

# The Mystery of Half-Right Reference

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## ABSTRACT

It is common knowledge, in both academic and public libraries, that only 50% of library reference questions are answered correctly. While this statistic continues to be treated as fact – it is even included in the 2020 edition of *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction* (Wong, et. al.) where does it come from, and why do we continue to treat it as fact?

A 1985 study, “Improving Reference Performance: Results of a Statewide Study” examined the accuracy of reference answers at the Maryland Public Library system and found 55% of reference questions were answered correctly. But, while the results of this study became common knowledge, it is often uncited and difficult to track down.

While citation hopping, I found Crowley’s article “Half-Right Reference: Is It True?” (1985). Crowley’s article directly cites the Maryland study and provides a long list of reference studies, which I have used to map the rise and proliferation of this study, while simultaneously reexamining it.

The Maryland study was analyzed with a traditional reference mindset - where correct answers were full answers at the desk. However, only 16% of the answers were tagged incorrect/no answer. The remaining were partial answers, like providing a source, or referral. While these might not have been correct answers traditionally, today, these answers are correct, especially as we teach patrons how to find answers rather than just supply them. As such, the myth half right reference needs to be contextualized and reexamined.

## References:

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## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Academic libraries; Public libraries; Reference transactions; Education.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

reference; library history; public libraries; academic libraries; library research.