desk, I asked, “I was wondering if you could help me find some information about degenerative muscle diseases.” The librarian reacted to my question by grimacing somewhat. She was not responding in a negative way, but rather in a way [that] indicated that this question would be tricky. She did not comment at all however, which I found rather awkward. She began typing at her monitor and continued to type quite a long time without saying a word. I felt so silly standing there silent that I finally spoke when she stopped typing for a moment. I said, “Are you searching for the subject, ‘Degenerative Muscle Diseases’?” She said, “Yes, but I’m not finding anything with those terms.” ... Then she said that the only thing she could suggest I do would be to go to the stacks and try looking at the medical books. She told me the medical books were assigned the number 610.

In the stacks I did manage to locate a dictionary of medical terms. The entry for Lou Gehrig’s Disease indicated that it is Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). I took this book to the desk and informed her that I had located [a possibly useful search term]. She told me that it really wouldn’t be helpful to search using a term of such technical specificity. Then she said nothing and seemed to be indicating that our search was at a dead end.

I told her that none of the books in the stacks looked helpful for my particular interest. I asked if there might be books anywhere else that I could look at now that I knew the name of the disease. Her response was to say, “The only other place that you might find something would be the reference section over there. You can look up the same number, 610.”

In our article on “Flying a Light Aircraft,” which reported on these library visit transactions, this particular case was not included among the 60 percent counted as successful. Although the user gave an answer that eventually obtained the highest rating of seven (“very helpful”) on a seven-point scale, the user reported that she was “not sure” whether or not she would return to the same staff member with another question. A clue to the user’s view of the librarian’s role in helping her find the answer is that the user revised the questionnaire question “How helpful was the answer given in terms of your own needs?” replacing “answer given” with “answer obtained.” In analyzing the transaction, it is easy to spot ways in which the staff member deviated from recommended reference behaviors:

- Her opening move was the “without-speaking—she-began-to-type” maneuver. The practice of typing into the terminal some key word(s) taken from the user’s question is based on assumptions that are often erroneous: that the initial question provides a complete and accurate picture of the information need; that some word that the user happens to mention in framing the initial question is the best search term to use either for key word searching of titles or as an assigned subject heading; and that the best resource for any question is a whole book on that particular topic rather than some other source, such as an encyclopedia or directory entry or a journal article.
- She did not ask any questions designed to clarify the user’s information need but took the initial question at face value. In other words, she chose not to conduct a reference interview or ask an open question such as, “What are you trying to find out about degenerative muscle diseases?” or “Is there a specific degenerative muscle disease that interests you?” Such questions would have elicited the real information need, which was that the user wanted to find out if the particular degenerative muscle disease present in her boyfriend’s family (ALS) would be passed on to his children.

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When the subject search did not produce any suitable titles, the staff member provided two unmonitored referrals that each followed the same general pattern: direct the user toward a very large set of books that are generally on the topic so that maybe the user will be lucky and find something (“Try looking in the medical books in the stacks in the 610s” “Try looking in the reference books in the 610s”). The staff member took no steps to check whether or not the patron actually found anything helpful.\textsuperscript{10}

She did not use a followup question (e.g., She did not say, “If you don’t find anything in the medical books, come back and we can try something else”).\textsuperscript{11}

She used negative body language, first of grimacing and later of silence, to indicate that the question was tricky and to suggest that the search had reached a dead end and should be abandoned. In her analysis of the “first words” of a reference transaction, Durrance reported that in 5 percent of her observed 486 transactions, the staff member initially “responded to questioners’ opening queries without words, but instead used grimaces, guttural sounds, facial expressions, or silence for an awkward period of time.”\textsuperscript{12}

What, we might ask, was actually going on in this reported reference transaction and in other similar transactions included among the library visit accounts produced by the students? Four years after the publication of “Flying a Light Aircraft,” we are still mulling over the significance of the high incidence of unmonitored referrals and the low incidence of the followup questions. In this paper, we take a second look at the original seventy-seven library visit reports plus twenty-three additional, but similarly produced, visit reports to try to understand the underlying structures associated with reference failure.\textsuperscript{13} If we set aside for a moment the usual explanation—that the reference staff always has the goal of giving the user an accurate and helpful answer but this particular staff member for one reason or other was unsuccessful in achieving her goal—and look at what was really happening, we see two things. First we see a user who is practicing strategies designed to get as much help as possible from the library staff member, and second we see a staff member who is using various tactics apparently designed to end the transaction. Instead of viewing this staff member as someone who was trying but failing to locate an answer for the user, we might see her as successfully using closing strategies that resulted in her getting the user to go away and stay away. This example is worth considering, not as an instance of individual failure, but as an illustrative case of what is happening in reference libraries everywhere as reference staff attempt to keep up with the endless queue of reference questions.

