

for 'hunger' retrieved more than 547 items. Limit that search to reference items only, and the result is a dismal 5 — certainly not representative of our reference collection.

How can we access the contents of our reference collections and see a tangible return on our investment? Online reference collections like the *Gale Virtual Reference Library* are a definite answer. Traditional print titles are instantly searchable by keywords, article titles, photo captions, dates, and scores of other parameters in the online interface, providing considerably improved access to the reference content. For example, the same search for 'hunger' in our *Gale Virtual Reference Library* collection retrieved over 625 results. Narrow that to hunger in the article title only, and discover over 60 results. The array of topics is also impressive, including a plethora of sources with different perspectives/topics including: food and culture, death and dying, world poverty, human rights, religion, civil rights in America, endocrine diseases, Irish history and culture, and major marketing campaigns. Students having difficulty narrowing a search topic will find this variety of perspectives extremely useful for preliminary research. For librarians, the ability to keyword search the reference collection online unlocks the hidden print collection. The best part, librarians and students can discover and explore these traditional sources — online, anytime.

If it isn't online, it doesn't exist. Certainly the print reference collection exists, but does the low usage justify the expense? The research is clear: print reference use has declined over the past 15 years and will most likely continue. Reference content is invisible through our major search tool — the catalog. Our students prefer to search, retrieve, and manipulate data electronically, access information 24/7, and email rather than pay for printing, so it's very hard to 'sell' the traditional print reference collection! Fortunately, there are online reference collections, like *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, with access to more than 1,800 titles, 42 publishers, and 2.6 million documents, waiting to be discovered.

¹ Engeldinger, Eugene A. "'Use' as a Criterion for the Weeding of Reference Collections: A Review and Case Study," in *Weeding and Maintenance of Reference Collections*, edited by Sydney J. Pierce. New York: Haworth Press, 1990, p. 119-128.

² Bradford, Jane T. "What's Coming Off the Shelves? A Reference use Study Analyzing Print Reference Sources used in a University Library." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 31 (2005): 546-58.

"I love that it (*GVRL*) allows for the kind of serendipity you used to encounter while doing research. You enter a search topic such as 'felines' and you are provided with perfectly on-point sources like *U•X•L Encyclopedia of Science* but, also material from *Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library* that covers some unexpected angles of your subject."

— Anna Yackle Reference Librarian

About The Author



Sue Polanka is Head of Reference and Instruction at Wright State University Libraries in Dayton, Ohio. She has more than 17 years of library experience in reference and instruction at public, academic, and state libraries. She currently serves as the Chair of the Reference Books Bulletin

Editorial Board, where she has served on the Board and been active in book reviews for over 6 years. Sue is a frequent contributor to RBB and ALA, her writings and presentations focus on specialized product reviews of print and electronic sources, the use of technology in reference and instruction, and e-reference books.

