

Articles by NDL staff

The 70-year history of the reference services in the National Diet Library — With a focus on two characteristic topics

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This article is a partial translation of the article in Japanese of the same title in the *NDL Monthly Bulletin No. 689/690* (September/October 2018).



After I left the restaurant, I went to the library nearby. At the reference desk sat a slender young woman with long black hair, engrossed in a paperback book. "Do you have any reference materials pertaining to the mammalian skull?" I asked.

"Huh?" she said, looking up.

"References-on-mammalian-skulls," I repeated, saying each word separately.

This scene from Haruki Murakami's novel *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*¹ features a visit to a library reference desk by a protagonist who asks for information on mammalian skulls. Reference services at libraries are there to help patrons find the information

they are looking for and to provide search guides that explain where to find information on a particular subject. Although not many patrons take advantage of reference services in Japan, the National Diet Library (NDL) has been providing reference service since it was founded in 1948, and nowadays almost all local libraries provide some form of reference services.

During the past 70 years, the NDL has provided patrons with numerous different styles of reference services. In this article, we present two examples that illustrate how our services have evolved.

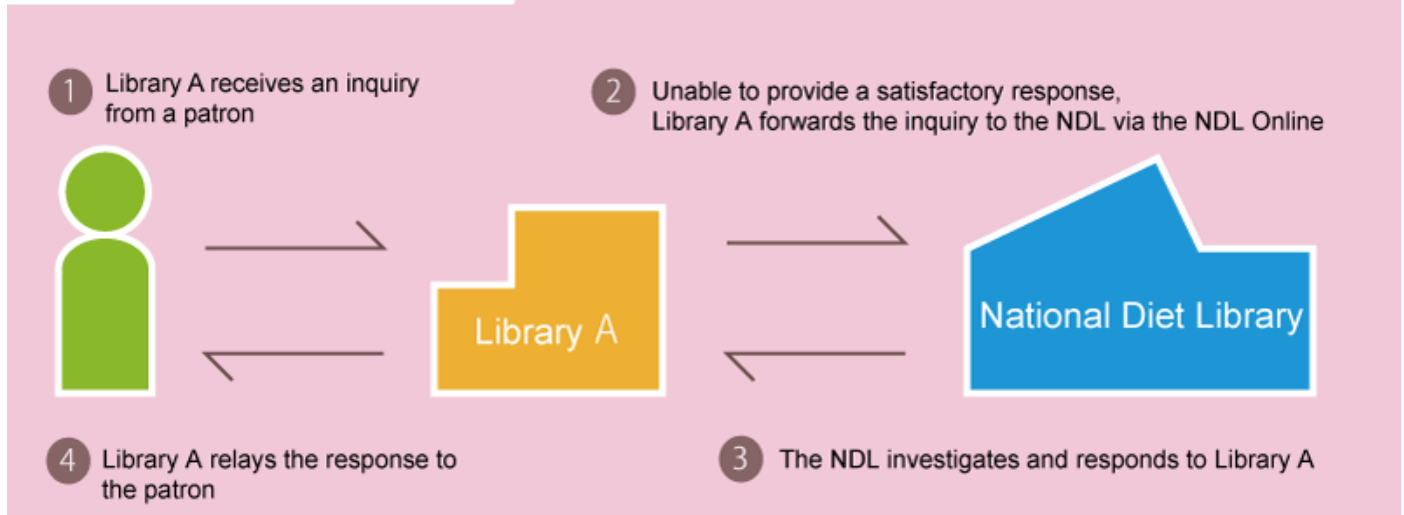
¹ Original work published 1985. Translation by Alfred Birnbaum. Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International. 1991. NDL Call No. KH384-A14

The NDL's cooperative framework for reference inquiries

In general, most libraries accept inquiries at a library reference counter, over the phone, or via a web form. But at the NDL, we do not accept inquiries via web form from individual patrons who reside in Japan. Instead, we ask them first to submit their inquiry to a local library.

Then, if the local library is unable to come up with a suitable response, it can relay the inquiry via the NDL Online, and the NDL will investigate the matter. This process is shown in the flow chart below.