### Getting Rid of the User: Negative Closure

Although the officially stated goal of reference librarians is to help the user find an acceptable answer, the immediate practical problem that librarians face is to deal with the stream of questions in such a way that users are processed expeditiously and sent out of the system. As William Miller put it in an article on reference work burnout, “Reference in this situation (with two or three people sometimes handling more than one hundred questions an hour) became a sort of tennis game; the idea was to whack the ball back into the client's court and hope that it stayed there.”\textsuperscript{14} If we use Miller’s game metaphor as a way of thinking about the dynamics that occurred in the transaction just examined and others like it, what comes into focus is the adversarial relationship between the actions—let's call them moves—of the staff member and the user. The staff member concentrated on moves that would achieve an ending to the reference transaction; the user employed countermoves to keep the reference transaction going. For example, although the staff member avoided using the followup question, “If this isn't it, get back to me,” etc., the user returned anyway to provide a more precise search term and ask for further help. When the staff member countered by claiming that a precise search term wouldn’t be useful and indicated by her silence that the search was at a dead end, the user kept the query going by directly asking what other sources she could consult.

In this case, and in many others from among the one hundred library visit accounts we have reviewed, the librarian and the user have opposed criteria for what counts as winning the reference game. In general, we can say that users come to the library because they have experienced a gap in their understanding or knowledge and need some fact, address, article, or book thought to be in the library's resources to help them achieve a goal in their own life: they want information that will help them plan a trip, write a resume for a job application, pursue a hobby or interest, come to terms with a major problem (such as the illness of a family member), complete a project, or learn a new skill. Users win when they leave the library with an answer that helps them achieve their own goals. If we
use the measure, "Willingness to return to the same librarian," as a proxy for users' judgments about whether or not they have succeeded at furthering their own goals, then we know from previous studies that 50 to 60 percent of users consider themselves winners. But the second set of players in the reference game is the library staff, who increasingly are harried as fewer people do more work and face longer line-ups of users. Librarians win when the transaction is completed and the librarian can move on to the next question.

Faced with line-ups of patrons asking for help, librarians who want to win the library reference game need to be good at closure: the art of terminating the reference transaction. Of course the best way for the librarian to achieve closure is to send the user away with the desired information—a win-win outcome in which the user's goals and the librarian's goals happily coincide. This outcome occurs, as we have seen, in approximately 55 percent of the cases and is more likely to happen when the librarian uses welcoming body language, conducts a reference interview ("The health section is pretty big. Is there a particular topic you are interested in?") uses a follow-up question ("Have you found what you needed?") and monitors the referral. In this paper, we do not examine the helpful behaviors of librarians who are in win-win transactions with users, because we have reported these helpful behaviors elsewhere. This time we focus on cases in which the library staff member achieves, or tries to achieve, closure in some way other than by providing the helpful answer. For example, a user looking for information on carnival glass said that she was given the impression that the staff member hoped she would go away: "I felt that she would be glad if I went and found [reference sources] for myself." In such circumstances, the staff member wins by getting rid of the user, but the user loses because nothing helpful is ever found. As one user put it in summarizing the library visit experience, "The least helpful aspect of the service was being at first ignored and then later feeling that my time was up before my needs were met."

Although, of course, all reference transactions end one way or another, very little has been written about the processes of termination. In the first article to focus on the process of closing the reference interview, Nolan notes that the topic of closure has been rendered invisible by the prevalent assumption that the reference interview ends by mutual agreement of the parties concerned when the question has been adequately answered. Nolan argues persuasively that reference interviews end for many reasons, apart from the provision of a helpful answer, and that reasons for ending the interview may be related to the internal goals of either party that largely remain hidden. Acknowledging that "there may often be considerable variance between what users want out of the interview and what the reference staff considers appropriate," Nolan lists various institutional goals not necessarily shared by users that may result in early termination of the reference transaction: the librarian's view that users should not be provided with answers but instead be taught to find their own answers; the belief that certain classes of clientele, such as students, deserve less help than others; some tacitly held guidelines about the appropriate time allowance to be given to reference questions; a library policy or environment that discourages reference librarians from involving another colleague who may be better able to answer the question.17

Nolan's article, which provides a taxonomy of factors involved in ending reference interviews, is not empirically based and does not examine the actual behaviors that library staff use to achieve closure. However, our analysis of one hundred library visit accounts complements Nolan's work by identifying a number of specific moves, apart from providing a helpful answer, that are used in termination. In using these ending moves, which we call "strategies of negative closure," the librarian wins the reference game by sending the user away from the reference desk and preferably out of the system for good.18 In short, the main purpose of strategies of negative closure is to get rid of the user, not to maximize the chance that the user will find a helpful answer. We consider a referral to be a strategy of negative closure only when the librarian doesn't know enough about the real question or about the match between information need and recommended source(s) to have any reasonable confidence that a user who follows the advice will find an acceptable answer.

