



St. Philip's College

Learning Resource Center

GUIDELINES FOR REFERENCE SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

Reference performance cannot be measured solely by the accuracy of an answer to a factual question. In many cases, the librarian serves as a research consultant who provides guidance and advice on search strategy and process, rather than providing a specific answer to a factual question. In cases such as this, the success of the transaction is measured not by the information conveyed, but by the positive or negative impact of the patron/librarian interaction. In this type of transaction, the positive or negative behavior of the librarian (as observed by the patron) becomes a significant factor in perceived success or failure.

The American Library Association's Ad Hoc Committee on Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services identified and recommended the following observable behavioral attributes that can be correlated with positive patron perceptions of reference librarian performance. These guidelines are to be used to assist in the training, development, and/or evaluation of St. Philip's College LRC librarians and staff who provide information services directly to library users. They are designed primarily to deal with instances in which the patron and the librarian are working face to face. While many of the guidelines also apply to most reference transactions, some will need to be adapted for remote users and persons with special needs.

APPROACHABILITY

In order to have a successful reference transaction, the patron must be able to identify that a reference librarian is available to provide assistance and also must feel comfortable in going to that librarian for help. To be approachable, the librarian:

Is poised and ready to engage approaching patrons and is not engrossed in reading, filing, chatting with colleagues, or other activities that detract from availability to the patron.

Establishes initial eye contact with the patron.

Acknowledges the presence of the patron through smiling and/or open body language.

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Acknowledges the patron through the use of a friendly greeting to initiate conversation and/or by standing up, moving forward, or moving closer to the patron.

Acknowledges others waiting for service.

Remains visible to patrons as much as possible.

Roams through the reference area offering assistance whenever possible.

INTEREST

A successful librarian must demonstrate a high degree of interest in the reference transaction. While not every query will contain stimulating intellectual challenges, the librarian should be interested in each patron's informational needs and should be committed to providing the most effective assistance. Librarians who demonstrate a high level of interest in the inquiries of their patrons will generate a higher level of satisfaction among users. To demonstrate interest, the librarian:

Faces the patron when speaking and listening.

Maintains or re-establishes eye contact with the patron throughout the transaction.

Establishes a physical distance which appears to be comfortable to the patron, based upon the patron's verbal and nonverbal responses.

Signals an understanding of the patron's needs through verbal or nonverbal confirmation, such as nodding of the head or brief comments or questions.

Appears unhurried during the reference transaction.

Focuses his/her attention on the patron.

LISTENING/INQUIRING:

The reference interview is the heart of the reference transaction and is crucial to the success of the process. The librarian must be effective in identifying the patron's information needs and must do so in a manner that keeps the patron at ease. Strong listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction. As a good communicator, the librarian:

Uses a tone of voice appropriate to the nature of the transaction.

Communicates in a receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner.

Allows the patron to state fully his/her information need in his/her own words before responding.

Rephrases the patron's question or request and asks for confirmation to ensure that it is understood.

Uses open-ended questioning techniques to encourage the patron to expand on the request or present additional information. Some examples of such questions include:

Please tell me more about your topic.

What additional information can you give me?

How much information do you need?

Uses closed and/or clarifying questions to refine the search query.

Some examples of clarifying questions are:

What have you already found?

What type of information do you need (books, articles, etc.)?

Do you need current or historical information?

Seeks to clarify confusing terminology and avoids excessive jargon.

Uses terminology that is understandable to the patron.

Maintains objectivity and does not interject value judgments about subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction.

SEARCHING

The search process is the portion of the transaction in which behavior and accuracy intersect. Without an effective search, the desired information is unlikely to be found. Yet many of the aspects of searching that lead to accurate results are still dependent on the behavior of the librarian. As an effective searcher, the librarian:

Constructs a competent and complete search strategy.

Breaks the query into specific facets.

Identifies other qualifiers of the query that may limit results, such as date, language, comprehensiveness, etc.

Selects search terms that are most related to the information desired.

Searches under the most limiting aspects of the query first.

Verifies spelling and other possible factual errors in the original query.

Identifies sources appropriate to the patron's need that have the highest probability of containing information relevant to the patron's query.

Consults guides, databases, or other librarians for assistance when he/she cannot independently identify sources to answer the query.

Discusses the search strategy with the patron.

Encourages the patron to contribute ideas.

Explains the search sequence to the patron.

Attempts to conduct the search within the patron's allotted time frame.

Accompanies the patron (at least in the initial stages of the search process).

Explains how to use sources when the patron shows an interest.

Works with the patron to narrow or broaden the topic when too little or too much information is identified.

Asks the patron if additional information is needed after an initial result is found.

Recognizes when to refer a patron.

FOLLOW-UP

The reference transaction does not end when the librarian walks away from the patron. The librarian is responsible for determining if the patron is satisfied with the results of the search and is also responsible for referring the patrons to other sources, even when those sources are not available in the local library.

For successful follow-up, the librarian:

Asks the patron if the question has been completely answered.

Encourages the patron to return to the reference service point.

Returns to the patron after the patron has had time to study the information source(s).

Consults other librarians when additional subject expertise is needed.

Makes arrangements, when appropriate, with the patron to research a question even after the patron has left the library.

Tries to ensure that the patron will get appropriate service after a referral by providing accurate information to the other department, library, or organization about the question, the amount of information required, and sources already consulted.

Facilitates the process of referring a patron to another library or information agency through activities such as calling ahead, providing direction and instructions, and providing the library and the patron with as much information as possible.

Refers the patron to other sources or institutions when the query cannot be answered to the satisfaction of the patron.

