


# Library Jargon: Student Recognition of Terms and Concepts Commonly Used by Librarians in the Classroom 1

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This article reports the results of a study that used a pair of fifteen-item multiple-choice surveys to measure first- and second-year university student recognition of a select group of commonly used library terms. A total of 297 students responded. The results from the surveys indicate that commonly used terms such as plagiarism, reference services, research, copyright, and synonyms have high levels of recognition whereas library or computer-specific terms such as Boolean logic, bibliography, truncation, precision, and descriptor do not. The article includes a number of suggestions for overcoming this potential impediment to classroom communication.

ave you ever attended a meeting, overheard a conversation, or observed a lecture in which the material was presented in a language you did not know or the presenter used undefined terms or concepts with which you generally were not familiar? For the author, this first occurred when he attended a trilateral meeting with representatives of Germany and France in Paris. During the course of the three-day meeting, it quickly became apparent that the translators were unfamiliar with the terms and concepts being used by the delegates. Unfortunately, it was not until the third day of the meeting that the translators had become conversant enough with the jargon being

used to provide an effective translation service. For library patrons and students in the classroom, it is the librarian who must translate the jargon being used into information the students need.

## Literature Review

Library jargon, the technical language used by librarians to describe library resources and services, has long been recognized as an impediment to internal communication, public service, and user access to information. In 1958, John B. Nicholson Jr., after completing a study of librarian communications patterns, noticed that abbreviations or initials were often used when librarians or library staff were discussing the tools, associa-

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tions, and places where they worked. He also noticed that the level of jargon used by a librarian or library staff member depended on both what he or she was doing and why.<sup>1</sup> In 2002, Daniel Coffey and Karen Lawson observed that meaning change associated with the growing use of technology in the library often resulted in communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. This led them to question whether librarians could be held responsible for ensuring that others, including fellow librarians, understood the jargon being used.<sup>2</sup>

In 1989, before the swell of computer terminology and Internet-based slang complicated the matter, Rachel Naismith and Joan Stein used a twenty-item multiple-choice test and protocol analysis to measure student recognition of terms used in reference interviews and library handouts. In their summary, they concluded that because a large number of

the questions they asked of the students were missed, a communication problem clearly exists between librarians and patrons and recommended a number of options for closing the gap.<sup>3</sup> Using a format similar to the one used by Naismith and Stein, Abdus Sattar Chaudhry and Meng Choo focused specifically on the client's recognition of jargon used by librarians during reference interviews. Showing more positive results than Naismith and Stein, they made a number of recommendations, including that, depending on the needs of the audience, librarians provide a glossary of technical terms, reduce the amount of technical language used, and ensure that both sides have a common frame of reference for the terms and concepts used.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, as the Internet gained prominence and support for distant users became more prevalent, a number of authors have expressed concern regarding how library jargon impedes the user's effective and efficient access to information. For example, in his article, Mark A. Spivey advocated the use of embedded explanations to counter the confusion caused by short descriptions and nouns, library acronyms, and vendor-supplied descriptions.<sup>5</sup> In another article, Leo Robert Klein asserted that the best way to increase the usability of library resources and services is to simplify access and avoid library jargon whenever possible.<sup>6</sup>

Closer to the focus of the present study, Sara Boron and Alexia Strout-Dapaz discussed the many modifications that international students make in adjusting to an unfamiliar library environment. They make a number of suggestions, including providing handouts and using plain commu-

**TABLE 1**  
**First Survey: Ranking of Terms from Least to Most Understood**

Terms	% Correct	Terms	% Correct
Boolean logic	8.10%	Edition	72.30%
Bibliography	14.90%	Reference books	75.00%
Truncation	27.70%	Call number	79.70%
Precision	31.80%	Editor	86.50%
Descriptors	35.80%	Audiovisual materials	89.20%
Bibliographic information	54.73%	Table of contents	90.50%
Catalog	61.50%	Copyright	91.90%
Fair use	67.60%	Reference services	94.60%

N = 148 subjects  
 Total number of questions answered: 2,220  
 Number of questions answered correctly: 1,342 (60.45%)  
 Mean: 9.07 correct (out of 15)  
 Median: 10.14 correct  
 Standard Deviation: +4.48

nication during instructional sessions.<sup>7</sup> Noting that students with English as a second language must make similar adjustments, Lia D. Kamhi-Stein and Alan Paul Stein made a number of significant recommendations that also could be applied in any classroom.<sup>8</sup>

Although no previous study appears to have focused specifically on library jargon and its impact on classroom communication, the literature discussed above does provide a firm foundation upon which to mount the present study.

### Methodology

Thirty-two terms derived from library literature, reference desk experience, and classroom observation were selected and included in a pair of fifteen-item multiple-choice surveys. (See tables 1 and 2.) Each question included a definition of the targeted term based on standard library reference resources. In response, students were asked to select from one of four options, labeled a to d, that included the correct response and three logical distracters.

