

# Willem Helf

## Reference and Instruction, Info 652

### Reference Letter Reflection

#### Letters and resources

##### Letter 1

##### Questions, answers, and sources

This letter was straightforward, asking for information about Wicca, Wiccan altars and religious materials, and resources for free Wiccan books, covens, and pen pal addresses. As the subject of Wicca was broad, I broke my response down into several different answers for clarity, seen below organized by resource type.

*What is Wicca?* – The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature, accessed via <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199754670.001.0001/acref-9780199754670>

*Rites of passage; magic and spellcraft; ritual practices; covens* – accessed via the Wikipedia page for “Wicca”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicca>

*Ritual tools* – accessed via the Wikipedia page for “Magical tools in Wicca”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magical\\_tools\\_in\\_Wicca](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magical_tools_in_Wicca)

*Wiccan divinity and beliefs* – accessed via the Wikipedia page for “Wiccan views of divinity”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiccan\\_views\\_of\\_divinity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiccan_views_of_divinity)

*Rule of three* – accessed via the Wikipedia page for “Rule of Three (Wicca)”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule\\_of\\_Three\\_\(Wicca\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_Three_(Wicca))

*Solitary practitioners* – accessed via the book “Wicca: History, Belief & Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft” by Ethan Doyle White, through Pratt Libraries.

*Wiccan holy days*: accessed via the web page “The Wiccan Sabbats, or Holy Days”, <https://carm.org/wicca/the-wiccan-sabbats-or-holy-days/>

##### Research process

This was an interesting first letter, as rather than several questions about different subjects it focussed on one overarching theme. I began by breaking down the different parts of the request, starting rather generally by Googling “what is Wicca”, which led me to various scholarly

websites, personal blogs, and religious websites with negative connotations towards Wicca; the latter two had too much of a subjective bent to suffice as resources, and the former mainly focussed on the history of Wicca rather than how the practice exists in the present. As it turned out, Wikipedia contained the most pertinent information about Wiccan practices, rituals, and beliefs, and became a prime resource for several of my answers.

The main Wikipedia article for Wicca led me to several related articles that I found useful, in particular “Magical tools in Wicca”, for information on ritual tools, “Wiccan views of divinity,” for Wiccan divinity and beliefs, and “Rule of Three (Wicca)” for the Wiccan rule of three.

I noticed that many of the resources cited came from various publications by Ethan Doyle White, and was able to find a PDF of his book “Wicca: History, Belief & Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft” via the Pratt Libraries site. While the book was composed mostly of different iterations of Wicca over time and various personal anecdotes, which did not feel pertinent to my research, I was able to find information on solitary Wiccan practitioners that was useful. I found it especially difficult to find a brief but thorough introduction to what Wicca is via the internet, so turned once again to the Pratt Libraries search function and came upon *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, which contained a simple and eloquent introduction to the practice as a whole.

Resources about the Wiccan holy days were particularly difficult to find reliable versions of – one of the top Google results for the query “Wiccan holy days” led to a perfume website, and I had difficulty locating a brief but thorough list of the holy days in any of the books I was able to access. On the second results page, however, I was able to find an informative resource via the CARM website.

As we were unable to provide books directly to letter writers, I included a resource for free books for incarcerated people in North Carolina, where the letter writer was based; this took some time, as googling “books to incarcerated people North Carolina” brought up one resource that was no longer running and one that provided books only for incarcerated men. “Asheville Prison Books” was on the second page of the results, but provided the most direct and thorough resources I was able to find.

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## **Letter 2**

### **Questions, answers, and sources**

This letter consisted of 3 questions, which are listed separately with concurrent resources.

1. *How can a prisoner make money outside of prison while in prison?*

*Getting to Work with a Criminal Record: New York State License Guides* – accessed via the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity website,

<https://justiceandopportunity.org/resources/getting-to-work-with-a-criminal-record-new-york-state-license-guides-2020-expanded-edition/>

*National H.I.R.E Network* – accessed via the Legal Action Center website,

<https://www.lac.org/major-project/national-hire-network>

2. *Tourism, guide, development & economic addresses for pamphlets, brochures, magazines or information regarding employment, housing, education, or opportunities* – see following states requested below:

