# *Afraid to come in:*

Students who fear the...

LIBRARY

●

We've all seen them: the students who silently sidle in burdened with an information-finding assignment they have put off until the last day. They immediately skulk off to the farthest corner where they furtively and unsuccessfully attempt to find what they need on their own. Only after being frustrated and overwhelmed, do they drag themselves up to the reference desk, where they shift their feet and mumble their question while staring at a point above your head or below your chin. And what is really frustrating about this encounter, is that after you've helped them find what they need, with a smile and a reassuring manner, they disappear out through the door not to be seen again…until the next tortuous assignment.
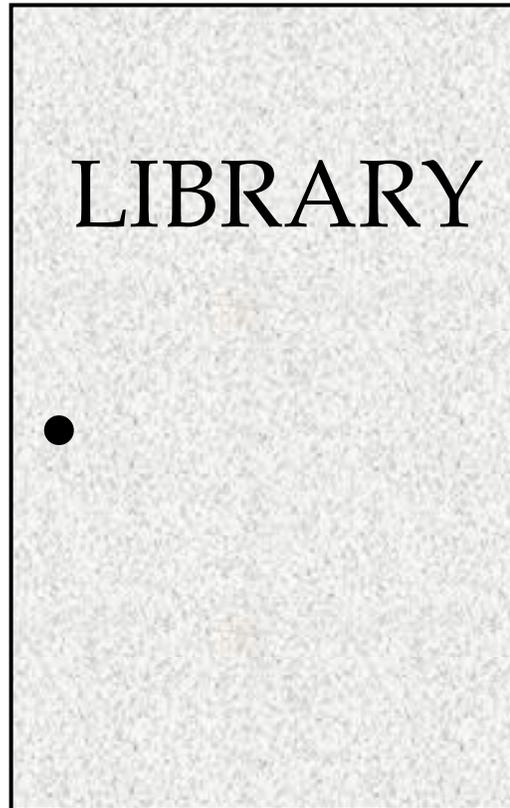
Why are some students afraid?

The official term for this fear is 'library anxiety' and there have been over thirty papers published in recent years devoted to the subject. By far, the most thought-provoking is a theory put forth by a duo named Radford who propose that this fear is not actually a fear of the library but of knowledge itself. Libraries and librarians, as keepers of knowledge, physically represent a contradiction – they exist to collect and make information available but the very act of organizing and applying a cataloguing system to knowledge stops this information from being accessed.   Radford & Radford claim that it is this application of order to chaos that makes some patrons uncomfortable. Once students enter the library dominion, they leave behind their ability to move freely in a world they understand- and come into a place where they are surrounded by an overwhelming amount of information, organized in a

system they don't comprehend, encircled by others (both librarians and students) whom they perceive to already know the system. It is therefore, for some, like entering a new school where they don't know or understand the rules and, as we all know, changing schools is one of the most stressful experiences in a child's life.

This may seem like a far-fetched theory but Radford and Radford link their premise to the stereotypical image of the librarian. You know, the mousy old-fusspot with the pinched mouth and the pencil in a bun of steel gray hair. Yes, her…she persists though we (including men) are nothing like that and, research shows, never have been. The reason why this image is perpetuated is because humor and degradation help defray fear. Their theory, if correct, would explain why we can not shake our 'bad image' despite all the pro-librarian campaigns that have been mounted in recent years. Perhaps, then a different approach is called for, one which attempts to recognize and understand this fear while, at the same time taking steps to help these nervous students.

What kind of student is afraid?

We know that library anxiety does not affect everybody or else we wouldn't even have libraries. However, recent research suggests that library anxiety is prevalent and, with the onslaught of technology, increasing as students are required to sift through more and more information choices. (At the college level, it is estimated that between 75-85% of all students experience some form of library anxiety).

So, the first step is to identify the fearful types. Fortunately, there have been several studies recently conducted in this area as well. They reveal that the type of student most susceptible to library anxiety is male (but there are plenty of females) with poor reading and study skills, and low self esteem. In addition, if a student does not speak English as a first language or is new to the culture, there is an added burden of stress as he/she struggles to comprehend language while learning how to handle technology, in some cases for the first time.

