

## ROLE OF SUBJECT GUIDES IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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**Abstract:** *Subject guide concept is not a new but is popularly known as Lib Guide, Path finder, Library Instructions, Information Literary Instructions, Subject resource guides, Information resource guides etc. but due to use of ICT in libraries the same concept is popularly known as Web subject Guides, Subject portal, Reference portal, Library portal etc. Many libraries offer subject guides over library Web sites. Librarians face challenges in providing subject-specific resources effectively and efficiently to the users in an ever changing technological environment. This helps user in locating and finding the desired information for effective research. The main goal behind subject guide is to provide useful information sources and tools to users. Paradigm shift in library technologies has impacted the format and content of subject guides. New emerging technologies make it difficult for the librarians to adapt to this environment and create the dynamic subject guides to meet the user needs effectively. This communication highlights the need of subject guides, contents of subject guides and trends in subject guides in IT era.*

**Key Words:** Subject Guides, Path finder, Library Instructions, Information Literary Instructions, Subject resource guides, Information resource guides, Web subject Guides, Subject portal, Reference portal, Library portal

### 1. Introduction:

One of the most difficult tasks facing in information growth for librarians today is information to users in a meaningful way. In the information, internet and technology environment

is to get awareness of information sources among professionals and the users for providing better library services, as variety and number of information resources are available abundantly in all the subject disciplines. Subject guides, bibliographies and portals all aim to address to

solve the problem by providing a clear view of a specific subject. Understanding the value of subject guides to new users like students, researchers and faculty at York University Libraries (YUL) began a project to look at new ways of organizing subject specific content on the Libraries' website. A team comprising of librarians, computing staff and other members worked collaboratively to create subject specific material and present the same in a better way, along with developing new tools to make the subject guide creation easier and efficient.

Many libraries offer subject guides over library Web sites. Librarians face challenges in providing subject-specific resources effectively and efficiently to the users in an ever changing technological environment. This helps user in locating and finding the desired information for effective research. The main goal behind subject guide is to provide useful information sources and tools to users. Paradigm shift in library technologies has impacted the format and content of subject guides. New emerging technologies make it difficult for the librarians to adapt to this environment and create the dynamic subject guides to meet the user needs effectively.

In 1950s the subject-specific research guides were introduced (Vileno, 2007). Librarians have an established relationship with subject guides, from defining the subjects, selecting apt resources and then creation of guides. With the advent of electronic resources, it became even more

challenging to create and review subject guides as it demanded for a dynamic subject guide creation strategy. Web-based subject guides are dynamic and provide ease of access, however, static Web pages limits updation of guides and increase the amount of time spent creating and updating.

In 1990's there was a shift from static, labor intensive HTML pages, towards more searchable and database-driven subject guides. In March 2007 review of literature on Pathfinders, Luigina Vileno (2007, p 448) reports that "while the initial implementation of a database-driven solution may consume more time and resources, the streamlined process greatly enhanced productivity thus cutting down on the cost in the end". Chad F. Boeninger (2006) discovered successful way to use Web 2.0 tools to present business resources at the Ohio University Libraries, even when librarians demonstrate subject guides to students (users), they do not necessarily feel to use them. Librarians have to demonstrate the use of subject guides' value to students.

## 2. What is Subject Guide?

The guides are covering resources and provides access to both subject specific and subject related resources for conducting interdisciplinary research. Subject guides are developed by subject experts and librarians and hence these are qualitative guides of resources which are included after evaluation for its effective use with important points in the form of annotations. There are different terms used synonymic for subject

guides like library guides, library resource guides, subject resource guides, information resource guides etc. In ICT environment these are termed as subject portals, subject links, library portals, web resource portals or guides and used as navigational tools to reach directly to the resource using the link (URL).

Such tools actually support to reference services and preparing bibliographic instructions as well as academic curriculum and research needs by listing and displaying resources. (Dean 1988, p 80) or linking resources. Subject guides support to flexible incorporation of resources on subject and related subjects from locally developed contents like bibliographies, databases, course materials, multimedia, presentations for campus wide users and in libraries, classroom, learning labs, and anywhere as desired if ICT is used. Subject guides either they may be local or used commonly anywhere.

### 3. Definition of a Subject Guide

The subject guides are also called as and used different terms like:

- 1) Subject Guide
- 2) Bib Guide
- 3) Path finder
- 4) Web subject Guides
- 5) Library Instructions
- 6) Information Literary Instructions.
- 7) Subject resource guides
- 8) Information resource guides
- 9) Subject portal

10) Reference portal

11) Library portal

Initially, it was termed as was pathfinder, after 30 years , libraries in the United States came up with a variety of terminologies to define subject guides: subject guides, research guides, research tools, pathfinders, electronic library guides (e-guides), webliographies, Internet resource collections, resource lists, or subject portals. For instance, a webliography includes web resources only, where as a subject guide includes online (print and subscription) as well as print resources.

Subject guides were first used in 1973 and defined them as “ A subject guide is a kind of map to the resources of the library; it is an information locator for the library user whose search for recorded materials on a subject of interest is just beginning.”

### 4. Need of Subject Guides:

The crux of a guide is to provide a beginning for the researcher to search the appropriate information.

- Subject Guides provide users assistance in identifying information sources to get relevant information
- The subject guides provide access points to scholarly resources
- Subject guides aids in doing research in a particular discipline or on a topic. They provide easy tips to find and use

information in particular formats, like patents or dissertations.

