The reference librarian aims to know the reference collection like the back of his or her hand. This knowledge of knowledge can be characterized as encyclopedic, in that it enables the reference librarian to comprehend the unity that exists within the branches of knowledge—the subject categories as outlined in the Library of Congress (LC) classification and represented in the reference collection. Comprehending this unity further enables the reference librarian to make those intelligent leaps, uncanny connections, and creative combinations between subject categories, whether closely or distantly related or even entirely unrelated. This meta-knowledge and the fluency with the collection it supports define at its most fundamental level what reference is and what reference does. Despite its ease, speed, and convenience, the algorithm is no replacement for the mind of the reference librarian. Critical acceptance of this fact is in evidence when the simple, spontaneous one-on-one encounter at the reference desk rather than the pre-planned, required session in information literacy is understood as the primary locus of learning in the library. Reference librarianship with its modest accoutrements—the reference desk, the reference interview, the reference collection—is still most suitable to provide the kind of guidance every thinking student needs to rightly read and engage the authoritative works that make up the main collection.

KEYWORDS Information literacy, reference, reading comprehension
We live in an increasingly virtual world to which the real world is increasingly connected. With mobile devices that seamlessly proffer terabytes of information, user expectations for library resources are off the charts. Indeed, millennials demand information speedily, easily, and at their convenience. The past 15 years or so have seen students inhabit the virtual world like there is no other. They have become accustomed to Google everything with confidence and without a hitch: goods, services, entertainment, friendship, and information—this last, with abandon. Yet their academic course requirements have assumed a search skill set that entails more than the easy point-and-click of surfing the Internet for random content (OCLC, 2005). Such indiscriminate, incautious bagging of information was being referred to as “research.”

After acclimating themselves to the disruptive pressures brought on by the rapid changes in technology, reference librarians began developing in earnest an instructional program to deal with the increasing amount of information on the Internet and the need to find, retrieve, evaluate, and use that information (ACRL, 2000). Students, it was claimed, needed to become literate in the use of online information. The end result, as formally propagated by the library associations, came to be known as “information literacy” with reference librarians eagerly taking it upon themselves to rescue students from lapsing into information-seeking behaviors that were hit or miss and “good enough.” While not casting aside traditional reference work the new program gained acceptance and expanded its purview not only as more content came online but as more and more librarians were hedging against obsolescence. It seemed a suitable response to the information explosion. Amid the noise and the mayhem of that period of adjustment, information literacy was formalized, becoming of increased importance, while traditional reference work quietly carried on in a somewhat subdued fashion. After all, it was only natural that libraries would wish to market newer resources and services—those deemed appropriate to the 21st-century library and its users. Convinced of the merits of information literacy, both instructional and salvic, library associations began to promote it aggressively (OCLC, 2002). Yet oddly the underlying principles, if not the actual content, of what reference librarians signified by information literacy were contained in the countless composition handbooks, college success/FYE workbooks, study guides, and subject-specific research methods texts that were sitting on library shelves. Given the amorphous constructs of information literacy (Wilder, 2005; Ariew, 2014, p. 218; Seale, 2015, p. 159) and the fact that the handbooks were a mere call number away, one might have wondered at the time why reference “instructional” librarians were expending so much time and energy reinventing the wheel.

Traditional reference work sees the reference librarian as a knowledgeable guide, a helping hand for the one-on-one spontaneous encounter at the reference desk. Simply by being there, the reference desk creates a
context that both draws and elicits student self-initiative. The one-on-one, the reference desk, the context, the spontaneity, the student’s self-initiative—these unassuming marks of traditional reference, though self-evident, now are languishing within the information literacy paradigm, overtaken by the algorithm, not to mention the virtuosity of the more digitally dexterous. “Those who cultivate competence in the use of a new technology,” wrote Neil Postman, “become an elite group that are granted undeserved authority and prestige by those who have no such competence” (Postman, 1992, p. 9). Whether this became the case with libraries is perhaps an open question; still, these traditional and “unplugged” marks of reference remain critical to the reference transaction. They are determinants by which the reference librarian calibrates his or her initial dealings with the student, bringing to bear his or her skill, experience, knowledge, and wisdom, in selecting the works of reference that will best engage the student as individual seeker, economies of scale notwithstanding. “The value of a library’s reference room,” said Matthew Bruccoli, “is the product of the selection of the books and their placement. Students and researchers learn from seeing books that are shelved near each other. The books they need to know about are the ones they didn’t know about.”