What are students afraid of?

Research notwithstanding, we as librarians, know by their behavior, who among our students is afraid of the library and can probably identify them without having to refer to exhaustive studies. The far more intriguing question is what *exactly* are they afraid of? Here, the research becomes much more insightful and of assistance in our quest to help these students.

Surveys of this group reveal two specific outcomes of library fear: students either state that they simply do not like research and, thus, places that foster it (the library) or say they fear failure and thus don't want to try. In 1992, a PHd candidate named Bostick developed an interesting model called the 'Library Anxiety Scale' which identified five key areas of library anxiety:

Barriers with Staff: No matter how hard we try to appear cheery, non-threatening and helpful, timid students often perceive the library staff as unapproachable. They see us as both too busy and too knowledgeable. Too knowledgeable? Yes, because we clearly understand the system and students fear that their questions will be viewed as stupid. We know this to be true because how many times have we heard, "I know this is a dumb question…"

Affective Barriers: Fearful students have the perception that they are the only ones who do not possess competent library skills. Their anxiety heightens whenever their class visits the library because they do not want to appear foolish in front of their classmates and therefore, will avoid asking questions or attempting a new research source. The older the student, the more prevalent this trend.

Comfort with the Library: How do students view the library as a 'place'? Conducting an informal survey of students or staff produces some interesting and opposing answers. Those who respond that they feel welcomed by the library obviously like the order the library provides. Those who shrug and say they are repelled by the atmosphere, the arrangement, the staff, etc. are those who most likely experience library anxiety. "But my library is open, inviting, friendly," you cry. Yes, but know that is it been discovered that this notion is pre-conceived and does not necessarily correspond with the reality of the situation.

Knowledge of the Library: Are all students visiting the library on a regular basis? How familiar are they with the space, the OPAC, the arrangement and location of the print resources? Students who are not brought to the library for regular visits (usually older students) often feel a fear of exploring it on their own under the watchful eye of the library staff. Here, size of the library places a part. If the library is a large and busy place, then a student will often feel more comfortable slipping in and looking around. Conversely, however, a larger library is also more confusing. A student may experience failure in trying to locate something and slip away, never to return again.

Mechanical Barriers: The technology tidal wave initially led to the belief that librarians would soon be obsolete. However, recent research indicates that today's 'screenagers' (those raised with multiple technologies) are turning to information professionals more not less. There are two primary reasons: today's kids are savvy enough to know to question where information comes from, particularly if it is from someone they do not know and trust. Secondly, students are increasingly time-conscious and impatient—they know that consulting a librarian will save them both time and effort. Yet studies also indicate that there is a rise in students who feel overwhelmed by all the technology and information choices and become anxious when faced with trying to navigate the library both as a physical and online resource.

When are students most afraid?

Does a student remain in a state of perpetual fear, therefore, whenever inside the walls of the dreaded library? Here again, research reveals an interesting pattern. Some students simply feel a nameless discomfort whenever surrounded by 'order' but most experience library anxiety in relation to research assignments. If the information-seeking process (and this can include searches for fiction as well) is divided into the six stages that most of us identify with, the following has been discovered:

During **task initiation**, anxiety begins to increase as the student becomes aware that she/he lacks the necessary skills and/or understanding. Anxiety decreases after **topic selection** but only if the topic is chosen during that study period. If there is a delay, then anxiety continues to increase until the time that a choice is made. The **prefocus exploration** stage has been identified at the most stress-inducing point of the research process because this is where a student's ability to read and integrate information is tested. Those who are poor readers or whom do not trust their skills, will flounder and sometimes abandon the effort altogether.

In the **focus formulation** step, the ability to comprehend and assimilate information is crucial. If a student cannot grasp the content of all the materials, then he/she will not be able to choose a clear and organized perspective for the project. This stage is difficult for even the best of students, so it is no surprise that those students already experiencing anxiety often just throw in the towel at this point and either don't complete the assignment or produce an unfocused, rambling, often plagiarized product. The fifth stage is the **information collection** stage, where the student returns to researching but with a narrower focus. This is where mechanical barriers cause the most problems as students are now required to use more sophisticated search techniques in order to discover specific topic-orientated material. At the **closure stage**, the end of the process, students present their findings and, if successful, this stage is characterized by feelings of relief. However, is a student has, in his or her mind, failed then the anxiety lingers and fuels a fear of libraries to an even higher level.