- Subject Portals provides research sources for users to perform research wisely. Helps users to refer more focused research, and for free access to many resources the library purchases for users and hence use of subject portals act as a starting point.

Subjects Guides are now required since information is available in every subject abundantly through different information resources and medium like print, digital and internet (www). The new knowledge is generated after using published literature in different forms by all types of users. However, since information explosion is very high it is difficult for the users to identify the right sources of information from where they get qualitative information for use and produce new knowledge based on it. Libraries are treated as treasure of knowledge and also called as KRC (Knowledge Resource Centers) . The literature sources are available in the library but many times users are not aware of it as well as library staff is also not instantly suggesting the resources on the topic to users in spite of availability in libraries. The information society faced many challenges while gathering information for their research purpose or educational purpose. If information sources are known to users then accessibility and finding and getting qualitative information published in qualitative resources is an easy task. But the

challenge is that there is no standard subject guide developed either by librarian or by the subject experts in the disciplines. If subject guides are available both librarians and users get benefited in the information society.

### **5. Importance of Subject guide to Researchers / users:**

The main purpose behind preparing subject guide is to assist users in getting their information from the resources using guides. Users can identify databases, e resources etc from the guide book of subject.

The subject guides are important for the researchers and library users including librarians to get aware of different resources available in libraries as well as in subjects. The important features of subject guides are:

- Subject Guides are lists of useful resources for finding information in subject area, compiled by librarians (and also subject experts at many times with annotations).
- Subject Guides directs to the most appropriate resources in subject area or unit.
- Researcher can also find the right database using Subject Guides.
- Listing of databases and important resources for each subject, along with contact information for in-depth analysis.
- Subject guides are envisioned as tools to help users navigate a broad or specific subject area.

- Points to a variety of resources available in library, online databases, e-journals, e-books and websites.

## 6. Content - Subject Guides

Subject guides include a broad range of terms and content potentials. This gives guide creators great liberty while selecting the contents of guides. This freedom needs to be coupled with guidelines, to avoid confusion among the subject specialists on content inclusion in research guides. Deciding the contents to be included can be eased by predefining the aim and analyzing the information-seeking behavior of the immediate users / audience.

The subject guides are covers reference materials, journals, databases, and internet resources, some possibilities of inclusion are career information, evaluative resources, professional associations, and citation style information.

The key points of contents of subject guide are:

- Introduction to creation of subject guide
- Library catalogue
- Library reference collection, manuscripts and rare collection etc.
- Databases with description for utility and related areas
- Periodical subscribed and related areas covered by them
- Abstracting and indexing resources
- Links to internet resources

- Government reports, official documents etc
- Links to search engines and list of important URL's for getting subject information
- Social book marking sites
- Subject & Subject related information resources
- Course work related information
- Events, conferences, People,
- Jobs and opportunities
- Scholarship Information
- Trends in subjects

It is also possible to add few points applicable to individual libraries based on needs.

## 7. Layout of Subject Guides

### Templates

Reviewing the subject guides of different academic libraries have shown that usually there is a uniform layout or template for an institution's subject guides. Guides that do not use templates allow rampant creativity in the presentation of content. The use of templates helps the user understand where the guides originate from. Templates provide an easy medium for the content creators to insert information and less worry about the presentation and alignment.

### Images

Many subject guides use images, but often guide creators avoid incorporation of images into their guides. Many guides use individual Web pages covered of text only. Subject guide should not only be startling but also, user-friendly. In subject guides, the more emphasis is on the content creation, so images may be considered peripheral.

SubjectsPlus is a good example of subject guide.

SubjectsPlus

(<http://www.ithacalibrary.com/subsplus/>) “is a database-driven subject guide maintained by Andrew Darby of Ithaca College. SubjectsPlus is designed to dynamically manage three aspects of a library Web site. It allows librarians to maintain subject guides, A-Z database lists, and a staff list that is sortable by department and subject specialist. SubjectsPlus makes it possible for librarians to easily add resources of all kinds including subject specialists to subject guides. SubjectsPlus is built using PHP and a MySQL backend. When Darby was first looking for a database-driven subject guide application and discovered a program developed at East Carolina University's Joyner Library known as PirateSource (<http://web.lib.ecu.edu/piratesource/>).”

### Conclusion:

This communication has presented some new avenues that may inspire reference librarians to adopt different templates and formats for creating and maintaining the dynamic nature of the

guides. The essential factors to be considered while creating guides are the needs and abilities of the user group and the guide creator's knowledge and content potential. Guides are most helpful if they are easy to create, update, maintain for librarians and have features like dynamic, searchable, vibrant and simple for users.

Subject guides have emerged and transformed since their initial advent over three decades ago. They have the potential to undergo continuous improvement as librarians strive to explore the new possibilities presented by new technologies, specifically with application to subject guides. It is vital that this assessment continue, despite the challenges faced by the librarians. Librarians have created web-based subject guides in different ways. They have used static HTML, database-driven subject guides, course management systems, and Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and social bookmarking Web sites. These approaches have their own benefits and libraries have a choice to select any of these according to their specific needs. Librarians have to work in collaboration with the computing staff who are responsible for the installation and maintenance of the software to achieve quality content development through subject guides.

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