

Practicing Reference . . .

Of Reference and Revelation*

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While working on a new edition of a legal research book, Ms. McMurrer comes to a new appreciation for how reference must interact with technical services and acquisitions to produce the best library possible.

¶1 Have you ever had a revelation? I am not referring to any sort of religious experience but instead to the sort of “AHA!” phenomenon that cartoonists sometimes depict as a light bulb over a character’s head.¹ I had a revelation recently—not about something new, but about something I thought I already knew. My revelation was all about the idea of “library,” my role in it, and how my work as a reference librarian meshes with that done by other library staff members.

¶2 It all started when I was doing something many librarians do: writing. Most of us have produced guides of one sort or another. This project just seemed so much bigger than others I do during a typical year. My colleagues and I were producing a new edition of the *Washington Legal Researcher’s Deskbook*.² My chapter, on Washington practice materials, required that I review practice and self-help books and distill what I learned into a few choice sentences describing their contents and user aids for my subject list of sources.

¶3 To better understand my revelation, let’s first flashback to the mid-1990s when three of my reference colleagues and I, along with library director Penny Hazelton, decided that a second edition of the research guide was needed. It was my first experience as an author for this book, and I was trying hard to follow in the large footsteps of Martin Cerjan, the original author of the practice materials chapter. The Gallagher Law Library collects Washington practice materials and self-help books since we are open to the public and are heavily used by the bar and lay persons pursuing their own legal questions. Thus I focused on our own wonder-

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1. Revelation in this sense is defined as “[t]he act of revealing or disclosing. Something revealed, especially a dramatic disclosure of something not previously known or realized.” AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 1491 (4th ed. 2000).
2. Sure enough, the project is completed and the new edition is out, PENNY A. HAZELTON ET AL., WASHINGTON LEGAL RESEARCHER’S DESKBOOK 3d (2002). Here is a shameless plug—check it out, maybe order a copy, at <http://lib.law.washington.edu/pubs/db3toc.html>.

fully broad collection, with a visit or two to the King County Law Library in downtown Seattle to make sure I was not missing anything significant.

¶4 For weeks, each morning before the library opened, I huddled over Washington treatises and loose-leaves in our reserve collection. This work raised all sorts of questions about the sources, such as where were they shelved, how were they cataloged, and how were they updated? I passed along a few of these questions to our technical services folks or to Reba Turnquist, our acquisitions librarian for Washington materials (other than government documents that were handled by Peggy Jarrett). However, I often kept to myself the things that puzzled me. Sometimes I was giving in to my general panic that I would never be able to review all those books and write up descriptions before the chapter was due. As you can imagine, the collection was just not the same as when Martin had looked at it: there were new editions, supplements had added chapters and topics, some treatises were no longer updated, and some were just brand new titles. With much to do and time running away at a gallop, I often decided I did not have time to ask or to wait for the answer.

¶5 I also suffered the double whammy of imperfect note taking and imperfect memory, stuffed as it was to capacity with my progress through every reserve item in KFW. I had different notepads for everything, each with so many little jottings that my mind reeled when I looked at them later. Ah, I had a question about that source, but what on earth was it? My notes could be cryptic, and my recollection did not always fill the gaps.³

¶6 But the chief reason for my lack of follow-up was probably my disinclination to “bother” those in acquisitions or technical services with my questions. Perhaps they would think them silly, or worse, things I already should know. Or maybe the questions were unimportant, stuff I should be able to figure out myself. Besides, all those folks were fully employed, and I should just leave them alone and let them get their jobs done.

¶7 Understand please, that based on my past experience in working with staff in technical services and acquisitions, I should have been looking forward to sending them hundreds of inquiries. Their responses had always been enthusiastic and positive. But in 1996, for whatever the reasons, I just worked through those books and, for the most part, kept my own counsel.

¶8 Now back to 2001. Once again it was time to update the *Deskbook*. We added topics, we added authors, we added Web sites. We were charged up and ready to conquer Washington’s legal research landscape. And no one was more eager than I was. For this edition, I would be sure to start early enough so that I

3. The same year that the *Washington Legal Researcher’s Deskbook* was published, we also wrote an article together about the importance of note taking in legal research. I have learned—and relearned—its lessons. Penny A. Hazelton et al., *Develop the Habit: Note Taking in Legal Research*, 4 PERSPECTIVES: TEACHING LEGAL RES. & WRITING 48 (1996), reprinted in *BEST OF PERSPECTIVES: TEACHING LEGAL RESEARCH AND WRITING, VOLUMES 1–9 (1992–2001)*, at 66 (Frank G. Houdek ed., 2001).

had the time to unravel any knots I found. Not only that, this time I would not stop with my library and the King County Law Library. No! I would try public libraries, law firm libraries, and other county law libraries across the state, publishers I knew about, and those I had yet to discover. Every stone would be turned, and even the gleam in the author's eye suggesting a new publication would be investigated. I was a librarian with a mission.