What can be done about the fear?

Well, if all the above is true, then it seems like we should just lock the door and throw away the key. But wait…there is, yes – more research! which gives us hope in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation. In recent years, the realization that the research process involves the whole person has been emerging. It is now becoming understood that the information-seeking is only successful if a person is *willing* as well as able to conduct research.

1. The first step, therefore, is recognition of this concept. That's easy- check (3).

2. Affective competencies and instructional objectives need to be integrated into your library skills program. For in order to achieve the goal of information literacy a student must acquire not only cognitive skills but the confidence to use them. (Please see bibliography for example websites.)

3. Make sure teachers understand the importance of including affective behaviors and incorporate the objectives into any collaborative projects, whether they be research or literature orientated. In addition, projects should involve every student having to use the reference desk as his or her research progresses. This step is crucial because it has been proven that students, when *required* to use the reference desk, somehow feel absolved of the embarrassment of asking for help.

4. Attempt to identify the students in need who will, of course, be the ones experiencing the most anxiety. One method is to set up what are called 'zones of intervention' (Kuhlthau, 1994) which identify when librarian involvement would be most valuable to a student in the research process. By doing so, you can identify not only which students need the most help but how best to assist them. Typically, libraries have developed services to respond to Zones 2 – 4, however, the deep space sounding 'Zone 5' is where most fearful students often fall.

Zones of Intervention:	Levels of Mediation	Levels of Education	Intervention
Zone 1	Organizer	Organizer	Self Service
Zone 2	Locator	Lecturer	Single Source
Zone 3	Identifier	Instructor	Group of Sources
Zone 4	Advisor	Tutor	Sequence of Sources
Zone 5	Counselor	Counselor	Process Intervention

5. Devise methods to help students cope. Begin by making sure that students are aware of their fear and that they are not alone. All students experience some form of library anxiety during research assignments. If this fear is understood to be a normal part of the process, many will begin to learn how to manage it. Therefore, during general introductions to the library as well as research assignments, openly discuss the role of fear in the process of information-seeking. It often helps to post a model of the research process with the affective behaviors included. Kuhlthau has developed a useful one called Stages of the Information Process (see sidebar for web address). You can also develop posters for inside the library as well as around the school that address the issue. For example:

Oh No! I have to go to the Library…

1. You don't have to be an expert to use the library, only willing to learn.
2. Bring a friend.
3. Relax! Hang Around and get comfortable in your space.
4. Practice improves performance (you don't have to be perfect)
5. Research is not an easy process – take your time!
6. Frustration is normal – don't let it stop you.
7. There are no dumb questions, only unasked ones.
8. Librarians may look busy but we are here to help you – *please* ask.

For those students who still appear to be experiencing difficulty or are exhibiting behaviors such as task avoidance (fooling around, doodling), an inability to focus (asking irrelevant questions, reading Sports Illustrated) and inertia (sitting with an encyclopedia for the whole period), further intervention is needed. Here is where the librarian steps forward and offers 'information counseling', where recommendations are made not only on how to find information but on how to process it, i.e. how to organize, synthesize, choose what is needed, etc. The goal is to guide and coach 'Zone 5' students through the early stages of the research process until they pass the critical anxiety point in the exploration stage and have formulated a focus. (Please see the *Information Counseling through the Reference Interview* sidebar for further information.)

A final note about the use of reference services: if your library offers a virtual reference service, refer your students to it. Anxious students may well be more comfortable asking their questions via e-mail. While a VSR exchange cannot replace a full reference interview, it can help to break the ice in learning how to ask reference questions and can offer a lifeline to those in need.

Additional Suggestions

The need to conduct research may be the leading cause of library anxiety but it is certainly not the only one. It is important to deal with the overall fear of the library as a societal institution. One very important way to do this is to discuss the library as a 'place' and its role in civilization. Ask a student about the most famous library of the ancient world? Dewey's first name? The date the first African-American library opened? Chances are great they won't know. This is because most library programs and materials focus on skills and developing good reading practices. But pulling back a little and studying the library as a public institution (outside of the school), opens the doors for a discussion about how students 'feel' about the library and its staff. If possible, show pictures of other libraries, discuss Melvil Dewey as a person not just a system (see Dewey article, SLJ 2001), arrange field trips to the public library for younger students or a local college library for older students.