**Strategies of Negative Closure**

In our analysis of library visit accounts, we have identified ten strategies of negative closure that library staff use to end the reference transaction, apart from providing a helpful answer:

1. The librarian provides an unmonitored referral. Often without conducting a reference interview, the staff member types a key word from the user's initial statement into the terminal and then gives the user a call number or point to some shelves and recommends browsing, saying something along the lines of this librarian's advice: "I suggest you just browse the shelf around the call numbers I have given you."
Sometimes the librarian points in the direction of the shelves, but often he or she gives no indication of where the user should look. In either case, the implication is that a list of call numbers is all the help to be expected and that users are on their own. That is, instead of providing an answer, the librarian provides a slip of paper and some call numbers. Usually no authors’ names or titles are provided, which makes finding the actual book tricky for novices. In 44 percent of the library visit accounts we analyzed, the librarian provided an unmonitored referral, which led to little or nothing of use. For example, one user asked for information on cellulitis, which is a skin infection, and was given a call number for a book on unwanted fat: “I found the book (not quite in its right place). It was called Cellulite: Defeat It through Diet and Exercise.” The unmonitored referral followed a predictable pattern that was some variant of the following one, which occurred in a large public library when a library user asked for current information about Epstein-Barr syndrome. The librarian searched Epstein-Barr syndrome in the catalog. “She did not explain to me what she was doing... She handed me a slip of paper with numbers scrawled on it and pointed me towards the stacks along the far wall... I went to the stacks and found the call number for the book she had recommended. She had not written down the author or the title of the book on the slip of paper and, since the subject of the book was not evident by its title, I was not sure if this was the book I was searching for. I glanced through the book and it seemed inadequate. I headed back towards the reference desk to ask about medical journals, but she was gone. I suppose it was her coffee break.”

2. The librarian immediately refers the user somewhere else, preferably far away—to another floor within the library itself or to another agency altogether. When asked for information on the relationship between homicide rates and capital punishment, the librarian immediately said, “That would be on the third floor.” The librarian on the third floor said, “Have you tried the criminology library at University X (in another city)?” Another librarian said, “The head office of PBS is in Virginia. You could write them and get the telephone number you want [for the Erie PBS station].” A user who wanted to cross-reference North American and British titles for Agatha Christie’s books was asked, “Have you considered going to a bookstore and seeing if they can help you?” A user who was a Czech citizen wanted to know which countries require travel visas of visitors and was immediately told that “the best thing would be to contact the Czech Embassy.” When this strategy of referral elsewhere is used before the library staff member has conducted a proper reference interview, it commonly happens that the distant information provider is not in fact the appropriate place to answer the user’s question, and the user is referred elsewhere yet again. Negative closure strategy number two should be distinguished from the monitored referral to another location, as illustrated in the following example: when asked for information on elder hostels, the librarian said that she thought the library received a newspaper called Elderhostel in another part of the library, but, before sending the user over, she called and confirmed that the paper was still there and available.

3. The librarian implies that the user should have done something else before asking for reference help. When a user in our library visit study asked for information about good mystery writers, the librarian said in a manner that was “quite severe: ‘Well, of course you’ve already checked in our microfiche catalogue under authors’ names to see if there is any information there.’... I felt he was rebuking me for asking for help rather than looking for the information myself.” Questions such as “Have you checked the catalogue?” feed into users’ anxiety about asking for help, for as one user wondered, “Was it irresponsible of me to seek assistance without first having done any searching myself?”

4. The librarian tries to get the user to accept more easily found information instead of the information actually needed. When one user asked for “information on how to build speaker cabinets,” the staff member explained the keyboard and then said, “The section on wall units and cabinets is in 684.16. It’s upstairs.” Another user who wanted information on how to make paper was told, “We don’t have too much on paper-making. I think you’ll find more in recycling books” and was given call numbers that led to books on recycling paper and using a blue box. Another user, who was making up a quiz, wanted information about Gene Roddenberry, the creator of Star Trek: specifically, whether he was married and had any children. The staff member said, “So you could use another question on your quiz then?” When a user refused to accept the answer that there are no fiction writers in Newfounland (see negative closure strategy number nine below), the librarian...
“pointed out all kinds of information that she could find... reference books for French Canadian literature, the literature of Canadian women, Western Canadian writers, etc." Admittedly in some cases, though not the ones considered here, a librarian's suggestion of a substitution may be genuinely helpful to the user. Whether the suggestion to switch to a more readily answered question is negative closure or an offer of genuine help in finding an acceptable answer depends on the context and what else the librarian knows about the user's information needs.