Collaborative Framework for Reference Services



During 2013, I visited national and royal libraries in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Denmark, and Norway to survey their approaches to providing reference services. I was surprised to find that none of these libraries had this kind of collaborative framework for reference services. In the all countries I visited, whenever a local library is unable to respond to a query from an individual patron, they recommend that the patron contact a national or royal library directly. So it seems that the NDL's collaborative framework for references services is quite unusual in the world of reference services. When did the NDL first develop this

approach to providing reference services via a collaborative framework?

According to the NDL's guidebook entitled *Kokuritsu Kokkai Toshokan riyō no tebiki* (Guide to Using the National Diet Library. Edited by the National Diet Library, 1954), the NDL does not provide reference services for problems that can be solved satisfactorily at local public libraries or in the workplace. Thus, from early on, NDL policy was intended to prevent it being flooded with reference queries by having patrons first ask their questions at local libraries.

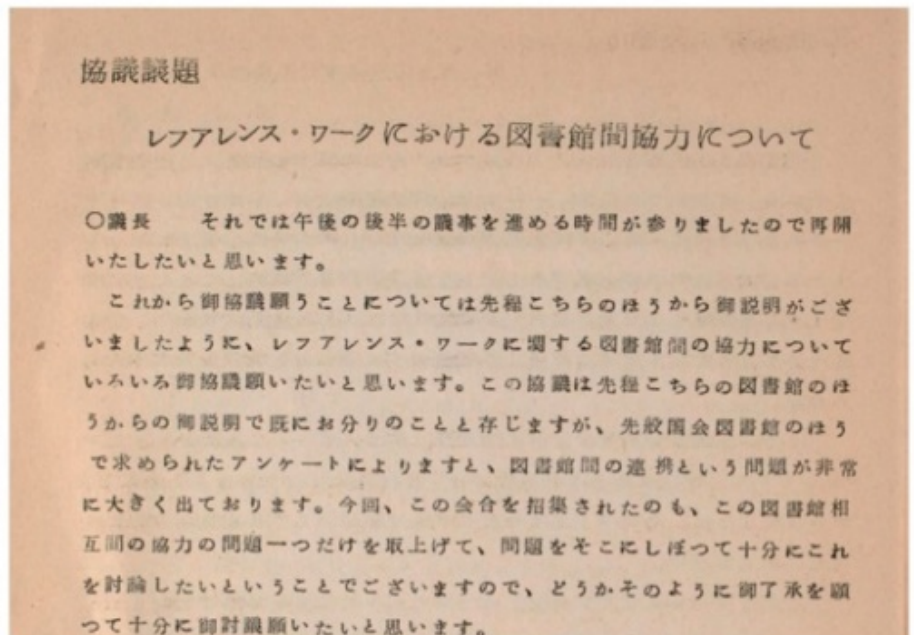
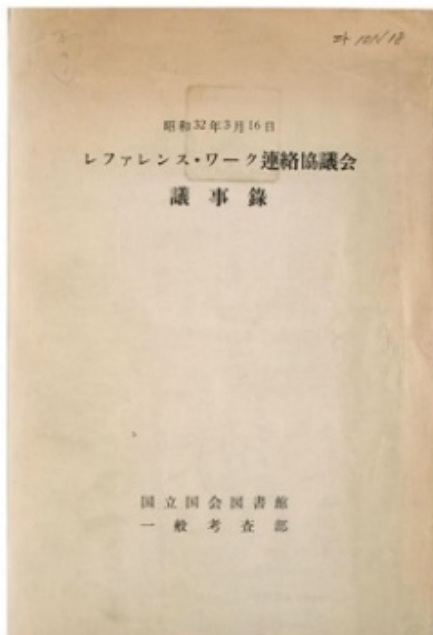


Kokuritsu Kokkai Toshokan riyo no tebiki: shu to shite ippan riyosha no tameni, Edited by the General Reference Division, National Diet Library; Published by Shunju Kai (at the National Diet Library), 1954. NDL Call No. 016.11-Ko5482k

Despite this policy, no specific measures were taken to restrict the acceptance of reference queries sent via postal mail by individual patrons, and in fact, the number of queries received this way continued to increase year after year.