A discussion about libraries would not be complete without mentioning librarians as more than 'keepers of the books'. Our profession is shrouded in mystery. I haven't found many administrators who understand what I do much less students. The remedy is show (rather than tell) students your job. Show then the tools of the trade, either online, Librarian's Guide to the Internet, SLJ reviews, etc. or in

print: the DDC, Sear's List of Subject Headings, H.W.Wilson's Library Catalogs, and whatever else you use.

For younger students, working with their teacher to help organize a classroom library is a great project. Have older students find the CIP information in a book and if you have access, troop them all to a computer lab and show them the MARC record part of your catalog. Let them team up and attempt to catalog a book or download a record . The goal is to have students realize you are an enthusiastic ally in the information search process rather than some abstract expert.

And finally, have a sense of humor about your poor beleaguered image. Buy the librarian action doll with the shhhing action and keep it on your desk. Post the Conan the Librarian cartoon and

dress as a frump for Halloween. Our image can only change if we face the fact that some of our patrons fear us. So, embrace the stereotype with a smile and help push the idea to one side in the realization of what it is, a manifestation of the fear of both order and the unknown. If we can do that, then we can begin to help those reluctant students skulking in the corners or lingering outside of the door. As one student, who benefited from information counseling, reported, "I've learned not to panic" walking into the library. "I've learned to accept that…the mind doesn't take everything and put it into order automatically. Understanding that is the biggest help."

Well, that's one down…

𝕭𝕚𝕓𝕝𝕚𝕠𝕘𝕣𝕒𝕡𝕙𝕪

Cahoy, Ellysa Stern. *Put Some Feeling into It! Integrating Affective Competencies into K-20 Literacy Standards*, Knowledge Quest, Vol. 32, #4, March/April 2004, pp.25-28.

Connaway, Lynn Silipigni, Radford, Marie L., Dickey, Timothy J. *On the Trail of the Elusive Non-User: What Research in Virtual Reference Environments Reveal*, Bulletin, Dec/Jan 2008 (special section).

Fister, Barbara. *Fear of Reference*, Chronicle of Higher Education, vol. 48, Issue 40, June 14, 2002.

Jiao, Qun G., Onwegbuzie, Anthony J. The Relationship between Library Anxiety and Reading Ability*, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Chattanooga, TN, Nov. 6-8, 2002. (Available from ERIC)*

Jiao, Qun G., Onwegbuzie, Anthony J., Daley, Christine E. *Factors Associated with Library Anxiety*. Paper presented at the Annual American Educational Research Association Conference, Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997. (Available from ERIC)

Kuhlthau, Carol Collier. *Students and the Information Process: Zones of Intervention for Librarians*, Advances in Librarianship, Vol. 18, 1994.
(http://www.glis.utexas.edu/~vlibrary/edres/theory/kuhlthau.html)

Nahl, Diane. *A Conceptual Framework for Explaining Information Behavior,* Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education, Vol. 1, Issue 2, May 2001.

Radford, Gary P. & Radford, Marie L. *Libraries, Librarians, and the Discourse of Fear*, The Library Quarterly, Vol. 71, #3, July 2001, pp. 299-329.

Affective Library Instruction Competencies

Kuhlthau, Carol Collier. Kuhlthau's Model of the Stages of the Information Process found in *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*. Norwod, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp, 1993, pp. 45-51.
(http://library.Humboldt.edu/ic/general_competency/kuhlthau.html)

Conan the Librarian

'Conan the Librarian' is a parody of the character 'Conan the Barbarian' created by the staff of William Mitchell College of Law Library. More information can be found on the Wikipedia website (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conan_The_Librarian). For a video version go to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZHoHaAYHq8.

The Librarian Action Figure

The librarian action doll is modeled after real-life librarian Nancy Pearl (author of *Book Lust)*. It is available on Amazon.com for $8.95