The initial version of the first survey, which was first used in September 2000, included questions on audiovisual materials, bibliographic information, bibliography, call numbers, catalogs, copyright, cumulative indexes, document delivery/interlibrary loan, editions, editors, fair use, library classification systems, reference books, reference services, and table of contents. Based on student feedback, classroom experience, and faculty suggestions, the questions on cumulative indexes, document delivery/interlibrary loan, library classification systems, and reference books were dropped and additional questions on Boolean logic, descriptors, precision, and truncation were added in January 2001. The second survey, which did not change during the

**TABLE 2**  
**Second Survey: Ranking of Terms from Least to Most Understood**

Terms	% Correct	Terms	% Correct
Controlled vocabulary	18.10%	Search statement	63.80%
Information need	34.90%	Journal	74.50%
Abstract	36.20%	Call number	83.20%
Article	47.00%	Synonym	89.90%
Citation	51.70%	Copyright	91.30%
Authority	57.70%	Research	94.00%
Collection	59.70%	Plagiarism	100.00%
Catalog	61.70%		

N = 149 subjects  
 Total number of questions answered: 2,229  
 Number of questions answered correctly: 1,430 (64.15%)  
 Mean: 9.64 correct (out of 15)  
 Median: 9.25 correct  
 Standard Deviation: +3.66

course of the study, included questions on abstracts, articles, authority, call numbers, catalogs, citations, collections, controlled vocabulary, copyright, information need, journals, plagiarism, research, search statements, and synonyms. Because of a formatting error on one version of the second survey, six students failed to provide a response to the question on synonyms.

To test the internal consistency of the study, three questions on call numbers, catalogs, and copyright were included in both surveys. Also, to counter problems associated with question order and response order, four variants of each survey were developed. For each variant, a number of techniques were used, including changing the order in which the questions were asked and changing the order in which the item responses were listed.

The response pool for the study consisted of three hundred first- and second-year university students who completed

a seven-week library skills lab between September 2000 and June 2003. Typically, the instructor explained the purpose of the surveys and then the students took ten to fifteen minutes to complete them. *Microsoft Excel* was used to tabulate the results and calculate the mean, median, and standard deviation for both surveys and the overall results of the study. Demographic data on the participants were not collected.

**Results**

Of the 300 students, 297 completed and turned in their surveys (99.00%). Of those, only three (1.01%) got all fifteen of their questions right. Overall, the students provided the correct response to 62.31 percent of the questions. The mean for the study was 9.35 questions right (out of fifteen), the median was 9.24 questions right, and the standard deviation was +4.12.

As shown in table 3, within both surveys the most highly recognized terms were plagiarism, reference services, research, copyright, table of contents, synonym, audiovisual material, editor, call number, and journal. The least recognized terms were Boolean logic, bibliography, controlled vocabulary, truncation, precision, information need, descriptors, abstract, article, and citation. As expected, the three terms included in both surveys showed a consistency in their results: catalog (61.50% in the first survey versus 61.70% in the second survey), call number (79.70% versus 83.20%), and copyright (91.90% versus 91.30%).

When comparing like terms, it is interesting to note that reference services (94.60%) had a much higher level of recognition than reference books (75.00%); copyright (91.90%)

had a much higher level of recognition than fair use (67.60%), editor (86.50%) had a much higher level of recognition than edition (72.30%), and bibliographic information (54.73%) had a much higher level of recognition than bibliography (14.90%). (See table 1.)

Looking beyond the present study, it is useful to compare results with two previous studies listed in the literature review for validating the process and procedures used during the present study

**TABLE 3**  
**Overall Ranking of Terms from**  
**Least to Most Understood**

Terms	% Correct	Terms	% Correct
Boolean logic	8.10%	Search statement	63.80%
Bibliography	14.90%	Fair use	67.60%
Controlled vocabulary	18.10%	Edition	72.30%
Truncation	27.70%	Journal	74.50%
Precision	31.80%	Reference books	75.00%
Information need	34.90%	Call number	81.48%
Descriptors	35.80%	Editor	86.50%
Abstract	36.20%	Audiovisual material	89.20%
Article	47.00%	Synonym	89.90%
Citation	51.70%	Table of contents	90.50%
Bibliographic information	54.73%	Copyright	91.58%
Authority	57.70%	Research	94.00%
Collection	59.70%	Reference services	94.60%
Catalog	61.62%	Plagiarism	100.00%

N = 297 subjects  
 Total number of questions answered: 4,449  
 Number of questions answered correctly: 2,772 (62.31%)  
 Mean: 9.35 correct (out of 15)  
 Median: 9.24 correct  
 Standard Deviation: +4.12

and identifying potential inconsistencies in the results observed. (See table 4.) In the study by Naismith and Stein, the results reported for catalog and call number closely mirrored those of the present study. On the other hand, perhaps reflecting the increased prominence of computers and the Internet, student recognition of the concept of citation and search statement had increased 10 to 16.7 percent over the results reported in 1989. More problematic is the divergence in results between the present study and those reported by Chaudhry and Choo. For example, although the percentages that Chaudhry and Choo report for call number and citation closely mirror the results of this study, the percentages they report for the concepts of catalog, bibliography, and bibliographic information do not. This divergence in results can best be possibly

explained when you consider the subject population Chaudhry and Choo used (e-mail reference clients and staff-identified participants) and the small size of their sample ( $n = 40$ ).

