



## Electronic Reference Service

A SPEC Kit compiled by

Lori Goetsch  
Director of Libraries for Public Services  
University of Maryland

with the assistance of

Laura Sowers  
Reference Librarian  
GCI Information Services

Cynthia Todd  
Coordinator, Information and Research Services  
McKeldin Library, University of Maryland

October 1999

Series Editor: Lee Anne George  
Production Coordinator: Peter Budka

SPEC Kits are published by the

Association of Research Libraries  
OFFICE OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SERVICES  
21 Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 800  
Washington, D.C. 20036-1118  
(202) 296-2296 Fax (202) 872-0884  
<<http://www.arl.org/olms/infosvcs.html>>  
<[pubs@arl.org](mailto:pubs@arl.org)>

ISSN 0160 3582

Copyright © 1999

The papers in this compilation are copyrighted by the Association of Research Libraries. ARL grants blanket permission to reproduce and distribute copies of these works for nonprofit, educational, or library purposes, provided that copies are distributed at or below cost, and that ARL, the source, and copyright notice are included on each copy. This permission is in addition to rights of reproduction granted under Sections 107, 108, and other provisions of the U.S. Copyright Act.

*The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).*

## SPEC

### SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE LIBRARY MANAGEMENT FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS

Committed to assisting research and academic libraries in the continuous improvement of management systems, OLMS has worked since 1970 to gather and disseminate the best practices for library needs. As part of its commitment, OLMS maintains an active publications program best known for its SPEC Kits. Through the OLMS Collaborative Research/Writing Program, librarians work with ARL staff to design SPEC surveys and write publications. Originally established as an information source for ARL member libraries, the SPEC series has grown to serve the needs of the library community worldwide.

#### WHAT ARE SPEC KITS?

Published six times per year, SPEC Kits contain the most valuable, up-to-date information on the latest issues of concern to libraries and librarians today. They are the result of a systematic survey of ARL member libraries on a particular topic related to current practice in the field. Each SPEC Kit contains an executive summary of the survey results (previously printed as the SPEC Flyer); survey questions with tallies and selected comments; the best representative documents from survey participants, such as policies, procedures, handbooks, guidelines, websites, records, brochures, and statements; and a selected reading list—both in print and online sources—containing the most current literature available on the topic for further study.

#### SUBSCRIBE TO SPEC

Subscribers tell us that the information contained in SPEC Kits is valuable to a variety of users, both inside and outside the library. SPEC purchasers use the documentation found in SPEC Kits as a point of departure for research and problem solving because they lend immediate authority to proposals and set standards for designing programs or writing procedure statements. SPEC Kits also function as an important reference tool for library administrators, staff, students, and professionals in allied disciplines who may not have access to this kind of information.

SPEC Kits can be ordered directly from the ARL Publications Distribution Center. To order, call (301) 362-8196, fax (301) 206-9789, email <[pubs@arl.org](mailto:pubs@arl.org)>, or go to <<http://www.arl.org/pubscat/index.html>>.

Information on SPEC and other OLMS products and services can be found on the ARL website at <<http://www.arl.org/olms/infosvcs.html>>. The website for SPEC is <<http://www.arl.org/spec/index.html>>. The executive summary or flyer for each kit after December 1993 can be accessed free of charge at the SPEC website.



# Kit 251

# Electronic Reference Service October 1999

## Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	7
SURVEY RESULTS .....	10
RESPONDING INSTITUTIONS.....	18

## Representative Documents

### ELECTRONIC REFERENCE WEBSITES

University of Arizona	
<i>Electronic Mail Reference Service</i> .....	22
Brown University	
<i>Ask a Reference Question</i> .....	23
University of California–Irvine	
<i>Ask a Question: e-mail reference service</i> .....	24
Case Western Reserve University	
<i>Ask A Reference Question</i> .....	26
University of Colorado	
<i>Reference</i> .....	28
University of Connecticut	
<i>About askHomer</i> .....	29
Dartmouth College	
<i>Ask a Librarian</i> .....	30
Indiana University	
<i>Ask a librarian</i> .....	31
University of Maryland	
<i>Ask a Librarian</i> .....	32
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	
<i>OnLine Reference Service (OWL)</i> .....	33
University of Miami	
<i>Ask the Librarian</i> .....	34

