**User services**

The second of the two main functions of libraries is directed at actively exploiting the collection to satisfy the information needs of library users.

**Circulation**

Although many of the libraries in antiquity were accessible to the literate public, this was almost certainly for reference only. Some monastic libraries, however, are known to have allowed the monks to borrow books for study in their cells; the Rule of [St. Benedict](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Benedict-of-Nursia) explicitly permitted this, and the librarian exacted penance from any monk unable to confirm that he had actually read his [book](https://www.britannica.com/topic/book-publication). Some [university](https://www.britannica.com/topic/university) libraries may have lent books to members of their faculties, but the notion of lending, or circulating, libraries did not become popular until the 18th century.

The rapid development of public libraries in the 19th century led to the [extension](https://www.britannica.com/technology/plug-in) of the practice and to the introduction of various systems for the recording of loans. All the early systems depended on the use of one or more cards on which were recorded the name of the book, the name of the borrower, and the date on which the book should be returned. Many libraries now use a computerized circulation system that [records](https://www.britannica.com/topic/archives) information about both the user and the material in circulation.

**Reference and retrieval**

Open access to the shelves and the facility to borrow books mean that much of the use of a modern library is at the free choice of the reader; scholars and scientists continue to emphasize the value of browsing among the shelves of a well-arranged library. “Chance favours only the prepared mind,” said [Louis Pasteur](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-Pasteur), and serendipitous discoveries of useful information during the search for some other subject have become a familiar and welcome aspect of using a library or other information service.

In reference service, librarians have traditionally given personal help to readers in making the best use of collections to satisfy their information needs. The publication of printed catalogs and bibliographies, the accessibility of [on-line catalogs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/information-system) and multimedia databases, and the organizing of interlibrary cooperation have widened the range of resources available to the individual reader. As a result, librarians increasingly are called upon to help users determine the most efficient tool to use in their research. In scholarly libraries, assistance to readers once was generally limited to explaining the layout of the library and the use of the catalog; in universities, members of the faculty would have been expected to know the literature of their subject better than any librarian. But in public libraries, and still more so in special libraries in the fields of science and [technology](https://www.britannica.com/technology/technology), readers have long sought guidance about information on their subject as well as about the library. This process has been greatly extended by the enormous increases in research worldwide and in the quantity of information and publications available in many languages and by the excellence of the indexes, abstracts, bibliographies, and databases that help to control the documentation of this massive output.

The [subject](https://www.britannica.com/topic/subject-catalog) search is one of the areas on which advancing technology has had the greatest impact. In many libraries, a variety of computer-based [information retrieval](https://www.britannica.com/technology/information-retrieval) systems provide ready access to details about off-site as well as on-site materials. For example, one development in subject access increases the amount of information that is available within library catalogs by including details from the table of contents or from a book’s index. Other systems, rather than just listing the abstract of a journal article, include the entire article. These full-text references eliminate the intermediate step characteristic of older systems in which users first performed an electronic search and then obtained the articles themselves in print or microfilm.

Reference services can be broadly divided into two main aspects, usually known as retrospective searching (or information retrieval) and current-awareness service (or selective dissemination of information). These terms indicate a specialization that has occurred in this core activity of libraries and that grew mainly out of the expansion of scientific and industrial research during and after [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I). Three factors strongly influenced this process. First, the increase in research and publication affected all types of libraries and brought with it a similar increase in subject specialization. Second, working scientists, accustomed to referring to reports in published papers, were content to leave the organizing of information searches to a colleague who knew and understood their work. And, third, the widespread application of scientific research in industry provided an extra stimulus to the [division of labour](https://www.britannica.com/topic/division-of-labour) because of the necessity for speedy application of results to gain commercial success in production.

Some information specialists have tried to draw a distinction between their reference work and the more general reference services of librarians, but in most countries there is close cooperation among all engaged in these professional activities. Most acknowledge a mutual interest and influence, while the range of duties allows, indeed requires, different emphases in different institutions.

All agree, however, in acknowledging the duty to assist users to find answers to inquiries and to carry out searches in existing literature. Such a service requires many qualities, personal and professional: a detailed knowledge of books, periodicals, and all other forms of record; an ability to search efficiently in catalogs, indexes, abstracts, and databases; and, above all, a sensitive understanding of each user’s needs. Matching the terms used by a reader in posing a question to the terms used by authors, indexers, and catalogers may well [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) one of the subtlest of professional skills.

