



# **CODES OF ETHICS FOR THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN**

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## Codes of Ethics

- ▶ Ethics has been variously defined. It is regarded as the “moral principles by which a person is guided” (Murray 1933: 312).
- ▶ Ethics and morals are terms which are often used interchangeably; however, they have distinct, if subtle and related, meanings.
- ▶ Morals define personal character, while ethics refer to the social system in which morals are applied.
- ▶ In other words, ethics point to standards or codes of behaviour expected to be observed by members of a group.
- ▶ Webster's third international dictionary, (1965: 780) defines ethics as “the principle of conduct governing an individual or a profession: standards of behaviour.”
- ▶ From these definitions, Code of ethics can be referred to a set of guidelines which are designed to set out acceptable behaviour for members of a particular group, association, or profession.

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## Ethics in reference work

- ▶ Code of ethics serves a vital purpose in information work.
- ▶ It identifies areas where there are or may be conflicts of interest, and indicates ways in which these conflicting interests may be balanced
- ▶ The code urges the highest standards of professional conduct and excellence of work in every area of information provision.
- ▶ The specific ethical obligations to be discussed here are confidentiality, honesty, independence of judgement, intellectual freedom, quality of service and competence.

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## *Confidentiality*

- ▶ Confidentiality is an ethical issue of concern to all librarians. American Library Association (1981:335) states that “librarians must protect each user’s right to privacy with respect to the information sought or received and materials consulted, borrowed, or acquired.”
- ▶ The potential of violating the client’s privacy is the reason for the injunction that reference librarians not discuss with others their interactions with patrons
- ▶ The idea of when information about a client and his or her use of the library resources might ethically be revealed is a complex one.
- ▶ Sometimes service to the patron would be improved if the question were surely discussed with a colleague.

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## *Confidentiality*

- ▶ For instance, in a situation where a reference librarian realizes that two patrons are working on the same issue and could benefit if each knew that the other was working on a particular problem or if the search analyst has reason to believe that the duplicate search would waste time and money; a useful guideline is to seek the client's permission.
- ▶ Sometimes revealing of a client's use of information may arise due to the needs of other members of society.
- ▶ Only when there is a high degree of certainty that a serious negative consequence will result from maintaining confidence, or when required by competent legal authority can confidential information be revealed; and even then, the reference library must take careful consideration.

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## *Confidentiality*

- ▶ To sum up on confidentiality, reference librarians must conduct interviews and searches in a way that protects the privacy and confidentiality of the clients.
- ▶ This includes modulate voice; use of private space for interview; and not discuss client request with colleagues

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## *Honesty*

- ▶ Reference librarians should always act with integrity and truthfulness and should never abuse the trust that has been placed in them.
- ▶ They should use the special trust given to them in the general interest and avoid using their position to unfairly benefit themselves or others.
- ▶ To elaborate further, Haycock and Sheldon (2008) indicate that librarians should not advance private interests at the expense of those they serve, colleagues, or their employers.
- ▶ This entails that they must refrain from activities which might prejudice their professional integrity, objectivity and impartiality.
- ▶ They should not benefit financially or otherwise personally to the detriment of institutions, users and colleagues.
- ▶ Therefore, librarians must avoid situations in which personal interests might be served or financial benefits gained at the expense of library users, colleagues, or the employing institution.

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## Independence of judgement

- ▶ Service provided by reference librarians should not be influenced by personal philosophies and attitudes
- ▶ This is not to say that the reference librarian should be without personal beliefs and attitudes.
- ▶ In fact, the more fully aware the librarian is of his or her beliefs and attitudes, the more likely he or she is to be able to keep them from detrimentally influencing professional practice.
- ▶ Therefore, reference librarians must distinguish clearly in their actions and statements between their personal philosophies and attitudes and those of an institution or professional body, not advancing personal interests at the expense of clients, colleagues or employers (duty to colleagues and organization).

