# A checklist for evaluating your library's handbook

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*An essential public relations tool for your patrons.*

**B**etsey Brenneman of Worcester State College's Learning Resources Center has developed an instrument for judging library handbooks that can serve as an aid in self-evaluation or as a checklist for grading a set of materials. The checklist was compiled at the request of Paul Heller, public services librarian at Norwich University, to evaluate entries in the Vermont Library Association Handbook Contest in which all entrants received an individualized critique.

Betsey, acquisitions/interlibrary loan librarian at Worcester State College, is the coordinator of the 2,000-item NEBIC collection, which since early 1987 has resided at Worcester State College. NEBIC (the New England Bibliographic Instruction Collection) serves as a "clearinghouse for examples of instructional materials prepared by academic librarians throughout the New England region." The collection has examples of over 100 handbooks from academic libraries and Betsey has personally reviewed several times that number. A former reference librarian, she has been involved in establishing BI programs and also teaches as an adjunct member of the University of Rhode Island's library school faculty. Generally speaking, the library handbook orients the patron to the library building and locates, usually by map or floorplan, "specific services and collections, elevators, handicapped access, drinking fountains, telephones and other patron aids. It may in addition take the user on a tour of the building, identifying each noteworthy location." The narrative portion describes each service giving rules and regulations as well as hours for service. In order to facilitate its use the guide should be indexed and the index should have multiple entry points and be as free of jargon as possible.

The library handbook has been around since 1905 when Cambridge University introduced *Notes for Readers*. Since then the concept has prevailed and the handbook has become an important public relations tool. Its omission is noted by accrediting agencies and it is often used entirely or in part by development officials, architects, academic administrators, and new faculty members. Every academic library in Vermont, surveyed as potential entrants for the VLA Handbook contest, had published a handbook and some libraries had published more than one. Lyndon State College, for example, publishes a handbook for faculty as well as the general population. The value of the library guide as a force in public relations may be underscored by the fact that in 1972 the Federal Library Committee Task Force on Public Relations published *Guidelines for Library Handbooks* offering advice on content, style of writing, format and design. Betsey's "Criteria for Library Handbooks" treats all of these in detail and, in fact, is partially based on this report. Her description of the criteria serves as an excellent guide for anyone preparing a handbook—at the minimum, providing a checklist of what should be included.

## Criteria for library handbooks

### Content

• *Essential information:* full identification of the school and library; location (street address, room number); days and hours of service; date of handbook's publication (if frequent revision is not expected, this is often coded, as its usefulness is primarily internal).

• *Services provided:* circulation; interlibrary loan; reference; online searching; bibliographic instruction; regulations regarding use, including eligibility.

• *Means of contacting departments:* telephone numbers; names, if turnover is infrequent or revision will be easy.

• *Methods of access to collections:* catalogs; indexes & abstracts; staff assistance (role of the librarian and encouragement for users to seek assistance).

### Useful additional information

• Information about other related information and research sources.

• Floorplans or other simple directions to guide users to desired information.

• Table of contents or index (determined by size and complexity of handbook).

• History of the library (also special architectural features).

• Special collections or related services.

### Order of presentation

• Most basic information (identification, location, etc.) must be given most prominence (cover, or at beginning).

• Constantly needed information (hours, telephone numbers, etc.) should be placed to facilitate access (beginning, end, cover, or insert).

• Bulk of descriptive information should be arranged in order of decreasing importance to the user (since readers are unlikely to read the handbook from cover to cover—the earlier information is presented, the more likely the reader can absorb it).

• Information presented in a logical manner; related items grouped.

### Style of writing

• Narrative should be brief and concise as possible.

• Terminology should be explained from the *reader's* point of view; avoid technical jargon whenever possible.

• The tone should be positive and should invite interest in reading the handbook and using the library.

• Headings should be made with the reader's interest in mind and should be written to facilitate scanning. This is important when a handbook is too brief to require an index.

• An index depends on the size and complexity of the guide's contents.

### Format and design

• Attractive in appearance.
• Easy to understand.
• Handy to use.
• Easy to obtain.
• Designed for retention.
• Economical to revise.
• Typeface (gives character to a page, resulting in a streamlined appearance).
• Illustrations: add to, not detract from the guide's attractiveness and usefulness; serve a purpose; placement with related passages of text; conform to limitations of the printing process; are of high quality; well produced; color (for emphasis and liveliness, ease in reading). ■■

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# Information crisis in Latin America

In the 1970s bibliographic databases offered through such services as DIALOG and ORBIT were made available to libraries in Mexico and Latin America. Since there were very few professionals trained to take advantage of these services, librarians in these countries took it upon themselves to study the capabilities of the databases and convince others of the benefits that they offered.

At the same time, the Mexican government was increasing its efforts to accelerate the country's technological growth, and in the process discovered that information constituted the raw material for developing national programs. The number of users of bibliographic databases grew as the value of access to international information was recognized.

Libraries, universities, research centers, and other information agencies soon began to evaluate these services at professional neetings. Visits from system vendors became increasingly frequent, and have continued through the present time when almost all of them have local offices.

Unfortunately, in 1982 Mexico was hit with one of its worst economic crises involving inflation, foreign debt, manufacturing slumps, unemployment, and a series of critical peso devaluations. The situation has been gloomy ever since and the peso continues to slide in relation to the U.S. dollar while