5. The librarian warns the user to expect defeat because the topic is too hard, obscure, large, elusive, or otherwise unpromising. One librarian responded to the initial request for information about a character called Alice Bluegown by saying, "I don't know if we will be able to find that. Gee, that's pretty obscure. Well I'll try this [typing 'gown' into the computer] on the off chance." When neither "gown" nor "Bluegown" produced promising hits, she said, "I didn't think we would find anything. You might want to try [another city] Library or maybe Toronto" (negative closure strategy number two above). Asked for information on how carnival glass is made, another librarian typed in "carnival" and got sixty entries dealing with carnivals and fairs. She typed in "glass," found glass manufacturing, and said repressively, "This is quite large." Another user commented, "She seemed to imply that this was going to be a long drawn-out process and that probably nothing would be found." "Your question is rather elusive," warned another librarian. This strategy blames the anticipated failure to get an answer on the intractable nature of the question itself rather than on ineffective search skills.

6. The librarian encourages the user to abort the transaction voluntarily. When a user asked for the educational background of Camille Paglia, the librarian "rolled her eyes and said 'Oh, her.' and then said, 'Is it really necessary to find out her major(s)? Why do you want to know?' After failing with negative closure strategies two and five, the librarian with the Alice Bluegown question asked, "How important is this to you?" Strategy six is often preceded by strategy five, since users are more likely to say that the search is not worth pursuing if they expect that a search will end in failure.

7. The librarian signals nonverbally that the transaction is over by tone of voice, turning away, or starting another activity. Users said variously: "I knew from the tone of her voice that this was her final offering"; "She was obviously finished with me at this point because she turned away and began shuffling through some papers"; "I said, 'I'll let you know if I find anything in these symbol dictionaries' but I got no reply or acknowledgment... and he goes back to the reference desk. That's the last I see of him."

8. The librarian states explicitly that the search has reached a dead end: "I'm not sure what other information we might have on that" or "I am sorry. This is everything we have in our catalogue under the entry '[city] in art." An international student who wanted to understand Ontario's health insurance coverage was told that, apart from an out-of-date government pamphlet, "I'm not sure what other material we might have available that would be of use."

9. The librarian claims that the information is not in the library or else doesn't exist at all. When asking for information on pollarding companies in Canada, especially Ontario, a user was told to go to the third floor. The third-floor librarian "turned away, narrowed her eyes, and, after wincing for five seconds, proclaimed, 'I don't think we have anything... I think she hoped I would be satisfied and leave." When another user presented the initial question, "I need some information on archaeology," the immediate response was that "there was not much material available at the library on this subject." In another case, when a user asked for help in finding the names of some fiction writers from Newfoundland, the librarian "registered that this was a very difficult question" and then, without consulting anything, said "that she didn't think there were any."

10. The librarian goes off to track down a document but then never returns. One user reported that after the librarian told her, "I'll go and see what I can find," she waited for forty-five minutes but "never saw the man again, neither at the desk nor with the promised document." Another said, "I waited at the shelf for a while, but she did not come back." In a variant of this tactic, another staff member advised the user to go home and wait for a call with the requested information, but no one ever called. Durrance has described this phenomenon as the "Disappearing Librarian." If we acknowledge the practical constraints placed on reference workers to conclude a reference
transaction and move on to something else, then it is much easier to see why a reference staff member may not practice model behaviors but instead choose:

- **not to conduct a reference interview** (if you find out specifically what the user wants to know, you will have to locate a pertinent source containing the answer to that particular question and you will not be able simply to advise the user to browse generally in the medical (law/travel/cooking) section); 21
- **not to ask a followup question** (if you are trying to process the user expeditiously through the system, why invite them to come back to start the whole interaction over again?); or
- **not to monitor the referral** (if you find out that the recommended source does not contain any useful information, you will have to start again and so, if you are trying to move users quickly through the system, it's better not to know).

Given that the followup question works against the system goal of achieving closure, we might wonder not why it occurs in only one-third of cases, but why so many librarians are dedicated and conscientious enough to use it as often as they do.

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**Users Fight Back: Counter-Strategies**

Users in our study recognized the strategies of negative closure for what they were: ending strategies that were not in the users' own best interests. A strong theme in many of the library visit accounts was the energetic effort of users to keep the search alive. Users employed ingenious strategies to prevent the staff member from giving up too soon, before an acceptable answer was found. But how typical were these users? The participants in the library visit study were students in the first weeks in successive offerings of an introductory reference course that is normally taken in the student's first term of a MLIS program. The idea of the assignment was to give the students an opportunity to experience the reference transaction from the user's perspective before they come to identify themselves with the perspective of library professionals. Although favorably disposed to libraries and more familiar with library systems than the average user would be, these students mostly were still novices in using reference sources and search strategies. However, with a two-page report to write, these particular users had an added motivation for not wanting to be dismissed too soon and were therefore probably less likely than members of the general public to accept passively the strategies of negative closure. As one user remarked concerning a transaction that the staff member was trying to abort at the first step, "I didn't know what to do, but I knew that this account certainly wasn't going to fill two pages, so I pressed on." Another user, who had been immediately referred elsewhere to different library ("That's a fairly specialized topic... Have you been to Academic Library Z?), reported: "I thought, 'She doesn't want to help me, but I'm not going to be put off that easily; I have an assignment to do.' So I said, 'I realize that I will have to do most of this research at Library Z, but I'm not sure how or where to start.' Since users who use strategies to counter librarians' efforts at negative closure reduce their chances being terminated before they find something of use, we might conclude that ordinary users, who may use these counter-strategies less often, may be even less likely than our users were to find an acceptable answer.

