Reference Services in Academic and Public Libraries

Colin MacKay

(he/him/his)

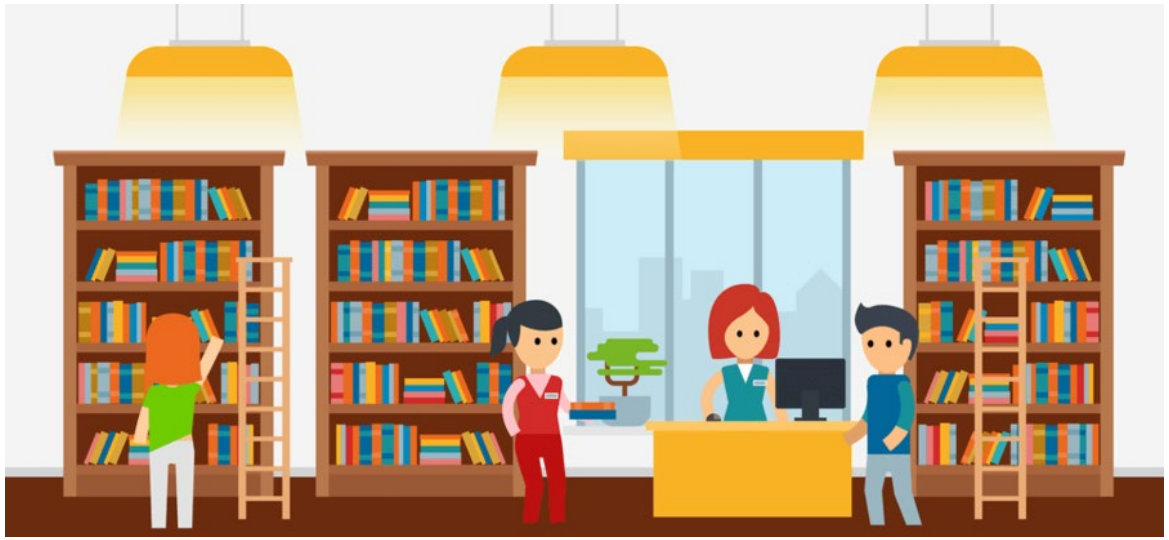
Personal experiences

- Graduated in 2022 from Mohawk College.
- Currently working in both an academic library and a public library.
- Have worked at other academic and public libraries in the past.



Reference services: key differences

- In academic libraries, the focus of reference services is to **educate the patron on how to find that information for themselves** (go through steps).
- In public libraries, there is more of an emphasis on **helping the patron in the most effective way possible** (find them the best resources quickly).



Academic Library: Vaughan Memorial Library (Acadia University)



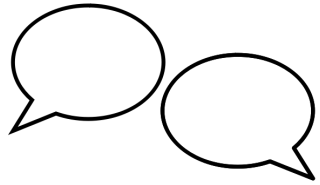
Who do we serve?

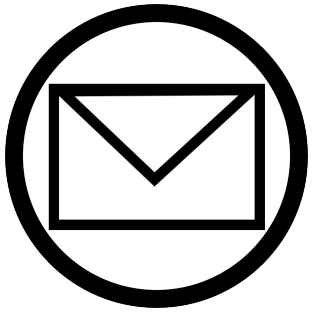
- Primarily academic community
  - Faculty/staff/students
  - Novanet
  - Alumni/retirees
- Community members (limited)



What do we do?

- Service:
  - In-person, over the phone, over email, virtual chat.
- Types of questions: directional, collection, and technical. More in-depth questions directed elsewhere (librarians).
  - Ex. Reference Desk, Novanet LiveHelp, Lib-guides
  - Exception: after-hours, weekends





Kinds of reference questions

Reference questions are very specific, often based on resource access and research questions.

- **Directional**: “Where can I find the printers?” or “where is the bathroom?”
- **Collection**: “I am looking for books on Python…” or “how can I access articles online from home?”
- **Technical**: “How do I print something?” or “how can I access online resources from home?”



Public Library: Annapolis Valley Regional Library (AVRL)



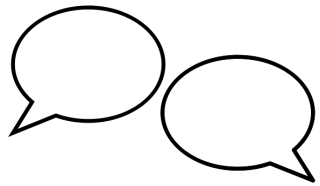
Who do we serve?

- **ALL** community members, demographics vary widely
- Can include children & families (programming), aging, and vulnerable community members



What do we do?