Because the reference librarian is engaged in the subject matter, he or she can be fully engaged, fully present, to the student. Reference work is not just a job; it is formative, bringing the novice learner and the subject authority, as represented by the reference book, together for the first time. For centuries, the West especially has provided an information-rich experience. Beginning with the ancient metropolises, access to learning advanced slowly until it reached the provinces and distant outposts. Despite today’s unprecedented equality and ubiquity of access, the art and science of traditional reference work is eminently appropriate to the needs of 21st-century learners. What then is the reference librarian’s knowledge and how can it be of any help to a generation that holds infinity in its pocket?

Reference work as we know it has been practiced for slightly more than one hundred years, so its theoretical underpinnings are not exactly set in stone, yet since its beginning the primary purpose of reference work was to provide assistance to the scholar and the general reader vis-a-vis the collection. Standard works of reference together the library’s catalog and indexes aided the librarian, who was charged with the task of assisting the general reader. Such assistance succeeded, gradually drawing grateful readers, and with more readers, reference work refined as it defined itself—its mission and its function (Rothstein, 1989, p. 373). A reference collection was set aside, even placed in a separate room of the library. A desk and chair were provided for the librarian who worked with this collection. What was the reference librarian to know if not this collection? The question begs a response that compels coming to terms with reference—that is, in defining reference for today.
The reference collection consists of meticulously selected reference works on general and specific subjects. The works are authoritative, reputable published, and authored or edited by either one or a host of subject specialists. Each and every contributing subject specialist is an academic who has given years if not a lifetime to a particular field of study. The reference librarian is privileged to work with the fruit of their research. More expansive than the general encyclopedia but narrower in scope than the main collection, the reference collection is a microcosm, an epitome, of all the branches of learning. The work of maintaining it is no different than that of the gardener, and like a garden, it is a pleasure for the reference librarian to maintain it whether cleaning, weeding, aerating, refreshing, as well as gauging how much or how little readers interact with it so that each work will be useful with no more and no less on the shelves than necessary. The reference librarian will not simply know the location of each book on the shelf, but its authority, value, contents, and use. More than this, he or she will know and understand how a particular subject fits within the general outline of knowledge or “the circle of learning,” the en-cyclo-pedia (Adler, 2010, p.6). This knowledge of knowledge, this metaknowledge, is a fundamental aspect of reference, so much so that it warrants inclusion in any definition of reference. It is the first order of business for the reference librarian. It is a type of encyclopedic knowledge not to be confused with that of the professor, the pedant, or the dilettante. The reference librarian’s faculties of reason, imagination, memory, intelligence, intuition, perception, and discernment are honed, enabling greater fluency and command of what could be thought of as a phenomenology of reference. Should this kind of encyclopedic knowledge seem daunting, it must be borne in mind that reference librarianship is about lifelong learning. It should not intimidate. Rather, it should liberate, allowing reference librarianship to provide the human-centered guidance that is its hallmark.

Far from incurious, the reference librarian is bristling with this knowledge and with eagerness embraces every opportunity to test his or her acumen by fielding questions. The mind of the reference librarian is alive with the manifold and marvelous combinations and connections reference work affords, pathways that serendipitously intersect. Such thinking becomes second nature and is what makes the reference librarian helpful in showing the student how to use the material library as well as how to discover and acknowledge, that is, to recognize as one’s own, that snippet of scholarship that had lay fallow in a reference book. Yet still, there is an immaterial aspect to the reference collection. If only in theory, there is the ideal of objective knowledge, or as outlined in the Library of Congress class schedules. This ideal is perceived subjectively, in which perception, reference as a concept takes on a significance that sustains as it inspires creativity in the mind of the reference librarian. It is at this level where seemingly subconscious, ad hoc, and uncanny connections are made. Bored? Indifferent? No way! The
reference librarian is nothing if not an enthusiastic learner—a true lifelong learner—and it is hoped that this enthusiasm, this love of learning, and the unity in diversity that make up the reference collection will rub off on all whom the reference librarian serves—but especially the next generations.

Reference knowledge provides the opportunity to truly guide the student. This guidance should not be confused with formal instruction, as the reference librarian does not instruct in the manner of the professor. He or she communicates reference knowledge to the student. This one-on-one communication is the instruction proper to the reference librarian. The reference librarian is free to develop practical aids at his or her discretion, aids based on experience at the reference desk. With self-directed learning the desired aim, the reference librarian may, for example, encourage the student to read reference book entries slowly and reflect upon what has been read. Taking the time to read, comprehend, and assimilate what at first may be difficult to understand is the basis for learning. The reference librarian informs the student that academic reading requires the same amount of attention, if not more, as academic research. There is no point in going through the steps of research if no learning is taking place with each step. An assignment may be completed—but it can be completed without learning occurring. Gaining a preliminary understanding of a subject will go a long way in stoking student self-confidence and further engagement with the subject under study.