The users in the library visit study certainly took a more active role in the reference transaction than is typically portrayed in the library literature. In published discussions of reference, the user is usually assumed to play an essentially passive role. It is acknowledged that the user asks the question that begins the reference process, but after that it's the librarian who takes charge, asks the questions during the reference interview, finds the sources, evaluates the sources, and so on. The user is there mainly to tag along, answer the librarian's questions during the reference interview, and receive the answer at the end.

In contrast, what emerges from this library visit study is a picture of an active user energetically pursuing goals not always shared by the librarians. Interestingly enough, the librarians themselves, for the most part, don't view the users as passive recipients of the correct answer. Librarians' strategies of negative closure, especially the unmonitored referral, imply that they hold a self-service model of information provision that puts the onus on users to browse until they themselves find the answers. Users similarly are aware of taking an active role, although quite often their activity takes the form of trying to elicit more help from librarians and to keep librarians from giving up too soon. Insofar as the library staff members' strategies are focused on getting rid of the user rather than on finding the helpful answer, users' strategies come into conflict with those used by library staff.

The library visit accounts (which are, of course, written by users) provide rich and detailed evidence that users are far from passive recipients of service.
These users wanted to be active partners in the search and many of them deliberately intervened in the search process, especially when they had reason to fear that things were going awry. Users emerged as engaged in taking initiatives, pursuing strategies, and evaluating both the sources provided and the quality of the reference experience itself. In pursuing their own goals of finding a satisfactory answer, users displayed the following eleven counter-strategies for preventing negative closure and keeping the transaction going:

1. When the unmonitored referral produces nothing of use, the user returns and asks for more help. The user who wanted information on cellulitis and was given a call number for a book on cellulite returned, with the offending book in hand, to the same librarian and asked rhetorically: "Is cellulite and cellulitis the same thing?" One user said, "When I found the correct section [for information on the executor's responsibilities in connection with wills], the call number which I was given was not there. It would have been nice to have a title, I thought... I returned to the information desk to get the title for the book... I noticed that other people were being handled similarly to how I had been initially. They were given instructions as to what section of the library would be relevant for their particular question. The second time, I spoke with a person who was not at the desk initially. I asked her for the title of the book for which I had been given the call number. She determined that the book had been deleted and was no longer circulating... The reference interview began again." The tendency for users to return to a different librarian either by design or because the original librarian is no longer available means that very often the librarian who provided the unmonitored referral never finds out how unhelpful the referral was.

2. The user refuses to accept a referral to another library or remote source. The user who wanted the phone number of the Erie PBS station and experienced negative closure strategy number two thought, "Writing to Virginia would take forever." She asked, "Do you get the WQNL programming guide?", which turned out to have the desired number. A user who was told that the best place for genealogical information was in a distant city thought, "Just saying that this place was in [city] could be a way of putting me off and hoping I would go away and I was not going to give up quite so easily." Another user who said he was interested in something on music was told to go to the music library: "I think she was quite willing to let that be the end of it, but I wasn't leaving, so she went on and pointed out on a little map the location of the music holdings within the main library. That was it." Undeterred, the user asked his question of a second librarian in the same library: "At first I thought she just wanted to pass me off to the music library too!... I half-expected her to pull out that little map too... But I was ready for her. I asked, 'Well, what I wanted was something kind of current—on a musical group. Like a review or something.' Users employing counter-closure strategy number two said that they don't want to be sent off on a wild goose chase when they are sure that the needed information is within the library, if only they could be helped to find it.

3. The user plays dumb. In response to being sent away to use the catalog or an index, the user claims helplessness and ends up being taken to the location or being helped by the librarian to search the catalog or use an index or microfiche reader. One user explicitly described the tactic she used to get more help as "acting dumb" and commented, "The least helpful aspect of the reference service was having to act dumb to get more help from the first reference person." In contrast, [the second librarian] "showed me where to look as a matter of course—I observed him helping other patrons and he was equally helpful to them." Another user reported, "He seemed ready to end the interview then, but I persisted... I asked him to explain exactly where the indexes were." The response to the user who said he wanted a book review on a musical group was that the librarian "rhymed off a few indexes and pointed in a northerly direction": "I must have had that dazed first-time library user look on my face, because she said, 'Here, I'll show you.'"