### Discussion

In general, the results of the study indicate that commonly used terms (plagiarism, research, copyright, and synonym) have high levels of student recognition whereas library-specific or computer-specific terms (Boolean logic, bibliography, controlled vocabulary, and truncation) do not. Moreover, the results indicate that a third group of terms (abstract, authority, citation, and

precision), which in a library setting may have a markedly different meaning from that which is typically understood, also can be an impediment to student understanding. It is this potential for misunderstanding and confusion that makes the presence of these last two groups of terms in a classroom or public service setting an important point to know and appreciate.

The results of this study and literature review provide a strong basis for assuming that there can be misunderstandings between librarians and students. Assuming that this is true, here are some recommendations for decreasing problems arising from potential misunderstandings:

**TABLE 4**  
**Result Comparisons**

Term	Current Study % Correct	Naismith & Stein % Correct	Chaudhry & Choo % Correct
Bibliographic information	54.73%	n/a	75.00%
Bibliography	14.90%	n/a	85.00%
Citation	51.70%	35.00%	55.00%
Catalog	61.62%	68.00%	95.00%
Call number	81.48%	83.00%	85.00%
Search statement	63.80%	53.00%	n/a
Current study N = 297 subjects Total number of questions answered: 4,449 Number of questions answered correctly: 2,772 (62.31%) Mean: 9.35 correct (out of 15) Median: 9.24 correct Standard Deviation: +-4.12  Naismith and Stein N = 100 subjects Total number of questions answered: 2,000 Number of questions answered correctly: 981 (48.55%) Mean: 9.81 correct (out of 20) Median: 10 correct Standard Deviation: +-2.865  Chaudhry and Choo N = 40 subjects Total number of questions answered: 800 Number of questions answered correctly: 609 (76.125%) Mean: 15.2 correct (out of 20) Median: 15 correct Standard Deviation: +-3.53			

- Be sensitive to the degree that technical language impedes comprehension and use of library resources and services.

- Focus on increasing the transparency of library resources and services by reducing the amount of technical language and jargon used to describe those resources and services.

- Ensure that both instructor and students have a common frame of reference for the terms and concepts being discussed.

- Define terms the first time they are used.

- Provide students with handouts and glossaries of relevant terms.

- Make sure that the handouts and glossaries are available in both print and electronic formats.

- Solicit feedback from students.

- Continually test to see what terms and concepts the students do or do not understand.

- Remember that when speaking to a student audience, the use of undefined technical terms is inappropriate.

### Areas for further research

Future researchers could focus on a number of areas such as testing for retention of material under jargon and jargon-free conditions, doing similar studies at various grade levels (elementary school, middle school, high school, and graduate school), or assessing the impact that library jargon has on distant learners. In each instance, the researchers' focus on the needs of the user could reduce and possibly negate a major impediment to the public's effective use of library resources and services.

The underlying current that pervades both the literature reviewed and the results of this study is that there is a potential for miscommunication and bad experiences for both the instructor and the students in the classroom. If the librarian-instructor is aware of these issues and willing to make accommodations to improve the level of communication in the classroom, there is a decreased likelihood that students will leave the classroom feeling that they did not master the daunting, but essential, art of library research.

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### Notes

1. John B. Nicholson Jr., "The Jargon of Librarianship," *Aspects of Librarianship* 16 (spring 1958): 1-34.

2. Daniel Coffey and Karen Lawson, "Managing Meaning: Language and Technology in Academic Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 63 (Mar. 2002): 151-62.

3. Rachel Naismith and Joan Stein, "Library Jargon: Student Comprehension of Technical Language Used by Librarians," *College & Research Libraries* 50 (Sept. 1989): 543-52.

4. Abdus Sattar Chaudhry and Meng Choo, "Understanding of Library Jargon in the Information-seeking Process," *Journal of Information Science* 27 (2001): 343-49.

5. Mark A. Spivey, "The Vocabulary of Library Home Pages: An Influence on Diverse and Remote-Users," *Information Technology & Libraries* 19 (Sept. 2000): 151-56.

6. Leo Robert Klein, "The Web Is Not Your Library," *Library Journal Net Connect* (winter 2001): 36-37.

7. Sara Baron and Alexia Strout-Dapaz, "Communicating with and Empowering International Students with a Library Skills Set," *Reference Services Review* 29 (2001): 314-26.

8. Lia D. Kamhi-Stein and Alan Paul Stein, "Teaching Information Competency as a Third Language: A New Model for Library Instruction," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 38 (1998): 173-79.