In March 1957, a meeting of the Reference Work Liaison Council was held, during which reference librarians from

public libraries throughout Japan discussed the establishment of a framework to promote interlibrary collaboration for reference work. One goal of the meeting was to discuss a proposal to recommend that patrons make reference queries first at their local libraries instead of contacting the NDL directly.



Refarensu waku renraku kyogikai gijiroku, Published by General Reference Division, National Diet Library in 1957. NDL Call No. 015.2-Ko548r * The Reference Work Liaison Council met in the Hagoromo room at the Akasaka Detached Palace, which is where the National Diet Library was located at that time. After hearing a report on a survey of reference services being carried out by libraries nationwide and a summary from each participating library of the reference services they perform, the discussion of how to promote a collaborative framework began.

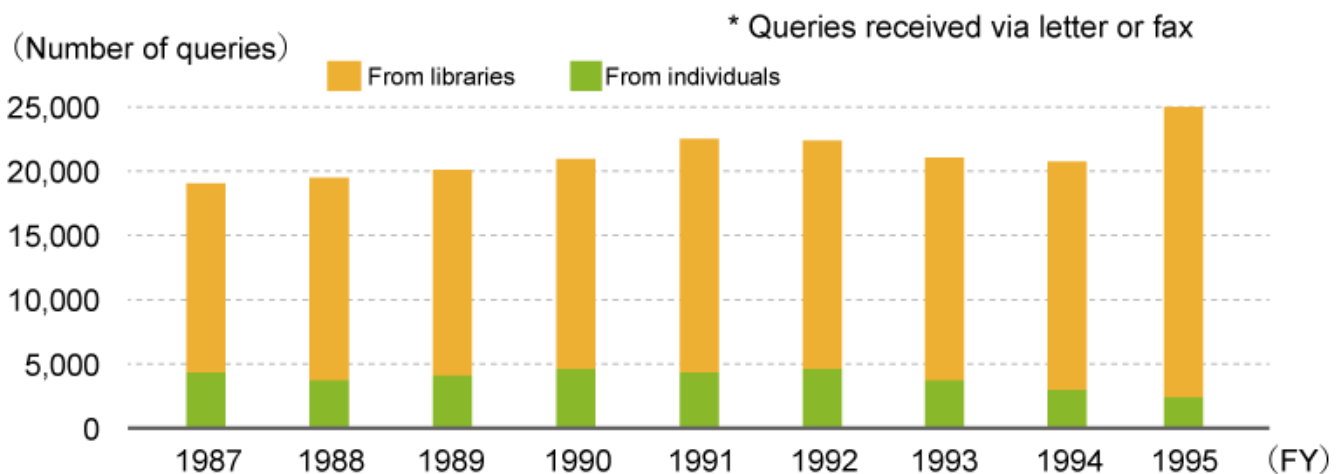
At the time, the NDL had been publicizing its reference services on NHK radio. As a result, the number of reference inquiries had increased significantly, and the reference librarians were tremendously busy trying to keep up with the demand. The *National Diet Library Annual Report* for that period shows that the reference librarians handled 4293 queries in FY 1949, 4461 queries in FY 1950, 5007 queries in FY 1951, 7082 queries in FY 1952, 10,133 queries in FY 1953, and 14,536 queries in FY 1954. It was becoming increasingly difficult for the NDL to meet the growing demand for reference services. However, promoting the use of local libraries has had a positive meaning, not just for dealing with quantitative problems. The reference service at the local library was not well known at that time. The NDL established a policy that urged patrons to use local libraries first, thus both promoting the use of local libraries as well as publicizing the availability of library reference services.

Despite the wide variety of opinions presented at the

meeting, most participants agreed to encourage patrons to make reference queries at local libraries. Thus, the NDL began to contact prefectural and municipal libraries in advance to learn about their local public relations policies, particularly with regard to publicizing reference services on local radio.

