

# Mini-profile:

## a day in the life of a reference librarian

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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 catalogues 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 reference desk begins. The unpredictability of the questions 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 graduate 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 reception of D H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*; yet another is whether something has been published concerning a local gravel pit. No question is really insignificant (such as "Do you have books here?"), because very basic enquiries often lead to something 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 unanswerable. 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 satisfaction. 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, preferably links to the real thing, not links to other link collections. This is the equivalent of our physical reference library, appropriate for students, researchers 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 suggestions for new sites in Safir.

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