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# The user-friendly library guide

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## *How to reduce user frustration by making your guides more readable.*

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Writing library guides that are friendly as well as helpful has been a continuing project of the Libraries of the University of Houston-University Park over the past several years. Beginning with traditional guides that were short subject bibliographies, the staff has revised the method used to approach the information contained in the guides and, as a result, has revised the format of the guides themselves. This has resulted in search strategy guides that are used by and are useful to large numbers of students at all academic levels.

Traditional library guides are, to the less enthusiastic library user, nothing more than the old shell game. Guessing which shell has the black bean under it is no different than guessing which source in a list is the one you need for your specific type of question. Library users often do not care whether the answer can be found in a journal or a handbook or an encyclopedia—they just want the information. Rather than give them a list of journals, handbooks, etc., to examine, it is more helpful to say, for example: “If you want to find this type of information, it is best to use handbooks. Here is how to locate appropriate handbooks.”

Guides may list a few commonly used sources in the subject field being discussed, but the emphasis is on telling the reader how to find information by using standard tools, such as journal indexes and the Online and Card Catalogs. Subject headings are suggested when possible to assist this process.

The search strategy approach, which emphasizes a process rather than a specific source (when

ever possible), has advantages other than simply demystifying a particular search for information. Hopefully it teaches some readers procedures that can be used in searching for other types of information, for which a guide does not exist. From a more practical standpoint, it also helps to prevent guides from becoming out of date so rapidly, since specific sources can be superseded, but subject headings and search processes tend to remain the same over long periods of time. As a result, the information gained from the guide remains useful to the reader over a longer period of time than would be true for more traditional guides in a bibliography format.

While the bibliography format used in many of our early library guides is traditional in libraries and one that librarians understand without difficulty, the library staff at the University of Houston-University Park came to feel that growing numbers of users were neither familiar nor comfortable with such bibliographies as guidance. In particular, it was felt that the primary target audience for the guides did not see bibliographies as useful.

### **Audience**

Identifying the audience was a first step in writing more effective guides. At the University of Houston-University Park, the audience was gradually identified through a series of discussions during the late 1970's within the User Education Committee. We concluded that our user group is not a specific category, such as “entering freshmen” or



“graduate students.” Rather, the target audience is any person, student or faculty, who has certain characteristics:

- in need of information about a subject or process;
- knows that he/she needs help;
- not likely to ask for help;
- perhaps intimidated by libraries or library staff.

The current use of library guides goes far beyond the type of people who fit the target profile above. Guides are used in classes to supplement or give structure to lectures. Guides are used at the reference desk as pathfinders, deflecting some potential routine business from the reference desk, which is often inundated with students needing help. It could even be said that guides are subtly used to raise the level of sophistication of persons posing questions at the reference desk, thus improving the morale of staff who appreciate challenging questions.

Whatever the current uses, however, the primary target group remains the same. Knowing the target group better enables the writer to tackle the main problem of most library guides, which is the writing style.

### Writing style

Quite a few library guides are written in a style that is best understood by other librarians. The tone is frequently very formal, and the arrange-

ment of the materials by the reference format, such as indexes, encyclopedias, or directories, does not encourage use by the general library user. We wanted readers of our guides to think of libraries (and librarians) as interesting and helpful. Since the printed guide that they would read might be our only chance to encourage that attitude, we found it important to write in a manner that:

- was friendly and informal;
- had information organized the way users looked for it.

In addition to these general precepts, it was important to write in a clear, concise manner, avoiding the unnecessary use of jargon wherever possible. Thus we are more likely to speak of “checking out” rather than “charging out” or “circulating” books, and we would probably never refer to a “vertical file” without explaining what it was in commonly understood English. It is easy to forget that much of the general public does not think of itself as a “patron” or may not know that the shelves that contain books are known as the “stacks.” The use of unknown terminology in giving directions or instruction alienates the reader.

### Choosing a title

The title should tell the reader which type of problem the guide can solve. The title of a guide is important because it is often the only vehicle available to encourage use. A title that says what the guide explains does not encourage use as much as a

title that tells what the guide can help a reader to do. For example, a guide explaining how to use indexes and abstracts might be titled "Indexes and Abstracts." There is a fair chance that readers who are familiar with the terms "index" and "abstract" already know the basics of how to use them. The reader who is least likely to know how to use these tools also is quite unlikely to know what the words really mean. The title "Indexes and Abstracts" does not encourage the second type of reader to read the guide, since it is unclear how the guide will be of help. A better title, one that clearly states what the guide will help to do, is "Finding Articles on Your Topic." Variants of this more informative title might include "Finding Journal Articles on a Topic" or "Searching for a Subject in Periodicals."

A similar user-oriented approach to the subject is needed when writing headings for sections within a guide. Consider the contrast between "Interlibrary Loans" and "Obtaining Materials that are not in the Library." The first heading, "Interlibrary Loans," is meaningful to few readers. Those who are familiar with the term probably already know about the service. The second heading, "Obtaining materials that are not in the Library," addresses a problem that most readers have had and alerts them to the fact that a solution to that problem is presented.

