

Web forms

Improving, expanding, and promoting remote reference services

by Annette Haines and Alison Grodzinski

As library online systems grow and become increasingly complex, electronic reference service is becoming increasingly popular. Now more than ever library users need someone to help them use the resources available.

Electronic reference service is currently offered via electronic mail by many institutions. The advantages of this type of remote reference service are well documented, but there are limitations. Outlined below are some ways that an online Web form can improve upon these limitations and add value to your library's reference service.

Provides remote access

Libraries now often provide access to many of their information resources through a library homepage on the Web. Web access to reference service is a logical next step. An electronic Web form gives users access to one of the most valuable library resources—the reference desk—from anywhere in the world, on any day, at any time of the day or night. Although response time to questions is usually not instantaneous, students can formulate questions as they arise instead of having to wait until they can phone the reference desk or visit the library building.

Like the standard e-mail reference service that many libraries now offer, the Web form provides a convenient means for users to communicate directly with a librarian from remote locations. This service surpasses an e-mail reference service because it eliminates the necessity of accessing e-mail to ask a question or, for that matter, even the requirement of having an e-mail account.

Enhances approachability

For library users who are often overwhelmed by the library experience, online access to the reference desk is invaluable. Approaching the desk can be a very intimidating experience for many students. Often they worry that they are bothering the reference librarian, or they feel their question is not worthy of asking. Through electronic reference services, patrons now have the opportunity to say anything without feelings of embarrassment or intimidation. Just like e-mail, the online form provides anonymity to users who perhaps have personal questions, and a user-friendly point of access to those who are reluctant to approach the reference desk.

With the form, the librarian plays an active role in the library-patron relationship. As opposed to e-mail, where the

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patron is required to initiate the reference interaction, the form reaches out and takes the first step. An attractive fill-in-the-blank structure guides the unsure user through the reference transaction with clarity and purpose.

Supplies framework

The structured format of a Web form query can be beneficial to both the library and the user. Without the possibility of a reference interview, initial questions received online are invariably difficult to decipher. When using e-mail to submit requests, students often omit pertinent information that may be required to answer their question effectively.

A fill-in-the blank format can require students to submit information, both about themselves and their topics, that they may otherwise not think to include. Often, a librarian needs to contact the student to clarify the question or schedule an appointment for in-person assistance. The Web form can be designed to elicit information, such as the requestor's phone number, that makes the follow-up contact easier. Sample questions and guidelines can be included within the form for added immediate referral and ease of use.

Furnishes statistical feedback

In addition to a simple and convenient means of communication with a patron, the electronic form also provides a method of feedback on how patrons are using the online system. Statistics can be formulated based on the information provided on the form. Information such as department, status, and access location can be incorporated into the form. Unlike a reference question submitted through e-mail, the library can determine what statistics to gather and design the form accordingly. The information can then be used to fine-tune, improve, or expand the service.

Helps improve and expand librarians' skills

As electronic reference services move traditional library services into a new age, librarians need to develop new skills or at least be able to adapt traditional reference skills to new modes of communication.

An electronic Web form gives users access to one of the most valuable library resources—the reference desk—from anywhere in the world, on any day, at any time of the day or night.

Even for the most knowledgeable and experienced reference staff, responding in writing does not always come very easily. Librarians who are used to personal interaction with a patron, may find it difficult to respond to vague questions without the possibility of a reference interview. The Web form provides the librarian with much more detailed information than e-mail submissions.

Beyond reference skills, librarians have the opportunity to fine-tune their technical skills, from designing the form to writing the HTML and CGI script.

Promotes visibility of library

A library Web site may make your library more visible, but a reference Web form will enhance this visibility by promoting the services your library provides. What better way is there to give a "human touch" to your Web site than by allowing your visitors to ask a librarian a question from your front page?

A Web form can provide a more personal touch than an e-mail link by allowing the inclusion of a greeting or pleasing graphics to communicate a positive impression of your library.

Further possibilities

Web forms expand the library reference service geographically and are unlimited by days and hours. Beyond using the Web form as an "ask a librarian" service, libraries are now developing tutorials and instructional modules to instruct users and answer commonly asked questions about the library. In addition to providing users with immediate feedback, interactive, Web-based tutorials can be used in conjunction with courses and may help relieve overburdened library staff.

