

APPENDIX 6

PROJECT REPORT: Reference Correspondence Analysis

ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS:

NNSC, Architectural & Cartographic Branch
NNSM, Motion Picture, Video & Sound Recordings Branch
NNSP, Still Picture Branch
NNRC, Civil Reference Branch
NNRM, Military Reference Branch
NNR-CG, Captured German Records Staff
NNX, Center for Electronic Records
NNLR, Legislative Reference Branch

DATES: October 1-5, 1990

METHOD: Direct Measurement. Each incoming reference letter was assessed to determine, if possible, the purpose of the letter and the specificity of the request, using a coding form developed for the project.

NUMBER OF ANALYSIS UNITS:

367 incoming reference letters

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Analysis Tables (4)
2. Consultants Office Log Form
3. Instructions to Reference Branches
4. Correspondence Evaluation Form

Archives & Museum Informatics will provide copies of the attachments to the original appendices to any reader upon request. Contact:

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HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS:

- * Of those writers whose purpose could be determined, about half (52.4%) concerned personal research topics, only about half of which are genealogical in character.
- * The vast majority of the people who write the National Archives (75.4%) seeks specific information from the holdings themselves rather than information about the records of the agency. Few specify how the information or records they seek will be used.
- * About half of those who write unique reference letters (55.9%), rather than submit a standard form, are also seeking copies of records in the agency.
- * The questions of those who write to the National Archives contain an average of four distinct pieces of information, such as proper name, geographic place, date, or type of document, while those who state their problem directly in the Consultants Office are much less forthcoming, at least initially.
- * Writers seem to be very well aware of the medium of the information they seek and state so clearly.

FINDINGS

An analysis of 367 reference letters is included in four tables attached to this report. Four types of reference correspondence were identified: reference requests in the form of letters; National Archives Trust Fund forms (NATF 72) requesting reproductions; requests received by telephone that are processed according to guidelines for incoming mail; and, thank-you letters, complaints, and miscellaneous correspondence of an administrative nature.

Descriptive Information

Table 1 reports descriptive information about the correspondents extracted from the letters and includes the purpose of the letter, the type of information requested, whether or not reproductions were requested, if the letters concerned genealogy, and the intended use of the information, if determined.

Each letter was read in an attempt to determine the purpose for which the letter was written. Some researchers stated their purposes directly, while clues on the letterhead or in the content of the letter aided in the categorization. In nearly one-third of the cases (28.2%) it was not possible to determine the purpose for which the letter was written.

Four categories of researchers are evident. The largest group of researchers (37.3%) who contact the National Archives by mail have purely **personal** reasons for consulting archives. Typical personal researchers trace family immigration patterns, document their own military service, or seek historical facts out of mere curiosity. A second group of researchers may be affiliated with an **academic** institution, and include faculty and students in a variety of disciplines functioning at various levels. Academic researchers account for only 5.4 percent of the letters analyzed in the project.

Table 1: Reference Correspondents by Unit

ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS OF THE OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES									
NNSC, Architectural & Cartographic Branch	NNSM, Motion Picture, Video & Sound Recordings Branch								
NNSP, Still Picture Branch	NNRC, Civil Reference Branch								
NNRM, Military Reference Branch	NNR-CG, Captured German Records Staff								
NNX, Center for Electronic Records	NNLR, Legislative Reference Branch								
	NNSC	NNSM	NNSP	NNRC	NNRM	NNCG	NNX	NNLR	TOTAL
What is the purpose of the letter?									
Personal	2	1	38	41	50	2	3	0	137
Academic	1	1	0	8	6	2	2	0	20
Professional	38	6	13	8	9	0	8	2	84
Avocational	3	0	5	0	10	0	0	2	20
Unknown	42	2	11	26	9	2	3	11	106
What type of information does the writer want?									
About NARA	6	0	4	0	0	0	2	0	12
About Records	20	1	5	14	22	2	4	1	69
From NARA Records	60	9	58	63	60	4	9	14	277
Other Records	0	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	7
Other	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
Are reproductions requested?									
No	47	4	4	44	46	1	9	7	162
Photocopies	9	1	5	33	32	3	2	8	93
Audiovisual	30	5	55	1	5	0	0	0	96
Microformats	0	0	0	4	1	1	0	0	6
Publications	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
Other	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	0	7
Does the research question concern genealogy?									
Yes	1	0	0	30	38	1	2	11	83
No	66	10	59	43	42	5	14	4	243
Unknown	19	0	8	10	4	0	0	0	41
Does the writer state how the information will be used?									
Yes	16	0	19	10	12	1	4	2	64
No	70	10	48	73	72	5	12	13	303
TOTAL UNITS	86	10	67	83	84	6	16	15	367

A third group of researchers, accounting for 22.8 percent of the sample, seeks archival information for use in a professional setting. Government administrators, journalists, lawyers, and film makers working on specific work-oriented projects are typical examples of **occupational** researchers. A person's occupation, per se, may not necessarily place them in this group, unless their purpose for visiting the archives is related to their job. The fourth group of researchers (5.4%) has an **avocational** interest in archives, and tends to pursue their interests in greater depth and over a greater period of time than personal researchers. Persons researching Civil War history on their own, documenting the personnel of a World War II ship, or the design of a fortification in Florida are examples of history hobbyists.