*Georgia:*

*Contact us* – accessed via the Technical College System of Georgia website,

<https://www.tcsg.edu/about-tcsg/contact-us/>

*About TCSG* – accessed via the Technical College System of Georgia website,

<https://www.tcsg.edu/about-tcsg/>

*About DCA* – accessed via the Georgia Department of Community Affairs website,

<https://dca.georgia.gov/>

*Contact Us* – accessed via the Georgia Department of Labor website,

<https://dol.georgia.gov/contact-us>

*Job Search Assistance* – accessed via the Georgia Department of Labor website,

<https://dol.georgia.gov/contact-us>

*California:*

*About us* – accessed via the California Community Colleges website,

<https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us>

*Contact us* – accessed via the California Department of Housing and Community Development website, <https://www.hcd.ca.gov/contact-us>

*Planning and Community Development* – accessed via the California Department of Housing and Community Development website,

<https://www.hcd.ca.gov/planning-and-community-development>

*Contact us* – accessed via the California Employment Development Department website,

[https://edd.ca.gov/en/about\\_edd/contact\\_edd/](https://edd.ca.gov/en/about_edd/contact_edd/)

*Nevada:*

*About us* – accessed via the Nevada Adult Education website,

<https://nevadaadulteducation.org/About-Us>

*Contact us* – accessed via the Nevada Adult Education website,

<https://nevadaadulteducation.org/Contact-Us>

*About us* – accessed via the Reno Housing Authority website, <https://www.renoha.org/about/>

*For applicants* – accessed via the Reno Housing Authority website,

<https://www.renoha.org/for-applicants/#>

*Contact us* – accessed via the Nevada Department of Employment, Training, and Rehabilitation website, [https://detr.nv.gov/Page/Contact\\_Us](https://detr.nv.gov/Page/Contact_Us)

*About Workforce Development* – accessed via the Nevada Department of Employment, Training, and Rehabilitation website, [https://detr.nv.gov/Page/Workforce\\_Development](https://detr.nv.gov/Page/Workforce_Development)

*Florida:*

*Career and Adult Education* – accessed via the Florida Department of Education website,  
<https://www.fldoe.org/academics/career-adult-edu/>

*Contact us* – accessed via the Florida Department of Education website,  
<https://www.fldoe.org/contact-us/>

*Renters* – accessed via the Florida Housing Finance Corporation website,  
<https://www.floridahousing.org/programs/renters>

*Contact us* – accessed via the FloridaCommerce website,  
<https://floridajobs.org/help-center---contact-us>

*Reemployment Assistance* – accessed via the FloridaCommerce website,  
<https://floridajobs.org/Reemployment-Assistance-Service-Center>

*Texas:*

*Find a Job* – accessed via the Texas Workforce Commission website,  
<https://www.twc.texas.gov/services/job-search>

*Adult Education & Literacy Program* – accessed via the Texas Workforce Commission website,  
<https://www.twc.texas.gov/programs/adult-education-literacy>

*Contact Us* – accessed via the Texas Workforce Commission website,  
<https://www.twc.texas.gov/contact-us>

*About* – accessed via the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs website,  
<https://www.tdhca.texas.gov/about>

*Contact* – accessed via the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs website,  
<https://www.tdhca.texas.gov/contact>

*New York:*

*Adult Education Programs and Policy* – accessed via the New York State Education Department website,

<https://www.acces.nysed.gov/aepp/welcome-adult-education-programs-and-policy-aepp>

*Contact us* – accessed via the SUNY website, <https://www.suny.edu/contact/>

*About* – accessed via the SUNY website, <https://www.suny.edu/about/about-suny/>

*Contact us* – accessed via the NY Homes and Community Renewal website,  
<https://hcr.ny.gov/contact-us>

*Tenants* – accessed via the NY Homes and Community Renewal website,  
<https://hcr.ny.gov/tenants>

New York State DOL – accessed via the New York State Department of Labor website,  
<https://dol.ny.gov/>

*Arizona:*

*Contact Us* – accessed via the Arizona Department of Education website,  
<https://www.azed.gov/adeinfo/about-ade/contact-us>

*Adult Education Services* – accessed via the Arizona Department of Education website,  
<https://www.azed.gov/adultedservices>

*About Us* – accessed via the Arizona Community Colleges website, <https://arizonacommunitycolleges.org/arizona-community-college-coordinating-council/>  
*Contact* – accessed via the Arizona Community Colleges website, <https://arizonacommunitycolleges.org/#Contact>  
*Contact Us* – accessed via the Arizona Department of Housing website, <https://housing.az.gov/about/contact-us>  
*General Public* – accessed via the Arizona Department of Housing website, <https://housing.az.gov/general-public-page>  
*Contact DES* – accessed via the Arizona Department of Economic Security website, <https://des.az.gov/contact>  
*Services* – accessed via the Arizona Department of Economic Security website, <https://des.az.gov/services>

