

# **Reinventing your Reference Collection**

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## **Abstract**

School libraries are changing constantly due to technological and organizational changes. One of the areas of the library most affected by change is the print reference collection. This presentation will provide an overview of the changing nature of the reference collection in the school library and a justification for maintaining a reference collection in a 21<sup>st</sup> century library. A significant part of the presentation will include resources, ideas, and strategies for a reference collection development plan. The presentation will specifically address important decision points for collection development, including selection and de-selection of print resources, electronic reference resources, virtual reference, and integrating the reference collection into an information inquiry program.

**Keywords:** Reference collection, Reference section, print resources, reference resources, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning

## Introduction

I love to browse the reference section of my school library. I find the most wonderful things there: encyclopedias, almanacs, the Guinness Book of world records. Without goals or purpose I browse these treasures and discover the most wonderful things, like the population Palau, the world's biggest donut, endangered species in our national parks. At my library, the reference collection stands in the very front as a welcome sign for knowledge explorers like me. For me, the reference section is a gateway for answering general information questions and then a guide for deeper exploration of unknown topics.

These days I seem to be a lone explorer of the reference section. Most library patrons prefer to do their browsing on *Google* and deeper explorations through electronic databases. Instant access to information through mobile electronic communication has drastically changed the way most people search for and access information. For example, my voice activated mobile search assistant *Siri* answers most of my ready reference questions without a need to go to an atlas, almanac or encyclopedia. If want to know the population of Palau, I just ask my phone and the answer is displayed in seconds. I am also ashamed to say that I often consult Wikipedia for answers to questions raised at the family dinner table.

In the age of ubiquitous computing, *Siri*, and search engines, what role does the school library print reference collection play in helping us to become effective users of information and ideas? It's important to ask this question today because the school library is changing around us, and the reference collection is at the forefront of that change. School librarians, as leaders in learning, information, and technology, light the way in guiding students, faculty, staff, and administrators through the information universe, mapping out the most effective routes to the most authoritative answers.

This presentation will provide an overview of the changing nature of the reference collection in the school library and a justification for maintaining a balanced reference collection in a 21<sup>st</sup> century library. A significant part of the presentation will include resources, ideas, and strategies for a reference collection development plan. The presentation will specifically address important decision points for collection development, including selection and de-selection of print resources, electronic reference resources, virtual reference, and integrating the reference collection into an information inquiry program.

Let's start with some serious self-reflection on the state of the print reference

collection, taking time to explore the reference section's purpose, characteristics, and target audience. Then, let's imagine a space for the reference collection that meets the needs of our 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and build this space from the ground up. As part of this process let's discuss basic types of reference and how they organize information. Let's also explore the essential differences between print and electronic references and develop a decision making process for selecting materials. When we have developed our vision for a 21<sup>st</sup> century reference collection, let's work to put it on paper by creating a reference collection development plan that functions as a policy document and information sharing tool.

### **What is in your reference collection?**

The best place to start is where you are. Let's take a look at your current print reference collection. Do you currently have a print reference collection in your school library? If so, where is it located? How many titles do you have on the shelves? What is the average age of these titles? How evenly balanced is your reference collection over the different Dewey or Universal Decimal Classifications? How many electronic reference titles your library have and how accessible are these items?

Although it is sometimes difficult to take the time and commitment to reflect on the status of your school library reference section it is an important task for maintaining a current and relevant collection. Asking and answering the questions listed above will help you understand if your collection is current or out of date, balanced or out of balance in scope and format.

According to Buckland (2007) the purpose of a reference collection is two fold: 1) to provide resources for looking up or verifying factual data, in other words, a go-to resource and 2) to supply resources that provide an introduction or context for any topic. Based on these basic functions there are a number of reference tools such as atlases, almanacs, and encyclopedias to help with ready reference questions and basic information exploration. These tools include very specific types of organization schemes, such as the alphabetical organization of encyclopedias, topical organization of almanacs, and chronological organization of historical timelines.

The ability of the Internet to perform keyword and phrase searches has revolutionized the way we are able to search for and locate information, which in turn, has changed the role of the reference collection in the library. No longer do library users have to call the reference desk for answers to questions, such as "who won the Kentucky Derby in 2015?" Changing times have changed how we access information, but in many libraries the

print reference collection continues to occupy a central location of the library. Many librarians working in the reference section have noticed the changing role of the reference collection and have provided some valid rationales for continuing the collection in print format. According to Singer (2012) some librarians have pointed out that the location of the reference section at the front of the library provides users with a “first impression” serving as a type of welcome center and guide for resources found deeper in the stacks (p.10). Additionally, many librarians maintain a print reference collection because they believe it is their mission to provide users with resources in multiple formats and some users prefer to use print reference resources. There is also some indication that print resources are effective information inquiry tools for younger students because of the way they structure and organize information (Lanning and Turner, 2010) Finally, librarians assert that it is important to maintain a print reference collection because many library budgets are not consistent from year to year. Purchases of print materials are added to the permanent collection annually, while many of the online information reference materials are accessed through online subscription databases, which in tight budget times may be discontinued or reduced in offerings. The feeling of many librarians is that if a balanced collection between print and electronic reference resources is not maintained, budgetary fluctuations affecting serial subscription reference materials may result in a reference collection that lacks depth and variety. (Singer, 2012).