University of Michigan	
<i>Ask Us!</i> .....	35
Michigan State University	
<i>Virtual Reference Services</i> .....	37
University of New Mexico	
<i>Ask-A-Librarian Form</i> .....	39
University of Pennsylvania	
<i>Ask a Reference Question</i> .....	40
Temple University	
<i>Archives of REFDESK@LISTSERV.TEMPLE.EDU</i> .....	41
Yale University	
<i>RefQuest: Ask a Reference Question</i> .....	42
York University	
<i>YUasked—Electronic Reference Service</i> .....	43
ELECTRONIC REFERENCE POLICIES, REPORTS, AND STATISTICS	
Columbia University	
<i>Memorandum Regarding Electronic Reference</i> .....	46
University of North Carolina	
<i>Guidelines for Email Reference</i> .....	54
University of Waterloo	
<i>Electronic Reference Guidelines</i> .....	55
<i>Electronic Reference Service Statistics Form</i> .....	60
<i>Electronic Reference Service Newsletter</i> .....	61
Yale University	
<i>Information About Asking a Reference Question</i> .....	62
Selected Resources	
BOOKS AND JOURNAL ARTICLES .....	65
WEBSITES AND LISTSERVS .....	66



# SURVEY





## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Research libraries are increasingly committed to using computer technology for everything from online catalogs to “friends of the library” retail stores. Reference librarians have found many ways to take advantage of technology in extending service beyond the walls of the library. One approach growing in popularity is reference service through electronic mail and web forms.

Library literature demonstrates the growing interest in exploring the benefits of and barriers to delivering reference service by electronic means. Areas of research and writing include the electronic reference interview, delivery of instructional tutorials via electronic methods, and analyses of individual libraries’ experiences with electronic reference service. Despite this interest, a comprehensive picture of the implementation of electronic reference services in ARL libraries has not been available.

The goals of this SPEC Kit were to report on the extent to which ARL libraries provide electronic reference services and offer a snapshot of the types of users reached, questions received, policies established, data-gathering techniques utilized, and innovations implemented.

For purposes of this survey, electronic reference was defined as reference service designed for remote users and identified by a specific link from a library’s website. Electronic reference queries that come directly to individuals or via other library web links were not included in the definition.

### Extent of Electronic Reference Service

Seventy-eight of the 122 ARL member libraries responded to the electronic reference service survey (64% of the total membership). Seventy-five (96% of respondents) reported offering electronic reference, while three (4%) do not. For the 51 respondents who supplied data for the relevant survey question, an average of 177 reference questions are submitted via an electronic reference service

each month. Those 51 respondents reported numbers ranging from 2.3 to 3,200 questions per month, with a median of 35. Closer examination of the data shows significant outliers to be the Library of Congress (2,500 questions per month) and the National Library of Medicine (3,200 questions per month). When the three national libraries are removed from the calculation, the average number of questions submitted monthly via electronic reference service is 67.

### Characteristics

While still a recent phenomenon, the growth of electronic reference has been developing over a number of years. Very few of these programs are new: 22 (30%) of the programs are more than five years old, 37 (50%) fall into the three to five year range, nine (12%) are one to two years old, and six (8%) reported that they are less than one year old. Most libraries—54 or 75%—reported a gradual rate of increase in the number of questions since the service began. One (1%) reported a rapid increase, while 15 (21%) reported no increase, and two libraries (3%) reported a decrease in use of the service since its inception.

Most of the libraries—36 or 48%—link their electronic reference service at the top level of their libraries’ web pages. Twenty-six (35%) reported links on the second level, and 13 (17%) reported links on the third level or lower. Many libraries reported multiple locations for electronic reference links. Email is the most common method for submitting questions, even when users submit them through a web form.

Seventy-four of 75 respondents reported that potential users learn about the service from the library’s home page. Other tactics are employed to advertise the service as well: 61 of the respondents noted library instruction activities; 52 respondents noted that service desk staff refer users to the service; and 37 utilize posters, flyers, and other written promotional materials. Even such creative

promotional techniques as inclusion on the answering machine for the library hours and TV screen ads in the university community center were mentioned.