Later, in 1986, the NDL established a Library Cooperation Department and began collaborate proactively with other libraries. Then the Library Cooperation Department became the contact point for requests from other libraries, and policies were established to prioritize responding to reference queries from other libraries over those received references via postal mail from individuals. As shown in Graph 1, the desired effect of reducing the number queries received from individual patrons was achieved. The NDL began to accept reference inquiries via web form in 2002 and has also configured a system that enables local libraries to submit reference queries online using an ID and password to log on.

Graph 1: Number of Written* Reference Queries



From searching for specific items in the NDL collections to providing reference information service

Another notable aspect of the history of reference services at the NDL is how changes in the cataloging of library materials has impacted reference services.

For many years, library materials at the NDL were managed using card catalogues. Index cards containing information on the title, author, publisher, and year of publication for each library material were kept in cabinets and arranged alphabetically by either title or author. Library patrons who wanted to read a particular book were required to browse these card catalogues to find the library call number, write it down on a request form, and present the request form to a librarian, who would retrieve the book from the stacks. There are some older NDL employees who remember receiving inquiries over the phone about the availability of a particular book,

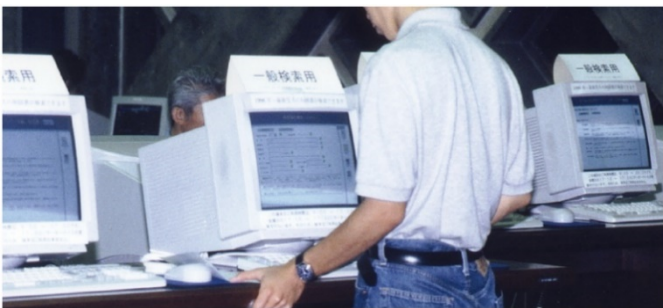
running to the card catalogue to find the book, and then hurriedly returning to the phone with the response. Starting in 1960, the card catalogues were also compiled and published in book form every few years. Although these catalogues were distributed to prefectural libraries and other institutions, patrons often needed to confirm the latest listings at NDL itself. And much of the NDL's reference services at the time involved searching for specific items in the card catalogue. Starting in the 1970s, the NDL card catalogue became searchable by computer. And since 1988, CD-ROMs of the library catalogue have been published and distributed to libraries throughout Japan.

Starting in July, 1989, the NDL began trial operation of computer terminals at the library and allowed patrons to search the card catalog themselves. Since then, parts of the catalogue were made available via the Internet, and the volume of data available to the public was gradually increased. With the release of the NDL Online Public

Access Catalogue (NDL-OPAC) in October 2002, virtually the entire NDL card catalogue was searchable via the Internet.