In contrast to the arguments for maintaining a print reference collection many librarians have removed the reference section entirely from their libraries. First and foremost, many librarians have identified the reference section as the least used area of the library. (Polanka, 2008). In many libraries, the print reference collection is what is called a “legacy” collection that is not weeded or removed because print materials add to the number of volumes a library holds which sometimes affects funding allocations (Singer, 2012). However, school libraries that are making room for innovative programming spaces such as social collaboration spaces, maker spaces, or problem based learning group work areas, are considering the reference section of the library as expendable space (Ghezzi and Johnson, 2015).

In a school library the reference collection must provide resources in multiple formats that meet the needs of their users. This seems to be a simple and practical statement and a practical goal for school librarians. But the reality of school library reference collections is quite different. In an informal study of print reference collections in Kentucky, graduate students in library media education reported that in many school libraries the reference collection is sorely out of date, in need of serious weeding, and little used. In some cases, the reference section has been removed entirely but not replaced

with either electronic reference resources, computers to access electronic reference, or an information literacy curriculum. Like many schools across the globe, school library budgets have been cut, so updating the collection has been difficult in past years. (personal communication)

If you find yourself in a library with a reference collection that is not meeting the needs of your users, my suggestion is to be brave and begin to initiate the change to a 21<sup>st</sup> century reference section. This does not mean eliminating the print reference collection entirely. It does however mean a developing a carefully planned, current, and relevant collection in multiple formats that follows a collaboratively developed and approved reference collection development plan.

### **Creating a Reference Collection Development Plan**

The first step in reinventing your reference section is creating a reference collection development plan that serves as a guide for how you will develop and maintain your reference collection. The plan should define the purpose, size and scope of the collection, describe the role of the reference collection in your school, the balance between print and electronic resources, and how the curriculum and information services are supported by the collection. The plan also is a document that can be referred to for making important decisions when faced with budgetary or staffing challenges (Singer, 2012). You do not need to reinvent the wheel by creating your own reference collection development plan. Your professional organization, such as the American Library Association will have a thorough reference collection policy that explains how to select materials and when specific items should be removed from the reference collection. In adapting collection development tools provided by your professional organization to a plan for your school library, make sure you involve your stakeholders, including administration, faculty, staff, and students in decision making process. This will ensure that your plan will have the support of your library users and will meet the needs of your school.

#### ***Resources for Collection Development Plans:***

Reference collection development policy template

[http://www.alaeditions.org/files/Singer\\_Reference-Collection-Development-Policy-Template.docx](http://www.alaeditions.org/files/Singer_Reference-Collection-Development-Policy-Template.docx)

ALA approved format and criteria that should be addressed in a reference collection development policy. Developed by Carol Singer

### IFLA School Library Guidelines

<http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/school-libraries-resource-centers/publications/ifla-school-library-guidelines.pdf>

Internationally approved guidelines for school libraries, with specific guidelines for the purpose and role of reference resources and services.

### Reference resources. National Library of New Zealand: Services to Schools

<http://schools.natlib.govt.nz/school-libraries/collection-formats/reference-resources>

This guide designed to help school librarians reflect on the reference collection, including a discussion of the purpose, content, and accessibility of the collection for all users.

## **Weeding the collection**

Many librarians hate to weed their print collections because they develop a personal attachment to each and every item in their library. However, the reference section above all other areas of the library must contain relevant and current reference materials in both print and electronic formats. According to Singer (2012), print reference collections that are not regularly weeded, can lack “curb appeal” and will not attract users. Former AASL president Terri Grief (Kirk, 2010) used a “tough love” approach to weeding her collection and ended up with a reference section that was neater, cleaner, and more relevant for her students. Based on the criteria defined by your reference collection development plan, remove both print and electronic reference items from the collection that are not longer current or relevant to the needs of your users. Add items to the collection that are timely, authoritative and meet your budgetary needs. During the weeding process continue to evaluate the balance between your selection and de-selection of print and electronic materials, and the depth and scope of the collection across Dewey categories.

### ***Resources for Weeding***

Weeding Library Collections: A Selected Annotated Bibliography for Library Collection Evaluation: ALA Library Fact Sheet 15

<http://www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet15>

An ALA approved bibliography, providing guidance for weeding collections

Tips for weeding your reference collection. Collection Reflection. [Blog]

<http://cdstacked.blogspot.com/2013/01/tips-for-weeding-your-reference.html>

A blog devoted entirely to the reference collection, developed and maintained by professional librarians.