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## Intellectual freedom

- ▶ Intellectual freedom is the right for every individual to both seek and receive information of all points of view without restrictions
- ▶ Intellectual freedom stems from the right of individuals to express their opinion without fear of punishment.
- ▶ It represents rights to freedom of speech, and it is a right zealously guarded by academia.
- ▶ Librarians as individual beings have certain moral values which may come into play in performing their job as librarians.
- ▶ In order to enforce intellectual freedom of the patrons, librarians are required to adhere to objectivity and resist censorship.

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## Objectivity

- ▶ Reference librarians in all types of libraries are faced with helping library users find answers to questions that may be controversial or that may reflect values that conflict with those of the librarian.
- ▶ In the process of deciding which sources to consult or what level of service to provide, the opportunity for bias (or lack of objectivity) arises.
- ▶ For example, a reference librarian who is opposed abortion and involved in the right-to-life effort may be asked by a client for a list of local abortion clinics.
- ▶ Librarians cannot let their viewpoint influence the provision of information to the client.
- ▶ The reference librarian, in all cases, should avoid bias, approach the topic objectively, and provide the best answer possible.
- ▶ Failure to provide information when the proper source is known could also be construed as censorship.

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## Censorship

- ▶ Censorship occurs because people, librarians included, have value systems, and it is these values that influence their actions and motives.
- ▶ Censorship in libraries is discussed most frequently in relation to selection of materials.
- ▶ Librarians should not allow their own biases to influence selection, nor should they allow others, through political or other pressures, to censor materials for library purchase.
- ▶ Librarians should select and provide materials and information representing all points of view as specified in the library policy
- ▶ In a nutshell, reference librarians must support the principles of intellectual freedom (right to freedom of thought and of expression of thought) and resist censorship.
- ▶ This means that Librarians must resist all efforts by groups or individuals to censor library materials (duty to society).

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## Censorship

- ▶ However, major concerns arise from those who wish to censor information materials;
- ▶ what bothers most people especially when it comes to children in school libraries is that free access to information may result in them accessing content which exposes them to offensive language and subjects, particularly sexual content and violence.
- ▶ In this context, service policies as well as legal guidelines must come into play.

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## Quality of service

- ▶ Reference librarians should be concerned with the quality of service being offered to their clients.
- ▶ In any library, quality reference service is especially important because responses can influence patrons' decisions across different parts of their lives.
- ▶ Quality is a vague concept, but arguably it can include accuracy, relevance, completeness, and timeliness of the information being provided to meet a user's need.

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- ▶ Reference librarians must provide the highest level of service through
  - ▶ appropriate and useful organized collections,
  - ▶ fair and equitable circulation
  - ▶ service policies, and
  - ▶ skilful, accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests for assistance (duty to clients).

# CODES OF ETHICS FOR THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN

## Competence

- ▶ Competence is a crucial obligation because no matter how hard librarians work at other ethical mandates, if they are incompetent, they are unworthy of their clients' trust.
- ▶ Ethically, reference librarians are required to provide skilful and accurate response to inquiries.
- ▶ This obligation requires the reference librarian not attempt to provide information of a sort he/she is not competent to provide and that the reference librarian be as competent as possible in providing the information that he or she and the employing agency purport to be able to provide.

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- ▶ The obligation not to practice in areas where one is not competent is the basis for the proscription against the reference librarian's giving medical or legal advice.
- ▶ There are various guidelines however, that might be used to assist the reference librarian in acting ethically in this regard.
- ▶ One such guideline is to avoid providing information personally that cannot be documented or confirmed in information sources, except in limited circumstance where the librarian's special training gives him or her competence to provide substantive information of the sort required.
- ▶ In order to enhance competence, reference librarians must always strive for excellence through professional development (duty to self).

# Summary

- ▶ In conclusion, ethics is inextricably linked with professionalism, and with professionalism comes the willingness to assume responsibility for one's actions.
- ▶ The ethical values that librarians hold, whether personal (societal) or professional (stated in the code of ethics), go a long way towards the provision of quality unbiased information.