Codes of ethics provide directions for conduct. Ethical concepts imply rightness, fairness, obligation, and consistency. Further, they generally arise out of need, when there have been conflicts between performance and perceived ideal conduct. Reference is the archival function where ethical dilemmas are most apparent. Reference archivists are faced with the need to protect the papers in their care, assuring that any contractual arrangements with donors are met, while at the same time providing the fullest possible service to patrons consistent with the rules and regulations of their repositories. How well the archivist carries out these sometimes conflicting duties greatly influences the patron’s image of a repository. Archivists and patrons have both rights and responsibilities as they engage in providing service and making use of it.

Archivists should think about reference ethics and establish policies and procedures before their patrons arrive at the door. Each repository owes it to its governing board, staff, and public to have a clearly articulated reference policy. The basic component of this policy should be a statement of rules governing the use of the repository’s holdings. This should be available to all patrons, and indeed ought to be mandatory reading before any documents are furnished for research. At the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, for example, all patrons must read and sign the rules sheet, called a consent form because by signing it they also consent to the search of their persons and/or belongings if deemed appropriate. This assures that all researchers, whether junior high school students or full professors, will abide by the same rules, and proves that those rules have been read by the patron. At the same time, researchers can see that others do not receive special privileges but that all are treated in the same manner—a public relations benefit for the repository which should not be overlooked.

The repository must also have a means of keeping records on the use of its collections. It is vital for both the archivist and the researcher that the patron fill out all checksheets or call slips on which material is requested. When dealing with an inexperienced or
lazy patron it often seems easier for the staff member to fill in the 
checksheet rather than explain its use for a second or third time. But 
if the request is in the handwriting of the patron, the archivist has 
proof that the patron was aware of and asked for material. If, on the 
other hand, the request is in the handwriting of the archivist, the 
repository may later be vulnerable to charges that the checksheet was 
forged and that the patron never, in fact, knew about or asked for the 
papers in question. The archivist can date and initial the checksheet 
to indicate when and by whom materials were provided to the 
patron.

Some may argue that such precautions indicate unwarranted 
suspicion, even paranoia, on the part of the archivist. Why is it 
necessary to be so cautious? The answer, aside from the fact that it is 
good administrative procedure, goes back some fifteen years to the 
case involving the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library.1 
Francis Loewenheim, a Rice University historian, accused the 
Roosevelt Library staff of deliberately withholding information 
about the existence of several letters he believed were essential to his 
research. A Roosevelt Library staff member was editing a volume 
and, Loewenheim believed, wanted exclusive use of the letters. This 
case marked a watershed in archival reference services. Public reposi-
tories throughout the country felt obliged to examine their reference 
procedures.2 The profession as a whole has continued to review its 
ethical standards on reference and access, as well as other concerns. 
We now have a revised Code of Ethics for Archivists, which addresses 
these controversial ethical questions.3 Yet it is based on common 

sense and courtesy.

Probably the basic tenet of reference work is the concept of equal 
access.4 Simply stated, it is a policy of nondiscrimination on the part 
of reference archivists toward their patrons: collections are to be 
made available on equal terms of access to all researchers. Setting 
aside such considerations as restricted collections for which specific 
terms governing use are in effect or refusal to allow a patron use of 
any collections because of infringement of repository rules, this 
means that if one patron uses a collection others must be allowed to 
do so as well.

Various kinds of repositories handle this issue in different ways. A 
public repository such as the Western Historical Manuscript Collec-
tion or a tax-supported state historical society must attempt to 
provide the greatest possible access to the largest number of people. 
A private agency may legitimately give priority to the research needs 
of its members, a business archives to the needs of its parent corpo-
ration, a private university archives to the needs of alumni. Further-
more, staff limitations may require that service in general, or service 
to those patrons not included in a repository’s constituency, be
circumscribed. Care must be taken, however, to define the limiting conditions and apply them uniformly.