*South Carolina:*

*About* – accessed via the Adult Education in South Carolina website, <https://adulthood.ed.sc.gov/about/>  
*Services* – accessed via the Adult Education in South Carolina website, <https://des.az.gov/services>  
*Contact Us* – accessed via the SC Technical College System website, <https://www.sctechsystem.edu/about-us/contact.html>  
*About Us* – accessed via the SC Technical College System website, <https://www.sctechsystem.edu/about-us/index.html>  
*Contact Us* – accessed via the SC Housing website, <https://schousing.com/Home/OwnerContactUs>  
*Housing Choice Voucher Program* – accessed via the SC Housing website, <https://schousing.com/Home/RentersHousingChoiceVoucher>  
*South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce* – accessed via the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce website, <https://dew.sc.gov/>  
*Find a Job* – accessed via the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce website, <https://dew.sc.gov/individuals/find-job>

*Puerto Rico:*

*Departamento de la Vivienda* – accessed via the Departamento de la Vivienda website, <https://www.vivienda.pr.gov/>  
*Sobre Nosotros* – accessed via the Departamento de la Vivienda website, <https://www.vivienda.pr.gov/servicios/solicitudes/>

*3. Rent-to-own homes information, qualification, requirements, and programs*

*Rent to Own Homes NYC* – accessed via the PropertyClub website, <https://propertyclub.nyc/article/rent-to-own-homes-nyc>  
*What to Know About Rent-to-Own Homes* – accessed via the Aronov Law website, <https://www.aronovlawny.com/blog/what-to-know-about-rent-to-own-homes-in-new-york/>

#### 4. *Top 10 remote work options from home, with descriptions*

*10 Remote Work From Home Jobs that Pay Well* – accessed via the Coursera website, <https://www.coursera.org/articles/remote-work-from-home-jobs>

*10 Best Work From Home Jobs Requiring No Experience* – accessed via the Handshake website, <https://joinhandshake.com/blog/students/work-from-home-no-experience-jobs/>

#### 5. *Affordable van/bus services that go from Buffalo to Upstate Correctional Facility*

*How to Get From Buffalo to Upstate Correctional Facility* – accessed via the Rome2Rio website, <https://www.rome2rio.com/s/Buffalo/Upstate-Correctional-Facility>

### **Research process**

#### *Question 1:*

For this question, I began with the Google search query “how to make money outside of prison while inside prison.” However, none of the results were satisfactory, as they all pertained to making money within the prison system, not without. I soon realized that while I may not have been able to answer the question directly, I was able to offer resources provided directly from the Brooklyn Public Library website.

#### *Question 2:*

This was a multi-layered series of questions that, for readability and convenience, I broke down the answers to state-by-state and within that by educational, housing, and employment resources. For each state, I first Googled the name of the state and the specific resource I was looking for (for instance, “South Carolina adult education”), then searched for an “about” page or similar for general information and for a “contact” page or similar for a mailing address on each website. Mailing addresses were at times difficult to find, as many websites strongly encouraged filling out a form online or reaching out by email. I made sure to only provide information from official government websites, which themselves were very easy to locate online.

#### *Question 3:*

This question was difficult to find relevant resources for; after searching for “rent-to-own homes New York,” I was faced mainly with search hubs for homes, rather than information about qualifications, general information, and requirements. Narrowing my query to “rent-to-own homes New York requirements” and “rent-to-own homes New York qualifications” provided more pertinent material, as well as a resource that provided useful legal information about rent-to-own homes.

*Question 4:*

My query “top 10 remote work jobs” returned mainly lists of jobs that required degrees and several years of experience; taking into consideration the fact that the letter writer had inquired about adult education and community college opportunities, I refined my search to “top 10 remote jobs no experience,” which returned, helpfully, several very detailed top-10 lists of remote jobs that did not require a bachelor’s degree or higher.

*Question 5:*

The query “Buffalo to Upstate Correctional Facility” had few detailed results; however, the Rome2Rio website, a site to book travel plans via bus and train, provided a detailed journey with maps, routes, and prices.

The letter writer also asked for resources for sneaker, underclothes, and hygiene donations to incarcerated people, and free freight brokerage certifications by mail; after refining search queries for both questions, I was unable to find objective and legitimate resources for either question.