Browsing the card catalogue from cabinets in the catalogue hall in 1997

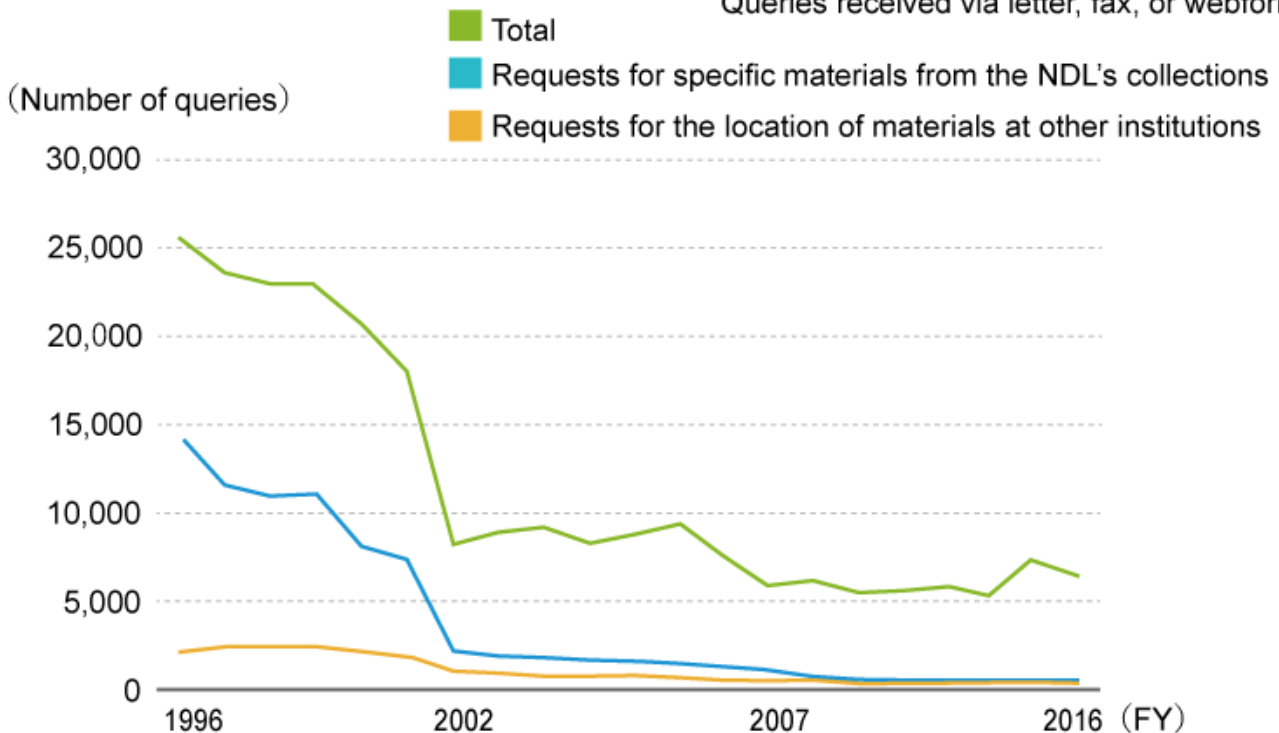


Searching for materials at a user terminal in 1997

As libraries throughout Japan began to publish their catalogues on the Internet, search engines capable of retrieving results from the catalogues of multiple libraries also began to appear. This new environment, through which both reference librarians and individual patrons were able to search catalogue of practically any library, brought about major changes in the demand for library reference services. The most obvious was a significant decrease in the number of reference queries. Reference queries at the NDL peaked in 1996 at 25,663, and by 2016 had fallen to a mere quarter of the peak level or 6,509. In addition, there were changes in the kinds of queries being made. Requests for specific books at the NDL decreased dramatically, from 14,464 or 56% of all reference queries in 1996 to 434 or 7% of all reference queries in 2016. This means that in just 20 years, requests for specific books in the NDL collections had fallen 97%. The next largest decrease was in requests for specific books at other institutions, which fell 90% in the 20 years between 1996 and 2016, as shown in Graph 2 below.

Graph 2: Number of Written* Reference Queries

*Queries received via letter, fax, or webform



Obviously, the decrease in reference queries was due not just to changes in services offered by the library but also because of increases in the information available via the Internet. Thus, at many libraries, making reference information available via the Internet has come to be regarded as an important part of providing reference services in its broadest sense.

In addition to a database of its library catalogue, the NDL is currently developing other tools to enable patrons to find what they are looking for efficiently. For example, the NDL's *Tema betsu shirabekata annai (Guide for Searching by Subject)*, which provides a summary of useful library materials as well as information from the Internet, was released in 2002. Additionally, the NDL's [Collaborative Reference Database](#) is an archive of library reference queries, which comprises records of reference queries and their responses compiled by the NDL and other libraries throughout Japan, was released in 2005.

The *Tema betsu shirabekata annai (Guide for Searching by Subject)* was later renamed *Shirabekata annai (Search Guide)* and in 2017 comprised some 1319 records that were accessed 6.5 million times. An English-language version of parts of this page is available as the [NDL English Guide in Research Navi](#). Also in 2017, 769 libraries participated in the *Collaborative Reference Database*, which comprised approximately 210,000 records that were accessed 53.1 million times. Although the Reference Work Liaison Council had promoted the creation of a national organization for reference services as early as 1957, this dream was finally made a reality with the growth of the Internet.

Although the reference services provided by the NDL have gone through many changes, we continue to cooperate with other libraries throughout Japan in seeking the best ways to support our patrons in their search for information of interest.

(Translated by Rie Watanabe and Mika Oshima)

Related articles from the NDL Newsletter:

- [All about the Collaborative Reference Database \(No. 218, June 2018\)](#)