[Keeping Your Library Collection Smelling F.R.E.S.H! The Adventures of Library Girl \[Blog\]](http://www.librarygirl.net/2013/10/keeping-your-library-collection.html)  
<http://www.librarygirl.net/2013/10/keeping-your-library-collection.html>

Professional librarian and blogger, Library Girl, offers a simple method for weeding the library collection

[CREW: A Weeding Manual for Modern Libraries](https://www.tsl.texas.gov/sites/default/files/public/tslac/ld/pubs/crew/crewmethod08.pdf)

<https://www.tsl.texas.gov/sites/default/files/public/tslac/ld/pubs/crew/crewmethod08.pdf>

Approved by the state of Texas, this is a comprehensive manual for weeding the library collection

## **Building a 21st c. Reference Collection**

Ready reference is still a critical need, but users have ready reference in their own hands on mobile devices. Access to instant information has created the expectation in all of us that the answers to our questions should be at our fingertips, free, easy, and instantaneous. Libraries of all types in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must celebrate this fact and move to a more current and relevant model of reference. To develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century reference collection school librarians must be brave. They must be able to evaluate the status of their reference section in an objective manner and be willing to discard items that are not used, no longer relevant, or out of date. In essence, the reference collection must be reinvented from the ground up. This means removing all items from the shelves. Initially, the shelves may be empty, but this creates an opportunity for developing a space for authentic information inquiry activities using a balance of print and electronic reference resources. Singer (2012) provides excellent advice when she states:

Try to imagine what the reference area would look like if it were completely empty. Think about how it is used and what the best design would be if that space there were no restrictions on how to configure that space. How much of that space should be used for a print collection? How should it be arranged? (pg. 90)

When imagining the 21<sup>st</sup> century reference collection think of the ways you can provide resources and services to your users in a variety of formats, including print and electronic resources, information inquiry instruction and face-to-face or personal information services. Creating a reference collection development plan that reflects a reinvented reference collection will play a critical role in this process, as will developing an effective web site for your library and an organizational model for delivering virtual reference services. With these plans in mind, your reference section can exist inside and outside the library at the same

time, as well as in the classroom and in your students' homes (Safford, 2005).

A key component of developing a 21<sup>st</sup> century reference section is implementing an information inquiry model in your school. Educating administrators, staff, students, and teachers about the importance of developing effective users of information and ideas is a key standard in 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and libraries (Riedling, Shake, and Houston, 2013).

### ***Resources for Developing a Lean Print Reference Collection***

Sullivan, M. (2013). *Library spaces for 21st-century learners: A planning guide for creating new school library concepts*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

This book provides a guide for implementing a 21<sup>st</sup> century model of school libraries, including planning for collaborative group information inquiry activities, print and electronic collections, and flexible use of space

Core Collection Development Tools, H.W. Wilson/EBSCO

<https://www.ebscohost.com/public/childrens-core-collection>

An online subscription-based collection development tools created by and for librarians that provides information on authoritative reference sources for students of all ages.

### ***Resources for Implementing an Information Inquiry Program***

Eisenberg, M. B., Murray, J. R., & Bartow, C. (2016). *The Big6 curriculum: Comprehensive information and communication technology (ICT) literacy for all students*.

Implementation guide for using the Big6 information literacy model in an educational technology infused curriculum.

Kuhlthau, C. C., Maniotes, L. K., & Caspari, A. K. (2007). *Guided inquiry: Learning in the 21st century*. Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited.

This book provides a comprehensive guide for implementing an information inquiry model into the school curriculum.

Riedling, A., Shake, L., and Houston, C. (2013). *Reference skills for the school librarian: Tools and tips*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Santa Barbara, CA: Linworth.

The book provides guidance and an overview of a wide selection of information inquiry models and reference resources.

### ***Resources for Developing a site for Virtual Resources and Services***



Gale Virtual Reference Library: K-12

<http://www.cengage.com/search/showresults.do?N=197+4294904997+4294917621>

A vast collection of ebooks, databases, and more for the school library reference collection.

Silipigni, L. & Radford, M. (2007). Service sea change: Clicking with screenagers through virtual reference. Proceedings of the ACRL Thirteenth National Conference, Baltimore, Maryland.

A research study, recommendations and results for providing Virtual Reference Services to teens.

<http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/national/baltimore/papers/191.pdf>

Internet Public Library Reference Desk

<http://www.ipl.org/IPLBrowse/GetSubject?vid=12&cid=3&tid=4244&parent=0>

Free online reference resources for K-12 organized by type of reference.

Reference Services for Youth. Youth Services Librarianship [Wiki]

<https://youthserviceslibrarianship.wikispaces.com/Reference+Services+for+Youth>

Virtual information Wiki for providing current and relevant reference services for Youth

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