The vast majority of people who write the National Archives (75.4%) seek specific information from the holdings of the agency. People who were placed in this category requested copies of documents or factual information that would require the person who drafted a response to consult the records themselves or detailed finding aids. Almost one in five who write (18.8%) request information about the records, such as the availability of series or general descriptions of contents that may be obtained from preliminary inventories, pamphlets, or published guides. A smattering of letters (3.1%) are from people who want to know something about the agency itself, while the remaining portion (2.4%) request information that can only be found in records held by other archival repositories, such as birth certificates.

Just over half of those who write letters asking for information (55.9%) also are seeking copies of records from the National Archives. If the total volume of correspondence were included in the analysis, the volume of requests for photocopies would probably exceed three-quarters of all requests. About half of those who want copies (25.3% of total) request photocopies, while the remainder (26.1%) are interested in photographs or film.

About one-quarter of those who write for information (22.6%) are clearly interested in genealogy, while two-thirds (66.1%) are clearly concerned with other topics. In 11 percent of the letters it is not possible to determine whether or not the writer is seeking genealogical information.

Tracking the impact of the reference services provided by the agency to everyday citizens is complicated by the anonymity of those who write. Few people state clearly how the information they seek will be used. In only 64 of the 367 letters (17.4%) did the writer specify a product, such as a dissertation, an article or film, or legislation.

Comparison of Question Specificity

An important part of the user study was to investigate the differences in question patterns between face-to-face questioning and reference correspondence. The research procedure for this project involved noting verbatim the original research question posed by 213 individual or teams that were issued research cards in the Consultants Office during a one-week period and listening to the answers to probing questions by consultants for new information supplied by researchers. In addition, the 367 reference letters received during the study week were read and evaluated in terms of the

information supplied by the correspondent. Table 2 compares the question elements in reference letter inquiries with those posed in the Consultants Office. Overall, the table shows that patrons who write for advice supply nearly four pieces of information about their topic per letter on the average, while on-site visitors only need to specify 2.4 question elements on average to be issued a research card. In the group of letters examined, the maximum number of elements supplied was nine; the minimum was one (in all four cases a broad subject). Closer analysis of patron requests broken out by purpose of visit or letter shows no differences in the average number of question elements supplied, which may run counter to the stereotypes of the un-prepared personal researcher versus the expert academics and professionals. Patrons who write to National Archives military reference units tend on average to supply more information; those who write to the legislative branch tend to supply less information than average.

Table 2: Research Question Elements: Orientation and Reference Letters

QUESTION ELEMENT	Orientation		Letters	
Date	94	44.3%	225	61.3%
Place	45	21.2%	177	31.9%
Media	98	46.2%	169	46.0%
Personal Name	94	44.3%	132	36.0%
Type of Document	31	14.6%	115	31.3%
Federal Agency	32	15.1%	110	30.0%
Other Name	8	3.8%	85	23.2%
Number, etc.	0	---	82	22.3%
Historical Event	14	6.6%	81	22.1%
Title of Document	7	3.3%	66	18.0%
Record Group	11	5.2%	46	12.5%
Broad Subject	54	25.5%	44	12.0%
Corporate Body	10	4.7%	17	4.6%
Building Name	8	3.8%	16	4.4%
Footnote	2	1.0%	11	3.0%
NARA Unit	0	---	4	1.1%
Language	0	---	3	0.8%
Agency Function	1	---	2	0.5%
TOTAL	509		1385	
Units	212		367	
Average	2.40		3.77	

As for the specific elements of questions posed, patterns vary depending on whether the query arrives in the mail or at the door. In the Consultants Office, the most frequently mentioned elements are medium, date (specific or general), and personal names. Probing by staff in the Consultants Office elicits additional question elements but does not substantially change the ranking of the most commonly specified elements. Correspondents also typically supply dates and media, but tend to describe their interests more specifically in geographic terms. Few visitors supply personal identification numbers or mention specific historical events in a first encounter with archivists, yet they are clearly prepared to do so when the opportunity for face-to-face interaction is limited. On the other hand, one in four visitors to the Consultants Office initially describes his or her topic in terms of a broad subject, whereas few correspondents write in general terms. Correspondents are also much more prone to mention a National Archives record group by name or the title of a document or report than those to visit the Consultants Office. Few researchers conceive of their topics in terms of federal agency function, document language, or a specific National Archives administrative unit that may assist them in their search.

Question Specificity by Reference Branch

Table 3 reports the specific question elements of the letters in terms of the reference branch that received the letter, which is a rough approximation of the broad topic of the letter. Correspondence routed to reference units in the Special Archives Division, which includes still pictures (NNSP), motion pictures (NNSM), and cartographic records (NNSC), more typically specifies the desired medium of the information requested. Writers to the cartographic branch are particularly apt to specify the type of document and unique identifying numbers. Researchers are far less likely to provide geographic place names when requesting information on motion pictures, and far less likely than average to supply dates and time periods when contacting archivists about still pictures.