TELEPHONE REFERENCE SERVICE

Urgent Requests:

As a general principle, priority for service is given to individuals who are physically present in the library. When receiving an urgent request by phone from a college administrator or faculty member, please assure the requester of your willingness to help as soon as possible. If alone in the reference area, you may need to call upon a colleague to replace you for the duration of your absence. The remainder of the day's schedule can be adjusted to compensate your colleague for the time spent in your stead.

Detailed Requests:

If a patron on the telephone asks you to compile a list of books or journal articles on a research topic, ask the patron to visit the library at an appointed time when you or a colleague can provide the necessary assistance. If the patron cannot come during regularly-scheduled reference hours, arrange for a time on the weekend or an evening and inform the appropriate supervisor. You may then offer the supervisor a brief tutorial on those parts of the collection which will be useful. If the caller is a distance education student who is unable to travel to the campus and requires exceptional assistance, please compile the information and send it by fax, pony, mail, or email..

Holds:

Upon receiving a request from a patron, we will retrieve items from the stacks and place them on hold for over-the-phone patrons. Ask the patron when they will pick up the material. Attach a note with the patron's name and "Hold until close of business on (date specified by patron)", and take to Circulation desk to be placed on "Hold" shelf.

 Calling Back:

If a patron calls for assistance which cannot be given within 5 minutes, offer to call back with the information. If it is a long-distance call, ask the patron to call you back at an agreed upon time.

 Paging:

If a caller asks you to deliver a message to someone studying in the library, use your own judgment. You may be working alone. There will be many times when you will have to explain to the caller that you are not able to leave the reference area.

 Bookings:

As a general rule, students may not book time over the phone to use computer work stations. Exceptions are made for students enrolled in distance education courses, and for disabled persons.

 Messages:

When taking messages on behalf of other staff, please make sure to mark down as many details as possible i.e. the full name of the caller, the date and time of the call, the purpose of the call, and other pertinent details. Note: Please do not provide callers with the home phone numbers of staff unless you have been given authorization by the person concerned. Ask persons calling long distance to call back rather than ask our staff members to return a long distance call.

 Transferring Calls:

When transferring a call to another location, please provide the caller with the number to which you are trying to connect. If the connection is broken, the caller can then dial the correct number.

 Phone Use by the Public:

Patrons should be directed to a public telephone. Please use your own judgment for any exception to the rule e.g. emergencies, or a student who needs clarification from an instructor before proceeding with library research.

 Phone Use by Staff

Phones should be used for SPC LRC Public Services purposes only. You are encouraged to use other telephones for personal calls, and to direct others to call at times when you are not on Desk Duty.

 OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES: **Training:**

All staff with experience in the reference department will be asked to provide training for new staff. The professional staff of reference librarians and reference assistants are trained to the extent that they can work independently with no direct supervision. Para-professionals are given training which is adequate for service with supervision, and are not expected to work alone without assistance. Reference staff are encouraged to upgrade their skills and increase their knowledge of reference resources. Please discuss your needs with the Coordinator. Reference staff will assist in conducting workshops to inform library colleagues of service enhancements and newly acquired resources.

Reference staff meetings are held at times when the majority of staff who participate in reference service may attend. Meetings are scheduled during regular work hours.

 House-keeping:

During quieter moments at the desk, you will have an opportunity to walk around the library and check the tables to see that books used in the library are returned promptly to the circulation desk, chairs are in order at tables, the children's area is in order, etc. You may also have time to shelve books in the reference stacks.

Work Environment:

Advise students of the no food/no drink/no cell phone policy.

Please remind students and colleagues to speak softly in the library.

Remind patrons to be careful with purses, wallets and other valuables, including textbooks, in order to discourage theft.

Report out-of-order equipment to Computer Services.

Report maintenance or house-keeping problems to the Dean's Secretary.

Interlibrary Loan (ILL):

An interlibrary loan request is given the same importance as a patron. Please process both incoming and outgoing ILL materials throughout the day rather than letting incoming/outgoing requests stack up for another person to process.

Library Instruction: Orientations/Special Subject Orientations/Tours:

The Reference Coordinator, Rita Castro, is responsible for ensuring equitable assigning of class sessions to reference staff. In her absence, the next person on the list to provide instruction who is on duty at the requested time, automatically assumes responsibility for instructing the class.

Reference staff will establish computer files listing resources, subject headings, available bibliographies, etc. for subject specific instruction.

Advance notification, prior to the date of the requested instruction session, is not required of the instructor if one or more instruction sessions have been offered in the past in a specific subject area.

Advance notification, prior to the date of the requested instruction session, is not required of the instructor if the subject to be covered may be found by consulting LC subject entries in the OnLine catalog.

A ONE-TIME ONLY advance notice may be required of an instructor if the subject to be covered is difficult to research. In such a case, the entire reference staff will jointly prepare the information file to facilitate the upcoming and future instruction sessions on the particular subject. The librarian should work with the instructor to ensure educational outcomes and learning objectives are met.

Library instruction is one of the reference department's most important duties. It takes precedence over scheduled duty on the reference desk, providing individual assistance to patrons, working on a project, or desk work in the reference office area. In general, if a reference staff member is on duty, instruction will be provided when requested--without advance notice. If this leaves the reference area uncovered during a busy day, librarians and/or other staff members may be called upon to assist during the instruction period.

Work together to prepare and/or update lessons and PowerPoint presentations

Make allowances for the students' different learning styles.

Prepare and/or update bibliographies (hard print copy and on the WWW) and other library user aids.

Distance Education Students:

Adapt PowerPoint and other presentations for easy use over the WWW or by CD-ROM or Zip-disk presentations at the off-campus instructional site.

Go the "extra mile" to get the resources needed for instruction/learning to our distance-education students. Use the pony, fax, mail, WWW, e-mail, or personal delivery to get the information to the students. Be creative and proactive.