4. The user refuses to accept the answer as provided. One user who was given a medical dictionary containing a definition of hyperkeratosis when she wanted to know about symptoms and cures, said, "This isn't easy to understand... Is there any chance of getting more information?" Another user, who wanted a children's book for a seven-year-old that would explain the seasonal variation of climate, said, "Well, these books are about the seasons. But I guess what I'm really looking for is a book that shows how the earth is tilted on its axis... I want to have a diagram or illustration of that." In such cases, the problem usually stems from an inadequate reference interview, in which the library staff...
member has failed to find out something crucial about the nature of the answer that will be acceptable.

5. The user realizes the staff member is not going to do anything further to help and so keeps the process going by talking. Users said variously, "I kept talking about my question. . . . I was quite desperate to ensure that the reference interview didn't end any more prematurely than it had to. . . . I got the impression that if I stopped talking, he would stop working"; "Obviously the reference interview was over before it began. . . . I felt obliged to open up some dialogue. . . . I rambled on. . . . I'm interviewing myself"; "I didn't feel there had been any real reference interview, so I took the initiative and offered more information, 'I'm not sure, but a friend of mine was telling me that she thought that Alice Bluegown was the nickname for a daughter of one of the U.S. presidents.'"

6. The user refuses to agree about the transaction voluntarily. Warned that the most recent census data was not yet available, the user said, "I'd still be interested in seeing what you have for [city] on ethnic origin and country of origin." When faced with negative closure strategy number six, "How important is this to you?", the user who wanted information on Alice Bluegown reported that she felt intimidated but she stood her ground and said, "Well, I would like to find out."}

7. The user, seeing that the library staff person's interest and stamina is flagging, proposes a course of action. Users suggested various ways to continue the search: "Is there any way to narrow that search down?" "Do you think Camille Paglia might be listed in a feminist reference directory or a Who's Who of American Women?" "Do you think government publications might have any information on polling companies in Ontario?" and "Just out of curiosity, do you think there might be something [on the names of famous vegetarians] if you looked under history and vegetarianism?" This strategy of suggesting a course of action sometimes worked to keep the librarian engaged in the question, but sometimes failed, as in the case of a user who wanted to discover if there was a connection between power lines and leukemia. After the librarian seemed to be getting no results from typing various undisclosed words into the catalog, the user suggested using "cancer" as a subject heading. The librarian responded with negative closure strategy number one by writing out the call numbers for two very general books on cancer, which of course contained no mention of power lines.

8. The user specifically asks for more help than has been offered, such as help in finding a recommended source or section of the library, using library technology, or locating further sources to try. Several users requested, "Could you point me in the right direction?". Another user, sensing approaching abandonment, reported, "I realized that my reference encounter was quickly drawing to a close as [the staff member] moved off towards the desk, so I called out, 'If I don't find anything here, is there any place else I might look?" A user who had been told to check the indexes reported, "He seemed ready to end the interview then, but I persisted because I didn't feel I had enough information to find the indexes or to know how to use them. I felt like he was sloughing me off to a certain degree. I asked him to explain exactly where the indexes were and he then took me over to them and explained how to look up articles." The user who wanted information on Camille Paglia asked, "Where can I go after this point if I am not successful?" in finding the answer in Current Biography. Another user who had been given a slip of paper listing call numbers reported, "I asked her, 'Where do I search for these books?' since she was not going to tell me." Often, counter-closure strategy number eight evoked the desired result of additional help, but sometimes, when asked for further help, librarians resorted to a new negative closure strategy. For example when the librarian used negative closure strategy number eight (see above), "I am sorry. This is everything we have in our catalogue under the entry 'city' in art,' the user reported that she thought, "I won't learn more," but still decided to ask another question. This time, the librarian switched to negative closure strategy number two and recommended that the user go to the National Library in Ottawa, which was an eight-hour drive away.

9. The user refuses to accept the claim that the information doesn't exist. When the librarian said that there probably weren't any fiction writers in Newfoundland and went back reading her magazine, the user reported, "As if I were going to accept that response! I couldn't believe that this was her answer. . . . I said that I was not satisfied. . . . I think she was hoping that I would tell her that it wasn't that important and that I'd leave. But I didn't. I smiled and stood my ground."}

10. The user sees that the process is going off-track and volunteers a correction or supplementary information. A user who wanted bio-bibliographical information on F.H. Kortright noted that the librarian was looking through the Cs and said,
"Kortright is spelled with a 'k,' not a 'c.'" Another user said, "Bluegown is one word, not two." When a user, accompanied by her twelve-year-old son, asked for information on turtles, she was directed to a display table of children's picture books. The user explained that the required information was not for her son but for herself. The librarian "simply replied that I should still look at the books out on the table and did not inquire as to what kind of information I wanted to know about turtles." Another user who had asked for information on cancer was handed a slip of paper with a call number and instructed, "Check these shelves in the medical section." The user reported feeling "frustrated because the librarian seemed more interested in giving me the call number of a book than with trying to understand what I was looking for, and so I said, 'Does this section include books on helping relatives understand and cope with a person who has cancer?'" This opportunity for user feedback and correction can occur only when the librarian is willing to listen and when the user has some way of following or understanding what the librarian is doing. Many users, however, said that they couldn't see the computer screen (or book or index) and therefore couldn't tell determine the staff member's search strategy.