**Retrospective searching**

The outcome of a search can take many forms, from a short, factual statement that gives the needed information to a short list of relevant references or a full-scale bibliography. In a computer search the first request often reveals that the [database](https://www.britannica.com/technology/database) contains hundreds or even thousands of “hits,” or references relating to the topic requested. The number can be reduced by narrowing the subject, adding more specific details, or defining more precisely the information needed. When a reasonable number of hits has been reached, the computer can be instructed to display the details of a few references to show the reader whether or not the search has covered the right subject area. If it has, the set of references or abstracts may then be obtained in the form of a printout; if it has not, the search begins again using new terms for the request.

In the specialized information centre a professional researcher can conduct the search and provide a state-of-the-art review of the literature in narrative form instead of as a collection of references. The service represents a peak of [efficiency](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficiency) on behalf of the client, who has neither the time nor the resources to make the same review. The value to industry and commerce has encouraged private individuals to become information brokers—i.e., to provide these services as a [commercial enterprise](https://www.britannica.com/topic/business-organization).

**Current-awareness service**

The purpose of a current-awareness service is to inform the users about new acquisitions in their libraries. Public libraries in particular have used display boards and shelves to draw attention to recent additions, and many libraries produce complete or selective lists for circulation to patrons. Some libraries have adopted a practice of selective dissemination of information (sometimes referred to as SDI), whereby librarians conduct regular searches of databases to find references to new articles or other materials that fit a particular patron’s interest profile and forward the results of these searches to the patron.

One development of the concept of SDI in the electronic [environment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment) is a [computer program](https://www.britannica.com/technology/computer-program) that scans computer bulletin boards, [electronic mail](https://www.britannica.com/technology/e-mail)messages, and similar networked information resources and selects items that meet a user profile. Such programs enable individual users to keep abreast of the large amount of information available through computer networks without having to sift through much material that may be of little interest or relevance to them.

**Community information**

**Library extension programs**

The growth of information services in special libraries, followed by college and university libraries, also has influenced [public library](https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-library) practice in library extension programs and [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) information services. Extension programs are usually arranged in cooperation with local educational organizations, university extramural courses, parent-teacher associations, and so on. In developing countries with [nascent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nascent) publishing and book trades, public libraries can offer valuable assistance to local authors, particularly those writing in [indigenous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous) languages, by providing facilities for authors to give lectures, hold seminars, and develop their own skills in direct relation with their potential readers. In European, African, and American libraries, poets or writers in residence have appeared as a part of similar action to bring authors and readers together.

**Community awareness programs**

In [North America](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-America), community needs for informal information are often met by the public library’s community awareness service (or information and referral service), though practice is far from standardized. This community outreach program is an important feature in many mostly rural societies. The Jamaica Library Service, for example, has long made a practice of setting up a stall at farmers’ markets to supply up-to-date books and pamphlets on agriculture. Public libraries in China regularly set up special links with local factories for the supply of technical literature and specialist advisory staff.

**Interlibrary relations**

**Library cooperation**

**Interlibrary lending**

The publication of bibliographies and library catalogs heightened awareness that no library could afford to be self-sufficient, and this awareness in turn stimulated interest in various forms of interlibrary cooperation. Cooperation probably originated informally, with readers referring to union catalogs to locate libraries that contained the books they wanted. One of the earliest formal organizations began with the Central Library for Students, founded in London by [Albert Mansbridge](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Albert-Mansbridge) in 1916. This was transformed in 1930 into the [National Central Library](https://www.britannica.com/place/National-Central-Library), which continued to act as a lending library but also formed the centre of a network of regional library bureaus. The bureaus were located in a major regional library and, with one exception, built up union catalogs of holdings in the local public libraries to [facilitate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/facilitate) interlibrary lending. The National Central Library encouraged other university and special libraries to participate. The National Central Library has since become part of the [British Library Lending Division](https://www.britannica.com/topic/British-Library-Lending-Division), which undertakes a major part of interlibrary lending both in the United Kingdom and internationally.

The progress of interlibrary lending, coupled with the great losses suffered by libraries in [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe) and Asia during [World War II](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II), led to an interest in cooperative acquisition of new materials. In 1948 the British National Book Centre was set up at the National Central Library in London to gather unwanted duplicates and to distribute them to the libraries that had suffered losses. It proved to be of incalculable value and was soon followed by the United States Book Exchange; both distributed lists of wants and offers to their member libraries.

**Cooperative acquisition and storage**

An ambitious program for cooperative acquisition of foreign materials by American libraries was conceived in the [Library of Congress](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Library-of-Congress) in 1942. This was the Farmington Plan: it involved the recruitment of purchasing agents in many countries, whose task was to buy their countries’ current publications and distribute them to American libraries according to a scheme of subject specialization. Many [criticisms](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criticisms) were leveled at the scheme, and as a blanket operation it inevitably acquired a certain amount of trivia; but many research libraries have benefited by the acquisition of materials that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain.

