

Noa Ryan
INFO 652 Reference and Instruction
Nora Almeida
May 2023

Summary of questions and answers

The first letter I received included a number of questions about two related topics. The patron indicated that they were interested in starting a business selling print newsletters (and eventually comics and zines) from home after their release from prison. In my response I broke their requests down into two sections: one covering information related to the production of the newsletters and zines, and another addressing the more general questions about starting a print-based home business.

The second letter I received was extremely specific in its requests and even provided URLs to sources for most of the information. The patron requested submission information about 7 specific writing competitions, and had two additional requests regarding Islamic prayer schedules for their location as well as contact information for a specific literary agency. In my response I mirrored the structure of their query and used the sources they provided.

The third letter I received included questions about the process of pursuing a culinary arts degree in New York City and Philadelphia. The patron also inquired about funding opportunities, specifically grants for people with felony convictions returning from prison. In my response, I broke down the information into a section for culinary arts degree programs with a subsection for each city, a section for grants with subsections for Pell Grants and other federal education grant funding as well as a section addressing different grant opportunities and resources for finding them. At the end of this letter, I included a section detailing local legislation in both New York and Philadelphia respectively that articulates the rights of people with prior felony convictions in seeking educational and employment opportunities, as it seemed relevant to the patrons inquiries and concerns. In this letter I included a copy of *Connections*, as well as providing information about how to access the Philadelphia Free Library's Philly-specific re-entry guide *Bridges*.

Summary of sources

WikiHow – navigated to the site directly and used their internal search to find a guide for starting a newsletter

University of Kansas's Community Toolbox

The Houston Chronicle's subsidiary "Chron" – this one came up a lot in Google searches and generally I wouldn't describe it as a deeply reliable source, but the content ended up being right for the query of the patron/the letter format in some cases.

I used a number of business/entrepreneurship centered sources such as blogs and other small online-only publications for the first patron's requests. Again, many of these sources weren't the kind I would endorse wholesale, but I vetted the specific content and found it met the patron's request in a concise way that I couldn't find in other sources. I provided disclaimers to this effect

on sources where I wanted to make sure the patron knew to trust the particular content, but not necessarily the entire source. These include:

Bizfluent

Biz2Credit

U.S. News & World Report

I used the Pratt Libraries discovery layer search and the NYPL general discovery layer search to find books.

In the second letter I literally used only the sources that the patron provided me in their inquiry – they had URLs for each specific query and I turned to those.

In the third letter I used a site called FelonyRecordHub that I had encountered in a previous volunteer job. I remembered the site had useful information about specific career paths in addition to general reentry resources, so I checked there first.

I used the CUNY website to search for specific Culinary Arts programs, and also searched nyc.gov.

I called 311 as well as the Small Business Administration to get clarification about background check policy for the city-run apprenticeship program *First Course*.

I added a variety of reentry resources and organizations for New York that I had known about from previous work, like the Community Justice Reentry Network, the Fortune Society, and the Osborne Association.

For Philadelphia resources, I found the Philadelphia Reentry Services List via google search, and used that database to find the community groups and support resources listed in the letter. I used studentaid.gov for information about federal grants, and went to state websites to search for state grant opportunities.

I linked to the grants.gov database for the patron.

I used the city government websites for New York and Philadelphia to search for legislation articulating the rights of people with felony convictions in jobseeking and pursuing educational opportunities.

Description of the search process

I used a lot of google, to be honest, often because the topics the patrons I was responding to were inquiring about required up to date information of the kind that is often widely available on the open web rather than, for example, historical research topics, which some of the other letters did contain. Through google I was able to quickly access sites such as the US Chamber of Commerce's Small Business Guidelines, for the first patron I responded to, or find reentry resources in Philadelphia, for the last. I searched the Pratt and NYPL library databases (using the discovery layer) in my first letter, where I found a couple of books about print newsletter business models to suggest to the patron as further reading. In the final letter, there were certain pieces of information surrounding New York reentry that I had previously been aware of and I was able to just include those from personal memory. I was very lucky to encounter a robust public database of Philadelphia reentry resources through google searching which pointed me towards all of the organizations I highlighted in the Philadelphia section.