11. The user restarts the process with a second librarian. In about one-third of cases, our users decided to cut their losses and start the search anew with another librarian within the same library or in another library. One user, interested in drug contraindications in treating lupus, experienced the unmonitored referral (negative closure strategy number one) but pursued the question with two additional librarians at two different desks until she got an answer. "The experience would have been unsatisfactory had I not persisted past the advice of the first librarian. It was by my own persistence and the advice of two other staff members that I discovered the entire picture concerning drug contraindication in treating the disease."

Conflicting Strategies v. Cooperative Strategies

When users sensed that their goal of getting a helpful answer ran counter to the library staff's goal of terminating the reference transaction, they often described their reference experience using language that was confrontational, even military: "I stood my ground," "I persisted," "I was not going to give up quite so easily," "I was ready for her." Some assertive users identified the reference transaction as a win-lose situation that they were in danger of losing and were able with confidence to mount counter-strategies. But more typically, users reported that they were made uncomfortable when their persistence in trying to get an answer seemed to be turning the reference transaction into an adversarial relationship. The user who wanted more than a definition of hyperkeratosis (user counter-strategy number four) commented, "I was already beginning to feel like I was being too pushy. Was it too much to ask for more information besides a definition?" Similarly, the user who held out for a diagram of the earth tilted on its axis was apologetic: "I was embarrassed that I . . . had been so inept at formulating my initial reference question. I should have made it clearer that I wanted a diagram, but could I have done this without appearing pushy? . . . The art of formulating the reference question is one I must still learn." Another user said she consciously tried to avoid seeming pushy by offering suggestions (user counter-strategy number seven) in a nonthreatening, unchallenging style: "I said this in an I-don't-know-what-I'm-talking-about kind of way so as not to intimidate or insult him."

The users' accounts described many instances in which they thought the librarians used dismissive strategies as a defensive response when they felt daunted by the complexity of the question. For example, the user wanting help finding fiction writers from Newfoundland described the librarian's reaction when she heard the question: "She looked scared." A user who wanted to know whether or not candles have animal products in them reported that, on first hearing the question, the librarian's reaction was panic: "She frowned, eyebrows twitched in what I gathered to be instant confusion. Had I been too demanding?" In other cases, the librarian's manner is encouraging to start with and becomes noticeably cooler as the transaction proves harder than expected: "When she could not find any information regarding visas, I observed a subtle change in her voice. I suspected a growing impatience from her quickening actions (walking more quickly, less careful handling of the books) and I did not know why. I wondered if she was finding my question harder than she first thought."

One interesting pattern that sometimes occurred was the user's transformation of the oppositional win-lose relationship into a cooperative win-win relationship. Some users reported that the reference staff had been initially indifferent to their question but that they had "warmed up" the staff member by pursuing various strategies: seem-
ing unthreatening, volunteering more details about the question, getting the librarian interested, or sometimes simply persisting. The user who resisted being sent to the music library (user counter-strategy number two) summarized his experience: "With a little persistence and a little patience on my part, [the librarian] got warmed up and showed me some useful indexes and locations. The lesson is: Don't be too eager to be sent off on your own search." Another user who initially thought, "She doesn't want to help me, but I'm not going to be put off that easily" ended up reinterpreting the librarian's strategy of referring her immediately to another library (negative closure strategy number two): "I reassessed the librarian's attitude. I did not feel that she did not want to help—just that she was not sure where to look and felt a bit overwhelmed by the question." This user in fact converted what promised to be a win-lose situation to a win-win situation, eventually getting the desired information on the illicit and legal book trade in eighteenth-century France. She responded to the user questionnaire by saying that she would be willing to return to the same librarian. By the end of the library visit account, this user was describing the reference encounter in terms of collaboration: "I found it interesting how this had developed into a cooperative search."

3. In the library literature, enthusiasm is sometimes expressed for the practice of making referrals, as if all referrals are equally helpful. We need to discriminate between two different kinds of referrals: the unmonitored referral, which is really a strategy of negative closure, and the referral in which the reference staff has verified that the recommended source will actually be of some use in answering the question.

4. In large libraries where it is impractical for the reference staff to accompany the patron to the shelves and make sure that the recommended sources are helpful, policies should be put in place to make it clear that an adequate reference transaction always includes a followup question: "If you don't find what you are looking for, make sure that you come back and we'll try something else." The invitation to return should not be an optional feature, used at the staff member's discretion if he or she happens to like the user or be interested in the user's question. Although individual librarians might suppose that refraining from asking the followup question will save work by getting rid of the user sooner, this supposition might not be the case. If we consider the one-third of users in our study who started out with a new librarian, it is clear that this duplication is an inefficient use of resources. It is preferable for the first librarian to conduct a proper reference interview and find an acceptable answer.