Thirty-eight (51%) of the libraries reported that they will accept any question. However, many libraries qualified this by saying that the library's response might be to suggest search strategies and sources, recommend that the patron meet with a librarian, or suggest that the question is not appropriate for an email response. Respondents mentioned excluding questions with foul language, requests for medical and legal information for personal use, questions that can be answered with resources generally available in local libraries, and broadcast queries that can be handled better by local public libraries. Thirty-one respondents (41%) accept only basic factual questions, but not included in this class are such items as requests for lists of factual information (for example, long lists of addresses or bibliographical information) or shelf checks for availability of materials.

Most respondents reported that the reference unit manages the electronic reference service. Teams within public services departments or cross-unit teams were mentioned as part of alternative management strategies for the electronic reference service. In some branch libraries where a reference unit does not exist, the librarians who provide reference assistance manage the electronic reference service.

Responsibility for answering questions is clearly decentralized. Twenty-six of 75 respondents described their environment as one in which responsibility rotates among several people on an established basis. Twenty-five described a situation where questions are received by a single individual and distributed to others. Seventy-one (95%) of the respondents reported that librarians are answering the electronic reference questions; 41 (55%) reported that support staff are participating in answering such questions; six (8%) reported using graduate assistants; two (3%) reported using student assistants; and two (3%) reported using other staff expertise such as computer science specialists or public affairs information specialists. Many libraries assign responsibility for answering electronic reference questions to librarians at the reference desk or on telephone reference duty. Others set up a triage system where basic questions are answered by librarians on the reference desk and others are forwarded to subject

specialists. Some services allow users to choose the branch library or department to receive their question, so the staffing arrangement may vary by location.

Response time is a minor issue for the respondents. Twenty-nine (39%) of the libraries stated that they do not specify a guaranteed response time. Twenty-one (28%) libraries specify a response time of one day, and 14 (19%) specify two days.

## Data Gathering and Assessment

Despite the current interest in assessment as a management tool, little information about users is being collected by ARL libraries in the area of electronic reference services. Most respondents (75%) collect the number of electronic reference questions, and 69% are including those questions in their general reference statistics. However, only 29 libraries (39%) are collecting user data. The user information that is collected includes:

- type of patron;
- type of question;
- time of day;
- affiliation of patron;
- response; and
- number of questions rejected as being outside of scope or policy.

Sixty-five of the libraries (87%) reported that they had performed no user assessment of their electronic reference service. Of the 10 who report conducting user assessment surveys (13%), both informal and formal assessment techniques have been utilized. Strategies for assessment have included questions on the service as part of a general library user survey and follow-up at the end of individual transactions.

Forty-six of the respondents (62%) reported that they maintain an archive of questions and responses. Email systems (e.g., Eudora, Pine) are used most commonly to archive questions and responses. Web-based database management systems, the Internet Public Library's software, and paper were mentioned as alternative archiving techniques. Of those who maintain an archive, the vast majority (91%) report that no part of that archive is publicly accessible.

## Conclusion

This survey shows that electronic reference service has become an established form of reference delivery within ARL libraries. It is yet another example of libraries' efforts to exploit technology and provide services to remote users. Despite expressed fears of being overwhelmed by those users, the workload seems to be manageable thus far, but local policies control who is eligible to receive reference service electronically and what type or level of questions are answered via the service. The age and number of electronic reference services indicate a significant amount of experience in developing, managing, and running a remote user service, and most ARL libraries see the service as part of the reference unit. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of variation in staffing and managing strategies.

Little electronic reference assessment seems to be occurring. Most libraries are counting questions and adding them to their reference statistics. This strategy is simple given the email technology that most ARL libraries are using to deliver the service and create archives. Technological solutions beyond email might encourage and facilitate additional data collection and assessment. One useful area for further study would be to examine the way that patrons are using this service; for example, to what extent do their questions elicit a "no answer response" versus the answer to the question. Online user surveys clearly need to be conducted as well, but few ARL libraries are experimenting with interactive technologies, such as chat rooms, to deliver this kind of service. Hopefully, this situation will change because interactive technologies offer expanded opportunities for reference interviews as well as new possibilities for assessment.