In library guides written at the University of Houston-University Park, an attempt has been made to reflect a user-oriented approach in writing section headings. Two changes were made in the headings that were previously used. First, wherever possible, writers have stopped using headings that name a type of source and have begun naming the process to be accomplished or the type of information to be found. Second, to help reflect the idea of action, (accomplishment of information retrieval), most headings begin with an action verb. Contrast the static nature of some of the previously used headings with the action inherent in the newer headings:

### Previously used headings

- Encyclopedias and Dictionaries
- Government Documents
- Indexes
- Bibliographies
- Books
- Newspapers

### Newer headings

- Getting Started
- Finding Government Publications
- Finding Articles in Journals
- Finding Lists of Other Sources
- Finding Books
- Finding Newspaper Articles
- Finding Statistics
- Finding Information about Laws

Once the pattern was set, new headings and sub-

headings easily came to mind. In some guides, for example, the section on "Getting Started" is subdivided into "Finding Quick Facts and Basic Information" (encyclopedias) and "Finding Overviews of Recent Research" (annual review publications). Since the new headings were oriented to an information need rather than to the format in which the information was presented, guides could be divided into smaller segments, enabling the reader to focus more easily on the specific section that might be of help.

### Support essential

Support, both within and outside the library, is essential to the success of library guides. Financial support must be in place for the program to begin, and it must continue to grow if quality is to be assured. Quality is needed not only in the writing, but also in the manner of presentation, the physical layout of the guides. At the University of Houston-University Park, a printing budget of \$8,000 during the 1983-84 academic year enabled the libraries to produce and distribute 46,000 guides. Guides are printed on quality paper with colorful inks.

Support has come also in the form of a library assistant who formats the final copy of each guide using an Apple III computer. Use of the computer to store and print texts has led to a reduction in typographical errors and a uniform quality to the visual appearance of the guides. Editing, revising, and rewriting guides has become much easier since we began using the computer, allowing us to spend more time on concepts rather than on production mechanics.

Finally, support has come from outside the library. Many faculty have been enthusiastic users of the library guides, sometimes calling for bulk shipments of the guides to their classes. Faculty have reviewed several of the guides before publication, making helpful suggestions for changes or additions. Faculty have also suggested new guides. This has been particularly true of faculty in departments for which guides did not exist. They appreciated the value of the existing guides and wanted something similar for their students.

Without support from both inside and outside the library, the current library guide program would not have been as successful as it is. Demand for the guides helped them to weather budget problems, and the enthusiastic feedback about the guides helped to improve their content.

### Teaching others to write

The big push for library guides written in this style began with a workshop for the reference department staff. Two guides that had already been written were shown as examples to follow. The two writers of the guides explained how they approached their subjects, since the approaches were different. Potential writers were encouraged to fol-

low one of the examples in structuring new guides. A brief handout given to the writers showed contrasting pairs of good and bad sentences in an attempt to illustrate a friendly, informal writing style. Since that time quality has been improved by the formation of an Editorial Board. The Editorial Board provides assistance to writers and assures a uniform standard of quality in the publications.

All of these changes helped to create a series of guides that are readable and useful while reinforcing the image of the library as helpful. This is not to

say that the job is complete, however. Each year, as guides are considered for revision, new ways are found to improve their helpfulness to readers. Those of us who write guides have found that, by reading guides prepared by various staff members, we have enhanced our abilities to improve on texts written in the past. Writing library guides is an art that will improve with practice.

Library guides prepared by the University of Houston-University Park Libraries are available through the LOEX Clearinghouse. ■■

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## Fund raising by direct mail

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### *Some suggestions on increasing the effectiveness of your fund raising efforts.*

**T**he use of direct mail to raise funds has proven successful for many organizations. Librarians around the country have used various forms of direct mail to make patrons aware of upcoming elections that will affect funding, to introduce new services, and to raise additional funds.

Direct mail is an approach to fund raising that must be carefully planned. A successful program is based upon many components, only one of which is the actual letter sent to a prospective donor. The use of direct mail to raise funds should be considered a part of ongoing fund-raising efforts. Dramatic results should not be expected immediately from a mailing, but averaged over a course of at least three years as the donor base expands.

To receive a greater response to your appeal prospective donors must first be made aware of the reasons for giving to the library over other organi-

zations requesting money. Donors must be informed of the activities of the library and the benefits that people receive before they will consider giving. Any fund raising campaign should be preceded by publicity on the organization telling why money is being raised. A donor that is informed on the activities of the library is more inclined to give when he/she receives a request through the mail than one who is unaware of the reasons behind the gift solicitation.

The average age of a donor is declining as more discretionary income is available to younger people. The main source of donations has been from people over the age of forty. These donors usually make larger and more frequent gifts to organizations. The library has a broad base of donors due to the diversified ages of the patrons. Donors can be segmented into groups by age, zip code area, pro-