People who write to reference units that primarily serve military records (NNRM, NNCG) tend to provide significantly more information to support their requests than those who write to other branches. Those who write for information from legislative records tend to be diligent in supplying the title of documents, in part because the branch services the printed archives that are part of the records of the Government Printing Office.

Table 3: Research Question Elements by Unit

ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS OF THE OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES									
NNSC, Architectural & Cartographic Branch					NNSM, Motion Picture, Video & Sound Recordings Branch				
NNSP, Still Picture Branch					NNRC, Civil Reference Branch				
NNRM, Military Reference Branch					NNR-CG, Captured German Records Staff				
NNX, Center for Electronic Records					NNLR, Legislative Reference Branch				
	NNSC	NNSM	NNSP	NNRC	NNRM	NCCG	NNX	NNLR	TOTAL
QUESTION ELEMENTS									
Date	55	7	31	44	74	2	7	5	225
Place	60	1	18	41	44	3	8	2	177
Media	59	10	67	10	18	3	1	1	169
Personal Name	3	3	15	47	57	2	2	3	132
Type of Documents	28	1	5	33	30	3	7	8	115
Federal Agency	12	1	15	29	46	1	1	5	110
Other Name	14	3	33	19	13	1	0	2	85
Number, etc.	39	2	17	7	8	3	6	0	82
Historical Event	8	2	20	14	26	3	6	2	81
Title of Document	8	3	1	21	15	1	5	12	66
Record Group	8	1	2	22	11	1	1	0	46
Broad Subject	10	2	11	10	7	1	3	0	44
Corporate Body	3	0	0	10	3	0	0	1	17
Building Name	1	0	2	4	9	0	0	0	16
Footnote	0	0	4	0	5	2	0	0	11
NARA Unit	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	4
Language	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	3
Agency Function	0	0	4	0	5	2	0	0	11
TOTAL	311	36	245	312	372	30	47	41	1394
Units	86	10	67	83	84	6	16	15	367
Average	3.61	3.6	3.66	3.76	4.43	5.0	2.94	2.73	3.80

Question Specificity by Purpose of Letter

The patterns of question elements supplied by those who submitted their requests in writing also varies somewhat depending on the writer's purpose and where the letter was sent. Table 4 lists the question elements of the letters by the purpose of the correspondent, if determined. Academics specify their requests in terms of broad subjects far more often (33%) than average. Professional researchers also supply document types and titles as well as unique personal identifiers (e.g., military service number) more often than other types of correspondents. The two letters that specified agency function as an element of their questions were engaged in personal projects.

Table 4: Research Question Elements by Purpose

QUESTION ELEMENT	Personal	Academic	Professional	Avocational	Don't Know	TOTAL
Date	93	13	55	12	52	225
Place	68	11	46	9	43	177
Media	48	7	62	8	44	169
Personal Name	89	8	11	4	20	132
Document Type	39	10	28	8	30	115
Federal Agency	52	9	22	11	16	110
Other Name	42	0	12	6	25	85
Number, etc.	13	3	36	5	25	82
Historical Event	48	2	12	8	11	81
Document Title	13	3	22	5	23	66
Record Group	11	5	10	2	18	46
Broad Subject	6	7	11	2	18	44
Corporate Body	4	1	1	2	9	17
Building Name	7	0	3	2	4	16
Footnote	6	3	1	0	0	11
NARA Unit	0	0	1	0	3	4
Language	3	0	0	0	0	3
Agency Function	2	0	0	0	0	2
TOTAL	544	82	333	84	341	1385
Units	137	20	84	20	106	367
Average	3.97	4.1	3.96	4.2	3.21	3.77

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

- * The week chosen for the study is not necessarily representative of all weeks during the year.
- * The sample of 367 letters is not large enough to allow for projection of trends beyond the study week.
- * Although every effort was made to achieve consistency in the coding of question elements contained in incoming reference letters, it is not necessarily possible to capture every possible question element in every letter and note the information consistently from letter to letter. To increase consistency, most letters were read by two coders working independently. It is entirely possible, however, that a records specialist reading any particular letter may identify additional information that would be helpful in crafting a relevant response.
- * Responses by National Archives staff to the incoming letters were not included in the analysis, so it is not possible to determine if any particular letter was written specifically enough from the perspective of those who must answer it.
- * Reference requests other than unique incoming letters were not assessed in this project, so it is not possible to assess the overall demand on reference branches from incoming correspondence.

DISCUSSION

This project was designed only to explore the feasibility of understanding researcher topics in terms of the specific question elements. Overall the findings suggest that researchers as a group apparently have significant information about their topics at their disposal when they contact the National Archives and that much of this information consists of the fundamental elements of historical inquiry--names, dates, places, and events. Regardless of whether they call, write, or visit in person, researchers seem to have their historical questions fairly specifically defined and their needs for documentation narrowed. Researchers have thought through the types of evidence that will answer their questions and contact the archives equipped with a wish list of document types as well as the format and media of the information they need. Perhaps the most important finding of this exploratory study is the frequency with which correspondents supply document type and the names of specific historical events in comparison with broad subject categories and agency functions as key question elements in their requests.