5. If understaffing makes it genuinely impossible for reference staff to do an adequate job, it might be necessary to make changes to the way that reference is delivered. One promising innovation is the designation of the "roving librarian," whose job is to move around and approach users to see if they need help.\textsuperscript{22} Roving is particularly important in "the electronic arcade," the area where public access electronic systems are installed. Another response to inadequate staffing levels is the two-tier system introduced at Brandeis University and described by Massey-Burzio.\textsuperscript{23} In this restructured model of reference delivery, front-line workers, who are not professional librarians, answer what questions they can. Anything that takes longer than three minutes to handle should be referred to a professional librarian. However, a qualitative study that Massey-Burzio later conducted at Johns Hopkins indicates that, at least in that particular setting, the staff at the Information Desk referred only 6 percent of all questions asked to the library professionals, with the result that "because Information Desk staff were trying to deal with

**Recommendations**

Based on our analysis of the library visit accounts, we propose the following five recommendations:

1. Let's stop kidding ourselves by imagining that library patrons actually find anything of use when we respond to their request for health information by saying, "Have you checked the catalogue?" or "The health books are in the 610s." We should recognize these ploys for what they are: efforts to achieve closure without spending any energy on the user's question. No headway will be made in encouraging librarians routinely to conduct a reference interview, ask a followup question, and monitor all referrals until we acknowledge the very real system-based structures within libraries that discourage the use of behaviors that prolong the reference transaction.

2. If librarians are using dismissive maneuvers as a defensive response when they feel overwhelmed by the question, then staff training on the reference interview and search strategies could give library staff more tools for coping.
questions beyond their abilities, patrons viewed them as ignorant and unhelpful.24 We need to make sure that any structural changes made in staffing patterns do not turn out to be just another way of getting rid of the user.

References and Notes


7. The indicator used to measure the success of the reference transaction was the user’s answer to the question, “Given the nature of this interaction, if you had the option, would you return to this staff member with another question?” “Yes” responses were coded as successful transactions and “no” and “unsure” responses were coded as unsuccessful transactions. (Dewdney and Ross, “Flying a Light Aircraft,” 22.) With the addition of twenty-three new library visit accounts, the success rate remains unchanged, with sixty “yes” responses and forty “no” or “unsure” responses.

8. In almost one-quarter (n = 19) of the seventy-seven library visit transactions, users reported that as soon as they asked their initial question, the library staff started to perform some mysterious activity, without asking any questions or explaining what they were doing. Most often, as here, the silent activity was typing key words from the user’s statement into the online catalog. (Dewdney and Ross, 225–26.) With the addition of the twenty-three new visit accounts, this phenomenon was reported in twenty-four out of one hundred cases.

9. Despite the almost universally accepted view that the reference interview is crucial to reference success, the reference interview was conducted in fewer than half of the library visit transactions. Only 45 percent of the seventy-seven library users reported having been asked one or more questions intended to elicit further information about their information need. (Dewdney and Ross, 226.) With the addition of the twenty-three new visit accounts, the proportion of cases in which users reported being asked one or more questions about their information need was slightly higher, at 51 percent.

10. In 42 percent of reported cases, the user received an unmonitored referral and then found little or nothing of use. (Dewdney and Ross, 227.) With the addition of the twenty-three new visit accounts, users reported unmonitored referrals that produced little or nothing of use in 44 percent of the one hundred cases. Reasons for the user’s failure to obtain a satisfactory answer varied: the user lacked the skills to locate the recommended source independently or find the answer within the source, even though the information may have been there; the recommended source was missing; or the recommended source was found to be irrelevant, too general, or not recent enough.

11. In 65 percent of our seventy-seven cases, a followup question was either definitely not used or probably not used. In slightly more than 55 percent of cases, the user reported at least one followup question. (Dewdney and Ross, 228.) With the addition of the twenty-three new visit accounts, the percentage of cases in which a user reported at least one followup question was 57 percent. In a similar study, Durrance reported that the followup question was used in only 25 percent of cases observed (“Factors That Influence Reference Success,” 254).


13. The inclusion of the additional twenty-three library visit reports does not change the statistical summa-

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ries much. Public library settings still account for approximately 70 percent of cases and academic library settings account for 30 percent.


18. Durrance’s discussion of closure in “Factors That Influence Reference Success” (255–56) uses a broader definition of closure than the one we are using here. She includes both what we have referred to as “negative closure”—behaviors that bring about the end of the transaction, apart from providing an acceptable answer or suggesting verified steps that can reasonably be expected to lead to an acceptable answer—and something that she calls “conditional closure”—referral elsewhere accompanied with a followup question that is an invitation to return. In our analysis, we see the followup question as the opposite of negative closure: its purpose is not to end the reference transaction but to keep the reference transaction alive long enough for a helpful answer to be found.