### **Letter 3**

#### **Questions, answers, and sources**

*1. Making money writing music*

*How to Start a Songwriting Career* – accessed via the BBC Maestro website,

<https://www.bbcmaestro.com/blog/starting-songwriting-career>

*How Songwriters, Composers, and Performers Get Paid* – accessed via a copyright.gov website PDF link,

<https://www.copyright.gov/music-modernization/educational-materials/musicians-income.pdf>

*About Us* – accessed via the ASCAP website, <https://www.ascap.com/about-us>

*Contact Us* – accessed via the ASCAP website, <https://www.ascap.com/contact-us>

*2. Bitcoin prices*

*Bitcoin BTC Price* – accessed via the Coinbase website, <https://www.coinbase.com/price/bitcoin>

*Bitcoin to US Dollar Exchange Chart* – accessed via the XE website,

<https://www.xe.com/currencycharts/?from=BTC&to=USD>

*Cryptocurrency Prices Today by Market Cap* – accessed via the Forbes website,

<https://www.forbes.com/digital-assets/crypto-prices/?sh=56d0ca082478>

*Bitcoin* – accessed via the CoinDesk website, <https://www.coindesk.com/tag/bitcoin/>

*BTC-USD* – accessed via the CEX website, <https://trade.cex.io/spot/BTC-USD>

*3. Starting a diamond and gold import/export business*

*How to Start a Diamond Import/Export Business* – accessed via the USA Customs Clearance website, <https://usacustomsclearance.com/process/diamond-import-export-business/>  
*Importing Gold into the US: Coins, Medals, and Bullion* – accessed via the USA Customs Clearance website, <https://usacustomsclearance.com/process/importing-gold-into-the-us/>  
*Register your Business* – accessed via the US Small Business Administration website, <https://www.sba.gov/business-guide/launch-your-business/register-your-business>

#### 4. *Starting a sports league*

*How To Start a Sports League* – accessed via the Magic Sports website, <https://www.magicsportsapp.com/league-management-advice-guidance/how-to-start-a-sports-league/>

#### 5. *Image of natural wildfire with houses and trees burning*

*Being Fire Wise is an Easy Way to Prepare For Fire Season* – accessed via the USDA website, <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2015/09/10/being-fire-wise-easy-way-prepare-fire-season>

### **Research process**

#### *Question 1:*

Initially, per the letter writer's request, I searched on Google for "get paid to write music agency"; however, the results quickly made me realize that the process for being paid to write music does not involve connecting with a singular agency to do so. I refined my search term to "how to get paid to write music", which returned a myriad of results; it was clear that the process is much more abstract and varied, and requires knowledge of copyright, various ways music can be released, and legal agreements. The three websites I sourced my information from, all of which were returned via my second search, covered these topics thoroughly, and came from reliable and official websites.

#### *Question 2:*

I assumed this would be a quick answer after Googling "bitcoin to USD," however, the Coinbase website, which was the top result, explained that Bitcoin prices differ depending on which cryptocurrency sources are checked due to volatility. I included this information in my response for clarity, and provided direct answers from the top five Google results, all of which were legitimate cryptocurrency trading or financial websites.

#### *Question 3:*

My search for "how to start a diamond and gold export business" was broken into "how to start a diamond export business" and "how to start a gold export business" after finding that each material has its own legal import and export requirements. The US Customs Clearance website had thorough, legitimate resources on how to manage exports and imports of both materials, but little on how to turn this into a business. I found that the US Small Business Administration,

a legitimate resource with plenty of legal advice, had useful and pertinent information on starting and running a small business.

*Question 4:*

While my search query “how to start a sports league” brought up many results, I found that the majority of them pertained to children’s sports leagues in particular, were forum posts, or contained only short lists of advice. The resource I sourced my information from came from a website that made technology specifically for small sports leagues, and contained thorough step-by-step information on how to get one up and running.

*Question 5:*

Out of the several image requests, the image of a natural wildfire was the only one I was able to source from a website that was not a social media website. The Google search “natural forest fire house trees” returned many images, from which I picked the first one.

## **Reflection**

I found our *Reference to Incarcerated People* project to be enlightening and informative, both in the context of my own librarianship practice and my understanding of critical librarianship as a whole. While I have participated in letter-writing drives to incarcerated people in the past, I was until recently unaware of the NYPL’s reference letter program, and found myself both excited and curious as to how my experience would go.