¶9 As before, I started with our own collection. However, instead of trying to work among the stacks in the reserve collection, I appropriated a book truck, loaded up one subject area of books, and wheeled them back to my desk. I worked through all the items on the truck before returning any of them (unless some patron had the audacity to need one before I was done with that subject). Focused on one subject at a time, I was able to get a good perspective on its coverage in Washington.

¶10 My very first request, sent to the e-mail address maintained by technical services for questions, was a tentative toe in the water, later to become a complete plunge into the ocean. I was trying to figure out how often a particular treatise was updated. With our Innovative Interfaces catalog, we in reference were accustomed to showing patrons how to determine if we had received a recent issue of a periodical. Before the online catalog, this information was available only by calling or running back to technical services to ask someone there to look at the check-in record. I had already used the catalog to make sure that a couple of sources were still being updated annually. But this book did not appear to be updated regularly. To make sure, I looked at its record in the catalog. When I clicked on the "Latest Received" link, however, I realized that the check-in history only went back to 2000. So I popped off an e-mail to technical services, asking about this book and whether I could still view check-in information from the 1990s.

¶11 A short time later, Tricia Hart, head of bibliographic access in technical services, poked her head in the reference office, where I was on duty. As the new millennium began, she explained, technical services had decided to "clean up" the records a bit and had deleted many of those old check-in records that went back to the beginning of our online catalog. My project, though, had unearthed a reason to take another look at that decision. She and I talked about it, and we came up with a policy to maintain access to those check-in records in the public catalog for about six years, long enough for someone to see updating trends, even for irregularly updated sources like the one about which I had asked.

¶12 This interchange was the beginning of my revelation. I had been a bit tentative about e-mailing technical services, but Tricia was thrilled to get my question on an issue that neither department had thought about, and together we had developed a solution that would make the catalog more useful. With that exchange under my belt, I let loose. After all, I had given myself enough time, I was working at my computer (where e-mail was oh-so-handy) instead of taking notes in the middle of the reserve stacks, and every question I raised was greeted with enthusiasm. I must have sent three or four messages to technical services and acquisitions almost every day!

¶13 In particular, since I was immersed in each subject and looking at all our materials together, I was able to see anomalies in the catalog and collection not otherwise noticeable. For instance, I reviewed a couple of books that I decided dealt with the same subject. They shared the same Washington subject heading, but one was shelved in KF and the other in KFW. Looking ahead to our new building and open reserve stacks, I suggested that browsers would prefer to find them shelved together. I also found books that were no longer being supplemented. If a title was still useful and not duplicated by more recent works, I recommended to acquisitions that it be kept in reserve for now but flagged for later review. The others I suggested moving from the reserve collection.

¶14 I was coming to a realization that, in our hearts, we all know: it takes a whole library staff to produce a library.⁴ What was brought home to me, though, as I gaily asked questions or passed along ideas, concerned my part in this whole process. I think before our *Deskbook* project I had tended to see myself mostly on the receiving end of everything done by the different departments of the library.

¶15 I knew that I could not do my job without the aid of everyone else. Without the acquisitions staff, I would not be able to guide patrons to the resources they need in our collection—there would not *be* a collection. Without access services, I could not borrow materials from another library, check a book out to a faculty member, or find books on the shelves instead of still lying on a carrel from the last user. Without technical services, I would never be able to *find* anything, since there would be no catalog, no call numbers, no mating of supplements to their main volumes. And of course, without administration, none of us would have computers or desks, nor would our labor be transformed into a paycheck. Just think about all the work everyone else in the library must do before I can assist a patron!

¶16 But my revelation was not that reference is some sort of parasite on the rest of the library staff. Instead what I realized is my level of responsibility for the work these other departments do. They enable me to do my best, and I must also enable them to do their best. I need to do more than just respond to questions that technical services and acquisitions send to reference or, when it is convenient, send them something I notice. Whenever I run across a problem in the public catalog, I must notify technical services. I am, after all, in the department that uses the public catalog the most, and if I do not alert them, they may never know there is a glitch. If I see an announcement about a new resource, I should never assume that Reba or Peggy has seen it, but instead must forward it to them.

