

Shapiro Undergraduate Library  
DFE: "Ready Reference" Web Module  
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## Website Analysis

### **Overview**

By visiting numerous websites of undergraduate libraries throughout the United States, I was able to gain an understanding of current practices for digital reference tools and aids. This summary provides an overview of my findings, including strengths and weaknesses identified on the websites and how to address these characteristics in deploying a reference module for the Shapiro Undergraduate Library.

### **Summary**

Each library that provided a reference section offered a different approach. Not all of the libraries were dedicated to undergraduate students needs, and many encompassed a very large collection of subjects. One of the most recurring weaknesses of these websites was the inconsistent presentation of information as well as navigation. Without these two considerations, it is difficult as a user to concentrate on the content as so much energy is taken in rediscovering original search paths and understanding the information hierarchy. Additionally, without a consistent structure for presenting reference aids, it makes it impossible to quickly process the information and take advantage of the resource. Navigation and structure should be solid components of the website in order to keep cognitive processing low and automatic, allowing students to focus their energy and attention on the intended search task.

Prominence of the reference section varied from one library to the next. In some cases, it was distinctly featured on the home page and in other cases it was buried in navigation as a second or third tier link. For Shapiro, I recommend creating a prominent display of the link, along with a brief description, on the homepage. Students should know that the reference tool exists and should also be able to infer by its value by its placement on the homepage.

The way in which reference sections were categorized (organized) varied greatly as well. Some libraries chose to offer general subjects including guides on geography, politics, and phonebooks. Others approached the matter by creating a way to search by subject, course, or discipline. Shapiro should consider providing as many search options as possible to support different user needs and preferences. These additional categories could easily be managed as indexes leading to the primary resources.

Lastly, the content for subject guides is equally important. While some libraries chose to focus on external website links, others provided links to library holdings and subscriptions. The most effective website offered a combination of both. One area where the majority of the sites lacked was context by description. A reference guide on Anthropology, for example, would have a long list of resource links, some obvious and others not so much. Many of the websites did

not offer any explanation or brief description of the purpose of website, what to expect when visiting the link, and how it related to Anthropology. Providing a brief summary and reinforcing subject context will increase the value of these digital aids to users.

In summary, the most critical components to a successful resource module are infrastructure and content. Having a consistent and complete navigation in place throughout the module as well as presenting resource information in a consistent, structured format will allow users to focus on the content and completing their search task. Providing context and descriptions for reference links will increase their use and value to students. Prominently displaying the reference section on the Shapiro homepage will signal to students that it is a valuable finding aid that they should use.

### **Highlights**

- Guides by Subject, Discipline, Category, or Format (University of Oregon)
- Supplementary tutorials providing tips on finding articles, books, and other reference aids
- General and Course specific guides
- Inclusion of both physical and electronic reference aids
- Context and descriptions of outbound reference links
- Useful terminology and keywords for subjects
- Links to external, noteworthy, and reliable websites
- User Interface continuity
- Navigation consistency
- Prominently featured on homepage
- Uniform presentation format for reference guides
- Structured reference guides
- Background Information & Reference Works
- Related cross-categories

### **Top 3 Websites**

University of Oregon  
<http://libweb.uoregon.edu>

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign  
<http://uiuc.edu/ugl/>

University of Washington  
<http://lib.washington.edu>