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From Caesar to crowd pleasers
and everyone
in between...

44 B.C.

Julius Caesar is assassinated at the Roman Senate, touching off a 13-year civil war.

1429 Joan of Arc becomes the heroine of France with her victory over the English at Orleans. She is later captured and burned at the stake.

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1944 D-Day: Allied forces commanded by Dwight D. Eisenhower land on Normandy Beach in France, an invasion that leads to the end of World War II in Europe.



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1999 The Gale Group launches *Biography Resource Center*, the most complete online biographical reference. Public and academic library patrons now have a single, easy-to-navigate platform to conduct in-depth research on a particular person, event, country or era.

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pages: the Real Regency Clothing Page, Regency Fashion Plates, and the Men's Page, which show costume images from fashion journals and plates and photographs of actual regency garments. *Access:* <http://locutus.ucr.edu/~cathy/reg3.html>.

- **The History of Costume.** C. Otis Sweezy reproduces the plates in the "History of Costume" or "Zur Geschichte der Kostume," which was printed from 1871 to 1880 in Munich. These plates reproduce 500 costume designs from antiquity to the end of the 19th century. *Access:* <http://www.siue.edu/COSTUMES/history.html>.

- **Godey's Lady's Book.** There are several sites that are in the process of providing access to this 19th-century periodical. This important journal included fashion plates as well as poems, fiction, and advice articles. Two locations for this journal are the University of Vermont (*Access:* <http://www.uvm.edu/~hag/godey/index.html>) and the University of Rochester (*Access:* <http://www.history.rochester.edu/godeys/>).

Associations and organizations

- **Costume Society of America.** Offers information on membership, symposia, exhibitions, and scholarships and awards. *Access:* <http://www.costumesocietyamerica.com/>.

- **The Costume Society (Great Britain).** *Access:* <http://www.Bath.uk.com/CostumeSociety/>.

- **International Costumer's Guild.** Provides information on this worldwide organization of costume professionals and amateurs. *Access:* <http://www.costume.org>.

Newsgroups, mail lists, chatrooms

- **F-Costume@lunch.asd.sgi.com.** Focuses on the design, motivation, and execution of fantasy clothing and costume. *Subscribe:* f-costume-request@lunch.asd.sgi.com.

- **H-Costume.** Focuses on how to accurately recreate historical costumes. *Subscribe:* h-costume-request@andrew.cmu.edu.

- **Vintage.** Vintage clothing discussion list. *Subscribe:* listserv@brownvm.brown.edu.

Note

1. Richard Martin. *Contemporary Fashion* (New York: St. James Press, 1995): vii. ■

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Forms can be used in other ways to enhance library services in general. For example, libraries can provide access to commonly used library forms, such as interlibrary loan requests, requests to put library materials on reserve, or requests for extended reference assistance.

As technology becomes more sophisticated, libraries must use creative and proactive methods to maintain viability. A reference Web form is one way libraries can expand their educational and service roles and stay at the forefront of a changing world.

Sources for building a Web form

- Beverly K. Duval. "Tables and feedback forms in Web pages." *Library Software Review* 15 (1996): 31–37. Part of the "Microcomputer Applications in the Library" column looks at the design and HTML coding for tables and feedback forms.

- J. Honeycutt, and Mark R. Brown. *Using HTML 3.2*. 3rd ed. Indianapolis: Que, Inc., 1997. This comprehensive reference book for HTML 3.2 Web page creation includes chapters on creating online forms.

- WebReference.com. *Access:* <http://www.webreference.com/programming/forms.html>. This page gives links to some excellent sites for creating forms on the Web. ■

Web forms to check out

Here are some well-designed Web reference forms we recommend looking at:

- Central Michigan University's Ask a Librarian Web form. *Access:* <http://www.lib.cmich.edu/departments/reference/askref.htm>.

- Ask a Librarian at the Eden-Webster Library at Webster University and Eden Theological Seminary. *Access:* <http://library.websteruniv.edu/askalibn.html>.

- College of Charleston Library Ask a Librarian form. *Access:* <http://www.cofc.edu/~whitt/question.html>.

- Ask Zach at the Zach S. Henderson Library of Georgia Southern University. *Access:* <http://www2.gasou.edu/library/form.html>.