Throughout the project, the contrast between my own access to information and that of an incarcerated person struck me particularly hard: for instance, I could easily type “Wicca” into Google, but the letter writer themselves could not do so; perhaps they might have access to a library, but it might not offer books on Wicca, so they would have to request some and wait for them to arrive. A somewhat obvious realization, maybe, but one that crystallized in particular while working on my second letter, which requested various resources for education, housing, and job seeking – I noticed that the fact that almost all of the resources were online-only, requiring forms to be filled out online and email addresses to be used as the main point of contact, impossible for an incarcerated person to access and potentially difficult for someone to understand post-incarceration if they are not familiar with the internet in its constant iterations.

In *Not the Shark, But the Water* (Chiu, Ettarh, & Feretti, 2021), the authors state that “...the process of dispossessing people of their right to use and enjoy something is rarely recognized as anything other than a neutral act because it upholds what the dispossessors see as just, normal, and right” (62). In this context, incarcerated people are denied access to information resources when incarceration is seen as “just, moral, and right” by society and its structures; their removal from public society is viewed simply as justice, a consequence. Yet when these consequences dictate what a person may wear, own, read, and do, who they may contact and

how often, where they can and cannot go, and what their legal status is in relation to the general public, it is crucial to question and push back against just how “neutral” such a stance can supposedly be. Why, really, is removing a person entirely from society considered an act of justice, and what authoritative structures are in place to make this so? How can these structures be worked against or dismantled entirely?

I found myself reflecting on these questions in several different contexts as this project progressed. In particular, I began examining my own role as a future librarian, especially one interested in data access: while information and data do need to be curated, cataloged, and classified, they are still functionally useless to those who cannot access it. Coming into the MSLIS program, I mainly considered this from a public versus private library perspective, but even the phrase “public library” contains the word “public”, and incarceration removes one from public life entirely – and, thusly, removes access to resources and information that may make someone’s life easier and more fulfilling. This project showed me quite clearly that the concept of data and information access reaches far beyond the library institution itself and deep into societal institutions as a whole, and that understanding and working with this reach is crucial to developing an access-centered practice.

This led me to consider the particular type of power those who control access to information often have and how it affects various communities. Just as information can be shared, it can be withheld or misused at will, and this is very sharply reflected in prison system libraries: in *Systemic Oppression and the Contested Ground of Information Access for Incarcerated People* (Charenko, Dillon, & Lincoln, 2020), the authors state that “the existing philosophical frames for providing books and library services to those in prison are shaped by the intersections of librarianship, logics of incarceration, and larger societal prejudices which are reaffirmed by both libraries and prisons.” Libraries, though often “... portrayed as a grandiose and silent place where people can go to find answers” (*Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves*, Ettarh, 2018), are still societal institutions, just as prisons are, and must be put into such a context if one is to come to an understanding of how they can play a role in oppressive structures. Librarians and library workers must not only come to terms with but actively continue to work against this fact.

This project, ultimately, was eye-opening and informative for me, and forced me to think critically about my own practice as a future librarian, the oppressive structures involved in working as one, and how my interest in data access has the potential to expand beyond the traditional library structure. I hope – plan – to take these questions forward with me and expand on them both at my time at Pratt and in my future beyond it.

## **Learning outcomes**

Through this assignment, the following SLOs were achieved:

1. *Apply critical and ethical thinking processes to the selection and use of information sources.*

2. *Communicate information to users appropriate to their environment and needs.*
3. *Critically evaluate information sources using professional standards.*
4. *Recognize and advocate for the role of libraries in empowering diverse communities and promoting justice.*

**Primary SLO:**

*Title:* Reference to Incarcerated People

*Description:* Through the NYPL, I served as a volunteer to respond to three letters from incarcerated people throughout the United States requesting information on various topics.

*Methods:* Upon receiving a scanned letter, I spent time researching answers to each question and curating an appropriate response, which I formatted into a letter using the NYPL template offered.

*My role:* Individual contributor

*Learning outcome achieved:* Ethical/critical/creative practice

*Rationale:* By undertaking this project, I was able to engage in critical thought around the practice of research and reference both within and outside of a library setting, as well as the societal implications of lack of access to information.

**Secondary SLO:**

*Title:* Reference to Incarcerated People

*Description:* Through the NYPL, I served as a volunteer to respond to three letters from incarcerated people throughout the United States requesting information on various topics.

*Methods:* Upon receiving a scanned letter, I spent time researching answers to each question and curating an appropriate response, which I formatted into a letter using the NYPL template offered.

*My role:* Individual contributor

*Learning outcome achieved:* Research

*Rationale:* This project taught me how to undertake research that involved different forms of media (websites, books, journals) and curate my findings appropriately for the intended audience.