- Service:
  - Over the phone and in-person (no public-facing email/chat for local branches)
- Types of questions: Directional, collection, technical, informational.
  - Increase in technical questions (digital literacy)
  - Knowledge about community events beyond the library an asset





Kinds of reference questions

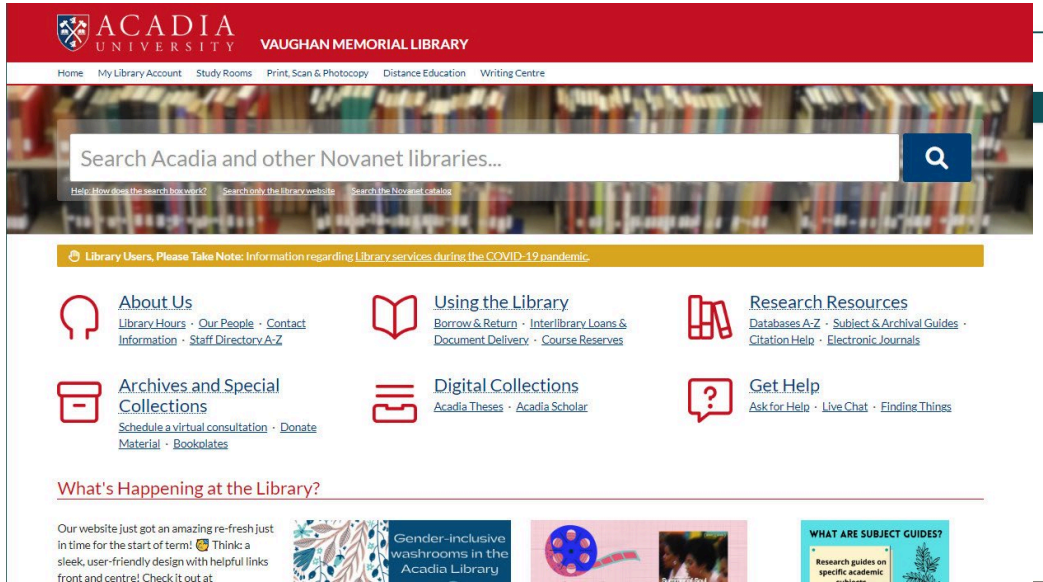
Questions can be varied based on community demographics

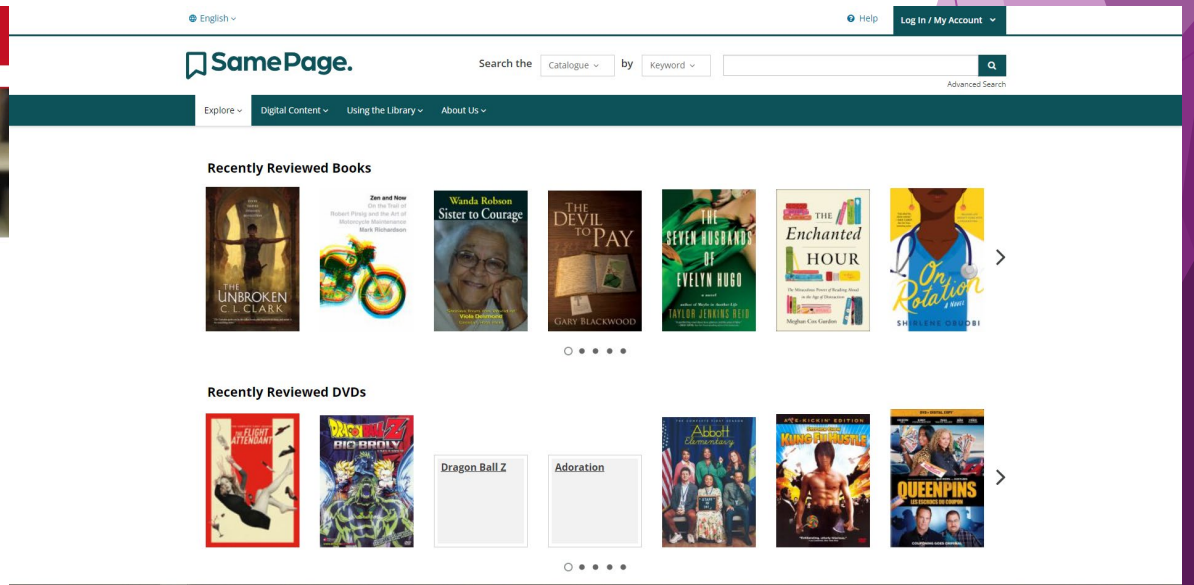
- **Directional**: “Where are the large-print section?”
- **Collection**: “I am looking for books by X author” or “I want a book on reptiles!”
- **Technical**: “I need help setting up an email account”
- **Informational**: “I am looking to donate this to the library” or “I am looking for somewhere to rent”



Skills to be successful

- Approachable/friendly
- Willingness to listen fully
- Familiarity with online searching (to the OPAC and beyond!)
- Understanding about what services you **can** provide





Contact

- If you have questions or want more information, feel free to connect with me:
  - Email: colin.mackay@acadiau.ca
  - LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/colin-j-mackay/