¶17 Then, however, I started backpeddling. Our acquisitions and technical services people are the best. Would they think I was trying to do their jobs for them? Would I be more trouble than my help was worth? Here is the rest of the lesson I learned while working on the book chapter. I had seen a mention of a gov-

4. My modified cliché is based on the African proverb (“it takes a village to raise a child”) that inspired the title for HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON, *IT TAKES A VILLAGE AND OTHER LESSONS CHILDREN TEACH US* (1996).

ernment report that I thought members of our faculty would find interesting. I e-mailed Peggy about it, with the caveat that I was sure she already knew about the report. Her response could not have been clearer: she is only one person, she explained, doing her best to find every government document that fits within the library's collection development plan. But there is more out there than any one searcher can uncover. She told me she depends on us to "run across" items she may have missed.

¶18 As I thought about it, I realized that I felt exactly the way Peggy did. About mid-quarter, I taught a research session for a class on medical malpractice. Everyone in reference knew I was working on a handout for the session, so several colleagues sent me e-mails asking if I had seen the new research guide in *Legal Reference Services Quarterly*.⁵ Was I hurt, imagining that they thought I would not properly research the subject? Heck, no! I was proud that they wanted me to produce the best handout I could and grateful that they had kept me in mind as they skimmed their mail and e-mail.

¶19 What about the "bother" factor? Well, there was one loose-leaf I reviewed that raised several issues in my mind. Having gotten into the "don't delay, e-mail right away" mode, however, I ended up sending several e-mails to technical services about that one source. After the first couple, I got a bit embarrassed and started prefacing them with apologies and self-deprecations like "picky." I ran into Tricia later and apologized again for monopolizing technical services' e-mail with such minutia. She just laughed and reminded me that technical services folks are known far and wide for their attention to detail—that they delight in being finicky. She told me that this series of e-mails suggested that I could be persnickety enough to work in technical services. Wow, high praise indeed!

¶20 I realized that I had been apologizing for bothering them just like patrons sometimes apologize to me for asking a reference question. Do patrons "bother" me when they stop in to ask a question? Am I disdainful when they diffidently say their problem is no doubt easy and one they should be able to solve themselves? Absolutely not! I love the challenge of reference. If no one ever asked me anything, the most fun part of my day would disappear. Moreover, as we all know, what seems at first blush to be easy is often really tricky and difficult. I delight in being "bothered!"

¶21 This book project gave me an opportunity to devote time and attention to a part of our collection in a way that does not fit into the normal schedule of technical services or acquisitions. Since I know my colleagues share with me the same goal of getting things "as-nearly-perfect-as-possible," I am sure that my questions and recommendations were treated as opportunities, not interruptions. I also understand that I owe it to my colleagues to turn over to them questions, puzzles,

5. Sheryl Summers Kramer, *A Research Guide to Medical Malpractice and the Law: Revisited*, *LEGAL REFERENCE SERVICES. Q.*, 2001, no. 4, at 111.

and anomalies. I had the time to investigate this tiny part of the collection; they have the expertise to settle correctly any issue I raised.⁶

¶22 So, there you are—that's my revelation. Something I thought I already knew but now I really know. Every project I take on may present chances for me to help another department shine. We all aim for excellence, but we cannot do it alone. We bear mutual responsibility to assist each other in doing the best job possible. And together? Well, together we become a class act and our library, a smash hit!

6. For suggestions about other ways that public and technical services staff can work together for the benefit of their library's patrons, seek out the audiotapes from these AALL Annual Meeting programs: Rule Maker or Rule Breaker, program presented at 95th Annual Meeting of the American Association of Law Libraries, Orlando (July 21, 2002) (audiotape available from Mobiltape Co.); Technical and Public Services Connections: Making the Most of Your Online Catalog, program presented at 95th Annual Meeting of the American Association of Law Libraries, Orlando (July 22, 2002) (audiotape available from Mobiltape Co.); What You Don't Know Can Hurt You: Essential Technical Services Knowledge for Public Services Librarians, program presented at 94th Annual Meeting of the American Association of Law Libraries, Minneapolis (July 18, 2001) (audiotape available from Mobiltape Co.).