Pressure on library space spurred librarians to discuss means of cooperative storage. Perhaps the foremost example is the Center for Research Libraries (formerly the Midwest Interlibrary Center) in [Chicago](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chicago), which began in 1952 as a centre for deposit of duplicate and little-used materials from research libraries. With the aid of a special grant, the [University of London](https://www.britannica.com/topic/University-of-London) established a depository library, at Royal Holloway College away from the centre of London, to which the colleges of the university can send materials for either cooperative or private storage. The British Library Lending Division also acts as a cooperative store; it receives unwanted items from any library and makes them generally available. Both of these libraries reserve the right to refuse items that they already have in cooperative storage.

**Cooperative cataloging**

A number of important organizations [facilitating](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/facilitating) library cooperation have been established to store and retrieve catalog [records](https://www.britannica.com/topic/archives). In the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States), a library cooperative in Ohio grew into the OCLC Online Computer Library Center, a not-for-profit company with a [database](https://www.britannica.com/technology/database) of millions of catalog records to which libraries can purchase access. Other organizations that store catalog records for retrieval by participating libraries have a regional focus or serve only one type of library, such as research libraries. In [Canada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada), two organizations developed for storing bibliographic data; one is in the National Library of Canada and the other started as the cataloging centre of the University of [Toronto](https://www.britannica.com/place/Toronto) and evolved into a for-profit corporation selling bibliographic records and other computer services to libraries. In Britain, the British Library became the supplier of cooperative library cataloging to all British libraries. Other library networks have been built around common automation choices. Groups of libraries that use the same circulation system or OPAC frequently organize to exchange information, advice, and bibliographic records.

**Associations and international organizations**

The wide variety of interlibrary organizations illustrated above makes for a [dynamic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynamic) and flexible [infrastructure](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infrastructure) supporting library cooperation. Many library networks evolve from one type of organization into another. New organizations come into existence and old ones cease to function. Against this pattern of change, library associations provide a steady influence in favour of library cooperation. These associations, found at national, state, and local levels, provide a forum for discussing and adopting standards that encourage the sharing of resources. Such standards include the framework for interlibrary lending, the international cataloging codes and standards, and communications standards that allow library computer systems to be linked to each other.

The oldest organization in the library and information field is the [International Federation for Information and Documentation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Federation-for-Information-and-Documentation) (*see above*). It was founded in 1895 in Brussels as the Institut International de Bibliographie by [Paul Otlet](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paul-Otlet) and [Henri La Fontaine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henri-La-Fontaine), as part of their plan to create an index of world literature on cards. The institute has many international committees, and some, especially those concerned with classification research and the constant revision of the [Universal Decimal Classification](https://www.britannica.com/science/Universal-Decimal-Classification), are very active. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA; Fédération Internationale des Associations de Bibliothécaires et des Bibliothèques, or FIAB) was founded in 1927 and first met formally in Rome in 1928. The organization publishes the *IFLA Journal*.

The International Council on Archives (ICA) was established with the help of UNESCO in 1948, and the first International Congress of Archivists was held in Paris in 1950. Early and continuing interest has centred on the microfilming, conservation, and preservation of historical [records](https://www.britannica.com/topic/archives) and on the development of standards for archive descriptions.

All these associations have received considerable [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) and financial support from [UNESCO](https://www.britannica.com/topic/UNESCO), the first General Conference of which took place in 1947. From its inception UNESCO has placed great importance on the encouragement of bibliography and libraries, public libraries in particular. (Part of its program was inherited from a [League of Nations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/League-of-Nations) organization called the International Institute of [Intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Intellectual) Cooperation, a principal concern of which was libraries.) UNESCO’s support has led to public library development in a large number of countries, as well as many other library-related projects.

The technical committee of the [International Organization for Standardization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Organization-for-Standardization), another [United Nations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations) body, has helped to formulate and [promulgate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/promulgate) a number of standards on bibliographical formats, particularly those related to computer processing.

**What is Current Awareness Service?**

Dissemination of information that will keep it users well-informed and up-to-date in their fields of basic interest as well as in related subjects is called Current Awareness Service. It is a system of getting knowledge on recent development, and especially those developments which relate to the special interest of the individual.

CAS is a device of the information system through which the users of information can be informed promptly, as soon as possible after publications but before absorption into the comprehensive secondary sources of current literature on a broad subject field or on a area in which a group of persons are interested, and presented in a manner, volume and rhythm intended to facilitate or cultivate current approach to information.