GALE VIRTUAL REFERENCE LIBRARY

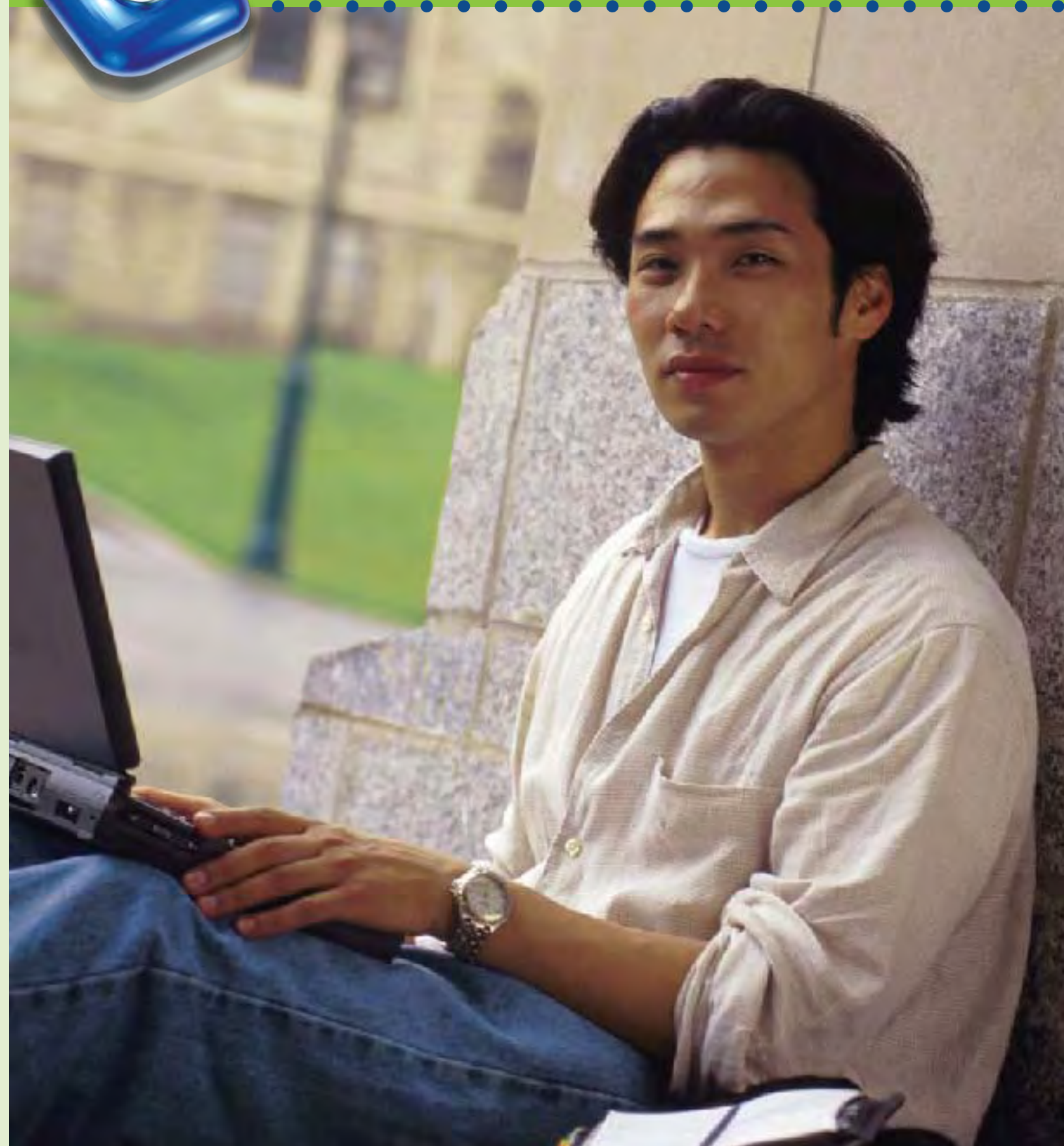
requires no:

- Special readers or software
- Login/logout
- Shelf space
- Subscriptions - own the content forever



Gale Virtual Reference Library

A Case for Electronic Reference Books by Sue Polanka



If you build it, they will come



"If it isn't online, it doesn't exist," seems to be the pervasive thinking amongst researchers of all sorts, particularly college students — including our own at Wright State University. As a reference librarian, I certainly hear it and see it from our students on a regular basis. For example, when we point them to the book shelves in response to a question they've asked and they reply with, "oh, it's only in print?" Moreover, as librarians we face additional challenges such as fluctuating budgets and the

weeding of traditional print collections for the transformation to the learning commons — writing centers, coffee bars, lounge chairs, group work areas, and new technologies. With all these factors, it can be difficult for libraries to ascertain the future of the reference collection, but the answers are out there.

So, is that really the case?

Do students use only a keyboard and monitor to find information today? Looking at various studies of print reference collections usage — including my own — I'd have to say that many of our students agree. The use of the print reference collection is declining here and at many other libraries, but is it truly dying? To some — generation Y and distance learners, it's not only dying...it never existed; to others — historians, archivists, and librarians, it's not. The answer is that the state of print reference depends on who you ask and that it's dead, nearly dead, or never existed to many of our patrons yet we still have patrons who need and prefer print. In fact, in a survey I conducted of 145 librarians at ALA Annual 2007, 58% said print reference "was dead or on its way out" while 33% said it's not dead.

Let's briefly look at the results of several studies on print reference usage that have been conducted over the years, demonstrating low usage. In 1990, Eugene Engeldinger published a 5-year study on reference use at the University of Wisconsin — Eau Claire. The results showed that more than half of the reference items (51.4%) had been used no more than one time in five years. In his conclusion, Engeldinger stated "without this project we might never have realized so much of our material was used so infrequently."¹ Fifteen years later, a similar study was published by Jane T. Bradford, from Stetson University. In this 2-year study of reference collection use, Bradford determined that only 9.7% of the print reference collection was being used.²

Finally, at Wright State University, our usage is also low. We have approximately 14,000 volumes in our print reference collection, the remnants of a significant weeding project several years ago. Since the Fall of 2004, we have checked-out (in-house use) any reference volume needing to be re-shelved. While our study wasn't controlled like the Bradford and Engeldinger studies, it did provide some eye-opening results. In fact, what we discovered was that only 1/3 of our collection was used in the three years, and only 6% was used four or more times.