A further interpretation of equal access might also be considered, and that is access equal to the needs of the patron. The requirements of each researcher must be assessed by the archivist in order to provide whatever will be of greatest use. Professional historians who do in-depth research on well-defined topics need to have the full resources of the institution at their disposal. Once they thoroughly understand the finding aids and reference materials available, they prefer to be allowed to do their own work in peace, free to call upon the archivist for advice and clarification as needed. This may be far different treatment from that accorded much-maligned beginning genealogists who often wish only to be pointed to a surname index, county history, or census record to look for one family name. These researchers should not be overwhelmed by technical information that can only serve to confuse them and make them feel that perhaps they are not sophisticated enough to be using archival materials after all. If beginners are broken in gently, they will feel comfortable returning for more information as they pursue their research, and may one day feel as at ease in the search room as the professional.

This points to another basic consideration of reference work—the need to listen carefully to what patrons say and to give them what they want rather than what they ask for. We are in business to make our materials accessible to as many people as possible, and it is up to us to tell them what they need to know about our holdings. The revised Archivists' Code of 1980 states that "archivists answer courteously and with a spirit of helpfulness all reasonable inquiries about their holdings, and encourage use of them to the greatest extent compatible with institutional policies, preservation of holdings, legal considerations, individual rights, donor agreements, and judicious use of archival resources. They explain pertinent restrictions to potential users, and apply them equitably."

In keeping with this policy, the archivist should give the patron all information that could be useful. To borrow a term from constitutional history, it is important that the reference archivist be a loose constructionist rather than a strict constructionist when interpreting reference requests. For researchers in the reading room, this may be relatively easy. When patrons thoroughly understand the repository's finding aids, they will be able to examine their topic from all angles, asking the advice of the staff as they proceed. Information found in one set of papers may lead them to other potentially valuable documents. But what of mail-order patrons? They must rely on the archivist to suggest worthwhile collections, and it is important that archivists be thorough in the search for materials for these patrons. Researchers who inquire about a particular set of
records should be informed about related holdings and even referred to another repository if the staff knows of relevant papers. Similarly, although it is not the reference archivist’s job to do the patron’s research, it is important to be honest about the quality of information on a particular topic. If a patron contemplates visiting a repository, the archivist should evaluate its holdings and advise on whether or not they are worth the trip.

While we cannot do our patrons’ research for them, of all aspects of archival work the reference function is closest to research. At the Western Historical Manuscript Collection we believe that as a public institution we have a responsibility to provide as much help as possible to the public. Thus, we interpret the “reasonable inquiries” mentioned in the Archivists’ Code loosely, to include almost any request. If we want our materials used, we must provide substantial mail-order service. Further, we do not place a limit on the length of time we will spend answering a reference request. Again this reflects the underlying philosophy of our organization. Everyone on our professional staff does some processing, and everyone takes a turn doing reference work. We believe that people process better if they know first-hand the kinds of questions researchers ask. Likewise, reference archivists perform better if they do not lose touch with how collections are readied for use. Thus we share our reference letters. Someone whose principal duty is processing will often enjoy working on a time-consuming reference letter as a change of pace. Even those who may not enjoy dealing with the public in person have a chance to do some reference work for mail patrons. Furthermore, we believe that doing a thorough job enhances our reputation with both scholars and the general public.

A further stipulation of the revised Archivists’ Code applies to reference service: “Archivists endeavor to inform users of parallel research by others using the same materials, and, if the individuals concerned agree, supply each name to the other party.” While this seems extremely reasonable and fair, it is unfortunately a controversial statement. When one thinks about it, however, does it not seem unrealistic that scholars would prefer to work for some length of time, spending money on research trips, photocopying, and typists, only to have a parallel work published shortly before theirs and to discover that their own time had been spent in vain? The picture of paranoid researchers afraid to divulge their topics for fear someone else will steal their ideas is actually the unrealistic one. To begin with, the purpose of scholarship is the advancement of knowledge. Thus, it is essentially a public rather than a private activity. While scholars hope to enhance their reputations through publications, it is not the material itself but the interpretation they put on it that will reflect their thinking.
We all have many collections that have been used over and over again, sometimes for very different topics but sometimes for very similar ones. It is still the use the patron makes of the material that determines the quality of the product. Less analytical scholars should not be allowed to blame the woodenness of their interpretation on the fact that a more imaginative researcher used the same materials. Further, news travels fast in scholarly circles. Scholars stake out certain areas of interest and that interest becomes known through publications, papers, and the grapevine. Why should archivists pretend not to know the research areas of their patrons? The scholars themselves pass the word. Finally, even if archivists do not inform scholars of parallel research, they should know what patrons are working on for a variety of other reasons. A knowledge of current research trends is important for adequate processing. There is a security dimension as well. If patrons must state their research topics, the archivist can determine whether materials requested for use are relevant. A person who indicates interest in the New Deal, for example, and then proceeds to request Lewis and Clark journals, will warrant careful watching.

