Whether the reference librarian has the toughest library job or not is a matter of opinion. Anyway, it can be challenging, rewarding and a bit schizophrenic at times. At the reference desk we have to provide answers on a wide range of subjects to customers who couldn’t be more different from each other. The carefree student is there of course, who is just starting to write the assignment he is supposed to finish tomorrow. Trying to cut ahead in the queue could be the older man who “is doing some research after retirement”. Waiting patiently behind them is a worried graduate, one of our regular visitors.

I work at the University Library in Lund, the largest research library in Sweden, holding about 5 million volumes. As a legal deposit library it receives more than 14,000 monographs and 10,000 periodicals each year. This means that I can benefit a lot from our extensive collections, both printed and electronic, and our experienced staff. We have about 2,000 visitors a day, including not only students and university staff but also the general public.

Being a slow starter in the morning, I begin by reading and answering e-mails, keeping up to date with intranet news and the special web log we use for our desk staff. I check our virtual reference service for e-mail questions I might have to answer. We also provide a chat service during the afternoon, at which times I may have to be online waiting for calls. Questions can come from students on campus or any country in the world. Once I chatted with a student, unaware at first that he was in a small town in Chile! Nine libraries at Lund University co-operate locally on this service, and Swedish libraries co-operate nationally in the evenings. Working in a virtual reference desk with no face-to-face contact makes you aware of how important the reference interview really is with the person you are supposed to help.

The first big task of the day is a two-hour course with a group of history students. Trying to break
the spell of Google, I show them our library cata-
logues and the many bibliographic and full text
databases that we can access through our locally
developed system ELIN, which integrates journal
articles from publishers, databases and e-print open
archives. Search systems are now easier to use than
ever, but I think the structure of where to find what
kind of information has become more complicated.
I try to transmit the thrill of finding the right
literature. It is fun when they begin to understand
the range of search tools on offer. Some of them
actually find just the thing for their paper. The time
passes quickly. Afterwards I invite them to return
with additional questions to the reference desk or
the virtual reference service.

After lunch my two-hour session at the refer-
ce desk begins. The unpredictability of the ques-
tions is one of its pleasures. Another is that we may
actually own the book they want, however obscure
it may seem.

A girl has to find a colour illustration of King
Kristofer (15th century). After a while I actually find
something, though more thanks to determination
than expertise. “I read a book in my youth about
physics called something or other … I think it was
in 1956. Do you have it?” The middle-aged man
looks at me expectantly. (At least he didn’t say it
was a large blue one …) Well, finding the exact title
and author is the first obstacle, but finally we find
the right book together. Later, a stressed-out grad-
uate student needs a conference paper fast, so I
explain how she can request it as an inter-library
loan.

Another student wants to find literature on
population change in the Baltic Sea region. I
suggest a couple of databases for him to use, and
demonstrate the basics of searching. Another
interesting question to tackle is the critical recep-
tion of D H Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*; yet another
is whether something has been published concern-
ing a local gravel pit. No question is really insigni-
ficant (such as “Do you have books here?”),
because very basic enquiries often lead to some-
thing more. One of the telephone calls I have time
to answer is from someone wondering how to
access a certain e-journal. Apart from local calls,
we also regularly receive calls from other parts of
the country.

The reference librarian’s biggest fear probably is
that you don’t have an intelligent answer to a tough
question – or that you will find the answer when
the customer has gone. You take some comfort in
finding that some questions are actually unanswer-
able. But you need to be quick-thinking, and it is
important to know as many reference works as
you can – both printed and electronic ones.

Two hours at the reference desk can sometimes
feel like interrogation under a very bright light, but
hopefully I leave the desk with a sense of satisfac-
tion. I sometimes wonder if actors feel something
similar after their performances, because you
really need to wind down after that effort. Most
days I learn something new myself, which is one of
the bonuses with this kind of work.

As my day nears its end, I add some interesting
web resources to our local link collection/subject
gateway, Safir. Our aim is to have a collection of
valuable academic reference tools on the net, pre-
ferably links to the real thing, not links to other link
collections. This is the equivalent of our physical
reference library, appropriate for students, re-
searchers or any other interested parties. Of course
it also benefits the librarians working at the
reference desk. For every site I add a classification
and a brief description of content and coverage.
Descriptions are important. I think that just listing
the resources would let the users down. I also
communicate with people who have sent me sug-
gestions for new sites in Safir.

Finally, I put out the lights and go home.
Tomorrow will probably bring new questions and
experiences.