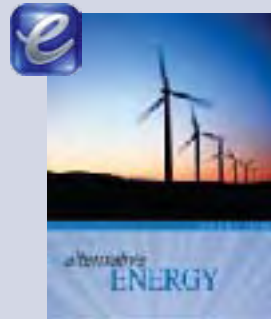
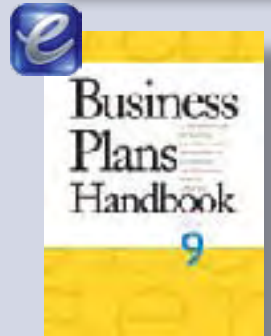
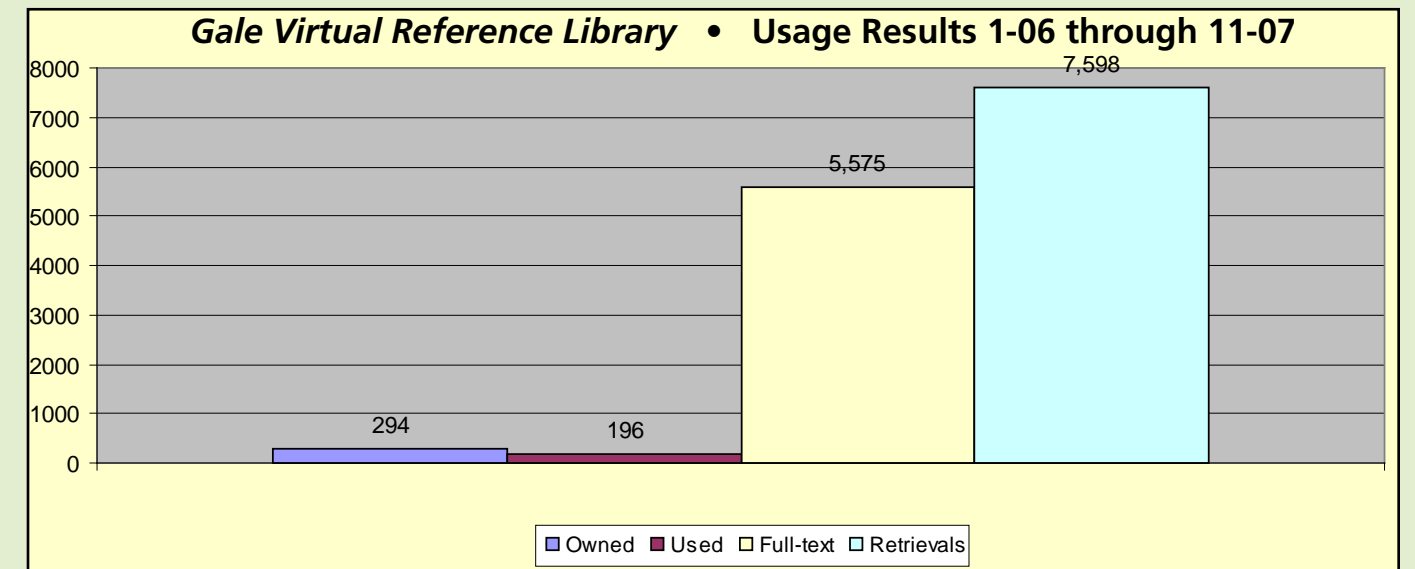


Chart A			
Count of uses = in-house + check-out			
	Total Volumes:	Number	Percent
	13,744		
	Volumes used ever?	4,662	33.92
	Volumes used 2x or more?	2,268	16.50
	Volumes used 3x or more?	1,364	9.92
	Volumes used 4x or more?	899	6.54
	Volumes used 5x or more?	638	4.64
	Volumes used 10x or more?	243	1.77

With the demand for an information commons, the 24/7 online search preferences of students, as well as an increasing number of distance learning students, WSU began investing in online reference titles. In early 2006, we purchased nearly 300 titles from the Gale Virtual Reference Library. The titles were generally multivolume subject encyclopedias published in the last 5 years designed to support our writing programs. In this short time frame — just shy of 2 years — usage of these 294 titles was an astounding 67%, with over 56% used four or more times.

What's also amazing is that we accomplished this usage with very little marketing effort. The titles were linked from the catalog, links to the Gale Virtual Reference Library interface were available from the library website so users could search directly, and a few "e" stickers were placed on the spines of corresponding print books indicating the print title was also online. The end result: our users were discovering the reference content on their own — online!



So, why is my print collection getting so little use and the online collection flourishing? There are several factors. First, the majority of our students prefer to start their research online (rather than coming to the brick and mortar library), from the comfort of their dorm rooms, homes, or laptops, 24/7. Second, our reference collections are simply too large for us to learn all the titles, much less the content of those titles, which leads to the most problematic factor: the content of our reference collections is hidden from the online catalog. Sure, the titles are cataloged, but only at the title level. What is NOT cataloged - the table of contents, index, article titles, and authors — is what provides the best access to the content. For example, a keyword search of our online catalog