

Reference Service to Incarcerated People Final Report

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The three reference letters I answered throughout the semester spanned a wide range of reference questions with unique problems and solutions stemming from each. I relied largely on Wikipedia, library catalog searches, and Google searches leading me to news articles across the three different letters. This project allowed me to practice my reference and research skills as well as be a part of a worthwhile service. Providing open and free access to information to anyone is one of the touchstone principles of the information profession and a major responsibility driving me personally in pursuing librarianship and archival work. No matter what circumstances an individual is currently living in, there is no reason for their access to information to be limited.

The first letter I answered was the most varied in reference questions, first asking about contact information, images, and background information on real estate projects in New York including Trump properties, the Time Warner Building, Sunnyside Railyard, and the Domino Sugar Factory complex. For these questions I relied heavily on Google searches to lead me to sources, most of which were the websites of private companies listing information on their development projects, along with photographs and artistic renderings of plans. This letter also contained questions about development of Maglev trains in the United States, which I also approached with a Google search and began exploring recent news articles, landing on one from the Washington Post. The final question was unrelated to their other research interests and was a more practical matter, the patron needed information on the features and services available in the

JPay Tablet, a device available to incarcerated individuals to stay in touch with loved ones in lieu of having a computer or cell phone. I found this information through a quick Google search leading me to the specs of their products from the company website. These were all straight-forward questions, and although the topics centered around multifaceted issues involving development companies, state and national infrastructure, and speculative investments, they were high profile projects that have been well documented, therefore finding information and images through Google searches was not difficult and adequately met the patron's inquiries.

The second letter I answered sought research, stories, and illustrations of Vedic gods and mythology, modern Hindu mythology, as well as fringe theories about extraterrestrial connections to Hindu deities. Since I was unfamiliar with the Vedas and the history of Hinduism, I began my search on Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica for more general overviews of these very broad and complicated topics. It was unclear from the patron's letter how well-versed on the topic they were already, I deduced they had some background knowledge since they provided names of specific deities but to be safe wanted to give as concise and clear an overview as possible. Therefore, I began with providing articles from both Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica on Vedic mythology, as well as the articles for specific gods Indra, Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma. I found Wikipedia to be the most useful of the two encyclopedic sources since it also provided a large quantity of images and featured more nuanced descriptions of various myths and connections between these deities. Next, to answer their question about a specific myth, I did a Google search to find an online version of the story and located a Hindu Temple website that provided resources and texts relating to Hinduism, so I copied the myth from there. At first, I was unsure if this source was reliable, but upon further exploration determined the organization and information included to be more detailed and authoritative than the many

personal websites offering mythology online also found through my exploratory Google search. Finally, they asked for further reading suggestions on Hinduism and theories about Hindu deities as extraterrestrials, so I did a worldcat.org search for book titles relating to these topics and managed to find quite a few resources that they can hopefully purchase or acquire from a library in the future. For the latter, I tried to steer away from conspiracy theory publications and attempted to include titles that were more based in popular science and mythology.

The last letter I answered asked for research on the effects of oppression on mental and physical health, specifically pertaining to the findings of different fields of science exploring human behavior. For this search, I began with a Google search again which turned up many news articles. Keeping in mind the patron wanted sources on both physical and mental health, I tried to find varied sources. The first result was from the Harvard Medical school blog, a recent post, that tied enduring racism to physical health effects in African Americans such as high blood pressure. The next source I found was from the American Counseling Association Magazine and explored the racial disparities in the mental health system. After finding these two authoritative sources discussing the issues in simple and concise posts, I turned to the Pratt Library catalog to find a journal article or more nuanced research, since the patron specifically asked for varied findings across scientific disciplines. Through this search I found a chapter of the book *The Psychology of Oppression*, which went deeper into exploring the psychological and mental health implications of many different forms of oppression, not just racism as the previous sources explored. I felt confident that all these sources were reliable and up to date, and while I only had the space to provide a few resources, I thought the patron would find them engaging and that they could lead to further research or continued reference letter writing.

I believe this project is an important and worthwhile endeavor and enjoyed working on these letters throughout the semester. I do not have reservations working with incarcerated people, I believe the NYPL is providing a vital service by filling the gap in services and opportunities afforded to incarcerated people, who are underserved and deserve access to information, whether it be for life planning purposes like securing employment, purely for entertainment value, or to pursue scholarly research and further education, reference service should be available to anyone who seeks it. It is an injustice that in the United States incarcerated people do not have any access to the wealth of information that is available to the public and providing reference service is a way of combating this injustice.

Answering these letters also allowed for me to practice reference skills in a unique situation due to the nature of letter writing. Typically, reference services are provided in a more conversational setting with back-and-forth dialogue and opportunity for follow ups, but with the constraints of snail mail I found myself making decisions and problem solving without any feedback, which allowed me to think through my actions more thoroughly and approach questions very thoughtfully, keeping in mind the patron's inability to access the Internet or other sources on their own for follow-up. I did have my professor and the coordinator at NYPL proofreading my responses and could rely on their feedback, but that still very different than getting feedback directly from the patron who asked the questions. I believe working through this situation expanded my reference abilities past the traditional reference interview interaction. Each of my letter responses were accepted by the program on the first drafts, which gave me confidence that my services would successfully meet the users' needs. Overall, my experience was positive, and I hope to continue volunteering with this program in the future and am grateful to have been able to assist through our class's involvement in this service.