When we reviewed our reference procedures at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in view of the Loewenheim case, we reasoned that as a public institution all of our records are public property. We printed on our checksheet, which all researchers use to request materials, that THE INFORMATION ON THIS SHEET IS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. What it means in practice is that if we recognize parallel research between patrons, we will inform them and even show one person’s checksheet to another. It does not mean that we cross-reference all requests and actively seek out parallel research concerns.

One further consideration of the reference archivist comes into play here, and that is the defense of one’s own institution and its rules and policies. Do not undercut your repository by apologizing to the researcher for its rules and procedures. If you do indeed disagree with them, the administration rather than the patron should hear your suggestions for change. Many inexperienced researchers grumble about the necessity to show identification, use pencils, or write down specifically what they want to see or what their topics are. These people need education in the use of archival records, and it is more and more often the job of the reference archivist to provide that training. A tactful reminder that they will find similar restrictions common at repositories throughout the country allows them to save face. And any patron who returns several months or even years later wishing to duplicate previous research will be convinced of the value of keeping good reference records when the archivist can produce an old checksheet showing what collections were used before.
We have touched upon many of the ethical responsibilities of the reference archivist. We should remember, however, that patrons have obligations, too. Researchers should state their topics clearly. The more precise researchers can be, the faster archivists can direct them to material they need. Further, researchers should have done their homework before arriving at the archives. At the least they should be familiar with their cast of characters and have a command of the secondary literature on the topic. It is not really the responsibility of the reference archivist to provide a list of governors of the state or other readily available information. At times there is nothing to do but send the patron away to do background work in the secondary literature. Further, researchers would do well to inform a repository ahead of time that they are coming. Only then can they be advised of possible holidays, unusual rules, restrictions on use, or off-site storage. Researchers also ought to keep themselves informed. It is surprising how many have not used the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections or other guides. In part, this may be due to inadequate training in graduate programs. For whatever reason, archivists more and more find themselves called upon to give a brief training session in how to do research. Once there, the researcher should abide by the rules of the repository. We have rules for a reason, and that is to assure that the documents in our custody will be preserved so that future scholars can use them as well. All too often, patrons see the value of a collection only in terms of their own research. Finally, in the event that the researcher discovers a mistake in the way items are dated or identified, it should be pointed out to the archivist.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of the Francis Loewenheim-Roosevelt Library case was that it pointed up the lack of trust between historians and archivists.\(^5\) Archivists were stunned to discover that what they had viewed as a relationship of equality based on mutual trust and good will was a myth. They came to feel that they were viewed as second-class citizens, and that historians considered them guilty until proven innocent of charges of uncooperativeness. Joint committees of historical and archival associations were formed, with both historians and archivists as members, to provide an avenue of communication between the two professions. Tensions surfaced again at the New Harmony Conference in 1976, however, as archivists tried to point out distinctions in access policies governing various kinds of materials in diverse repositories.\(^6\)

Perhaps these tensions and disension were timely. The 1970s were a decade of growing awareness of archivists' professional responsibilities, with both the expanded Society of American Archivists and the burgeoning regional organizations, such as the Midwest Archives Conference, taking active roles in awakening their
members to professional needs. Programs at both national and area meetings provided forums to discuss the nuances of ethical considerations, and gave archivists the wherewithal to meet the challenges they faced.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a review of the case involving Francis Loewenheim and the Roosevelt Library, see the Final Report of the Joint AHA-OAH Ad Hoc Committee to Investigate the Charges Against the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Related Matters (24 August 1970), distributed by the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians.


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