The reference department is as much a venue for learning as the classroom. The reference librarian walks the student through the more demonstrably tactile and cognitively deliberate reference process. Behind the encouragement to read mindfully is a simple but critical element that today has become little more than an afterthought: forethought, a cognitive faculty that an algorithm all but eliminates. If not mindful, the student is prone to passivity staring at a screen and can easily mistake screen time for research. One-on-one reference work offsets this danger. Taking a reference book firmly in his or her grasp is a way of keeping the student actively engaged in what amounts to a step-by-thoughtful-step process. By sheer heft alone, the volume in hand rivets the student’s attention. He or she will place it on a table or stand, open it, skim it, read it, glean from it, and take notes from it. The student may or may not be seated but passivity is not an option. The reference librarian is keen to observe that the student is in the present moment.

Together with forethought, another easily overlooked aid for the student in reference is the précis. The inexpensive prerequisites to this concise summary are a sharpened pencil and a sharpened mind. Précis writing is an excellent skill and goes hand in hand with the reference book. Indeed, it could be said that the précis is the interactive tool par excellence for the student engaged in reference work. In his *Précis Writing for American Schools*, Samuel Thurber writes: “The first and perhaps the greatest value of précis writing is the demand it makes upon us to read comprehendingly and thoughtfully.” To quote at length:
Newspapers, magazines, books surround us and thrust themselves into our busy lives. So overwhelmed are we by this avalanche of reading matter that before we know it we become ‘mere skimmers of the printed page.’ We glance from headline to headline, from sporting column to cartoon. If a paragraph is long or dull, we skip it; if a sentence is a bit involved, we lose the thought—and let it go; if a word is unfamiliar, we dash on. Time is precious. A hundred other things wait to be done. Books—more books—offer their honey for us to sip.

Now this glancing into many pages, this flitting butterfly-fashion over print, is a debilitating process. It develops a habit of seeing and thinking superficially. Our thought remains continually fluttering on the surface of things. Worse still, our minds are trained to wander, to start and jump, to snatch a bit here and a bit there, to look at books as they look at pictures that glide by on a shimmering screen and make no lasting impression. But to write a précis we must look steadfastly at words, and carry sentences through to the end. We cannot skim. We must ‘read to digest,’ to distinguish between unimportant details and the central thought, to understand perfectly the very heart of the whole matter. In a word, we must think. (Thurber, 1940, pp. 4–5)

The précis yields a double dividend as the student’s compositional skills are also sharpened. Thurber asserts in no uncertain terms that précis writing demands care in one’s choice of words. “Into a few well-ordered sentences,” he states, “we must pack the essence of a paragraph, or even a whole page. To do this effectively we must explore our stock of words, arrange and rearrange them, hunting for the most concise, and at the same time, the most exact terms . . . . Thus the making of an abstract is an exercise of the highest value in vocabulary building, in sentence construction, and in clear, concise expression” (Thurber, 1940, p. 5).

Inculcating forethought and the précis are only two practical examples of the reference librarian’s “instructing” the student so that the student might best engage the content of the authoritative texts to which he or she has been guided. These aids prove useful in helping the student understand not only the subject at hand as discovered in the reference book but also the rich mosaic—the circle of learning—that underlies all the subjects he or she will study in college and beyond. Under the reference librarian’s guiding hand, the student will learn to give thought to the thought of those he or she is reading. In the end, understanding an entry in an encyclopedia, a conclusion in an article, or a chapter in a book becomes more critical than the collection itself because without understanding, the library becomes a wasteland. “A large library,” said Seneca “is apt to distract rather than to instruct the learner. It is much better to be confined to a few authors than to wander at random over many” (Edwards, 1973, p. 357). One wonders what Seneca would have thought if he knew that students today had access to information beyond the library.
One may also wonder, at this point, why, in this day of all things digital, the reference book is being stressed here. As this touches upon a muted controversy between print and screen, a controversy that most assuredly pertains to reading comprehension (Mangen et al. 2013) and its impact on the work of the reference librarian, well, it is a brisk subject for another day.

REFERENCES