Even though I didn't spend a huge amount of time in library databases for this work, I do feel that I learned better search practices, both within library databases and using major search engines. I iterated a lot on my searches and examined the language of successful results to further tweak my query phrasing. I also navigated between networks of resources by looking at other pages or sources that useful resources had cited. I also learned about the power of exploring library resources by subject heading, particularly when you find something that is almost just right, but falls short in some crucial category. In my case, I found a book that was just a bit too old to be the newest source I recommended to the patron on the subject. Through looking at other titles under the same subject heading, Nora was able to show me a similar book that was much more recent, and I included both in my letter.

Reflection on the process

I loved doing this work. I felt that the service I was providing was worthwhile and also an appropriate employment of my effort based on my skills. I have worked in the past doing legal advocacy with people who are applying for parole or clemency, which I also loved, but it was difficult at times because I am not a lawyer and there were parts of the work that I simply wasn't good at, they weren't strengths of mine. In part I pursued this career because it feels like one that is well suited to what I am good at, and it's also a job that (not to do vocational awe!) can be service and justice oriented. The parts of the legal advocacy work that I did in the past that I felt I was the best at centered a lot around communication and collaboration with the client (in this case, the patron) in support of their pursuit of information and expression. I felt like I was able to start hitting my stride in terms of understanding this form and how to best format and address people's questions by the final letter, and I'm excited to continue doing correspondence reference work. I don't have the capacity to write 3 letters each week for three months with the NYPL, though I hope to some day, but I absolutely want to connect with the PLSN to tap in to their reference by mail efforts. I don't have reservations about working with incarcerated people. I grew up with an immediate family member with a prior conviction and incarceration history who was able to move on and build a life, incontestably due to race and class privilege in addition to their own innate capacity for life and growth and change. It is one of the great cruelties of our time that so many people have been and continue to be violently denied that chance. Beyond legal advocacy and abolition work at the policy level, I agree with many others that fostering communication and support (material in the form of food and tangible resources, informational in the form of letters like these, and social-emotional in the form of connections and bonds) between those trapped inside and the world outside is a crucial piece of the work of abolition. Reading the range of letters we received this semester, it is striking how many different kinds of information needs are being expressed and how many different realities and desires they reflect. It is obvious how providing information like this isn't happening in a vacuum, it is providing people with a puzzle piece that fits into the larger paths they are building.

Learning outcomes

Apply critical and ethical thinking processes to the selection and use of information sources.

I chose this learning outcome because the most concrete examples came to mind from the process of making these letters. One of those examples came during the final letter I wrote,

where the patron had made an inquiry about culinary arts programs. Technically one of the “top programs” (by admittedly dubious metrics) is the Institute of Culinary Education. I was debating whether or not to include it among the list of community college programs and the free city-run apprenticeship. In my first draft, I decided to put it in with the aim of showcasing the range of options. Nora pointed out to me in her feedback that because it was a for-profit institution, it might not make sense to include it. After reflecting, and spending more time on the ICE site and looking at their somewhat harshly worded policy around background checks and conviction records, I realized that “providing the range of options” doesn’t have to mean being beholden to the unethical registers of that range. The great power of being in the position of providing reference service is being responsible for making that kind of editorial decision – coming from a background in education of being beholden to educational standards and having to have superiors sign off on the information myself and my team were choosing to include, I’m not used to having the ability to make executive decisions about information in this way. Its a huge responsibility, especially in this context where patrons are relying on this service without recourse to the same independent research tools that are available on the outside. I have also spent time in organizing spaces where its easy for best intentions not to be taken in good faith, and noticed that a tendency to shy away from making real decisions about what is right quietly emerged in the aftermath – *who am I to say?* If anything this assignment made me realize what a huge responsibility librarians carry, and how real the implications of the “selection and use of resources” can be. If this same patron came back and wasn’t satisfied with any of the programs for an initial list, then it would be a time to reconsider providing information about this program, and how to contextualize that information if I were to provide it. The line between paternalism and indifference is actually not that thin, and I leave this course and this work more empowered to occupy a position of principled care and attention towards patrons, grounded in my own values.