GUIDELINES OF THE SUCCESSFUL REFERENCE INTERVIEW FROM AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

GUIDELINES TO A SUCCESSFUL REFERENCE INTERVIEW

The five main areas to the reference interview are

1. Approachability,
2. Interest,
3. Listening/Inquiring,
4. Searching, and
5. Follow Up.

Within these steps there are three distinct categories.   They are:

General

Guidelines that can be applied in any type of reference interaction, including both in person and remote transactions.

In Person

Additional guidelines that are specific to face-to-face encounters, and make the most sense in this context.

Remote

Additional guidelines that are specific to reference encounters by telephone, email, chat, etc., where traditional visual and non-verbal cues do not exist. Some of the original Guidelines have also been rewritten to make the service ideal they convey apply more generally. The goal of this document's revision has been to create a conceptual framework and service ethic with which reference professionals can consider all patron reference interactions, and help establish a service standard for their institution.

 Following the Guidelines of the Reference Interview can help researchers articulate what information is needed

Note: The term *librarian* in this document applies to all who provide reference and informational services directly to library users.

1.0 APPROACHABILITY

In order to have a successful reference transaction, patrons must be able to identify that a reference librarian is available to provide assistance and also must feel comfortable in going to that person for help. In remote environments, this also means placing contact information for chat, email, telephone, and other services in prominent locations, to make them obvious and welcoming to patrons. Approachability behaviors, such as the initial verbal and non-verbal responses of the librarian, will set the tone for the entire communication process, and will influence the depth and level of interaction between the staff and the patrons. At this stage in the process, the behaviors exhibited by the staff member should serve to welcome the patrons and to place them at ease. The librarian's role in the communications process is to make the patrons feel comfortable in a situation that may be perceived as intimidating, risky, confusing, and overwhelming.

To be approachable, the librarian:

General

1.1   Establishes a "reference presence" wherever patrons look for it. This includes having Reference Services in a highly visible location and using proper signage (both in the library and on the library's Web site) to indicate the location, hours, and availability of in-person and remote help or assistance.

1.2   Is poised and ready to engage approaching patrons. The librarian is aware of the need to stop all other activities when patrons approach and focus attention on the patrons' needs.

1.3   Acknowledges others waiting for service.

1.3.1   Employs a system of question triage to identify what types of questions the patrons have when more than two patrons are waiting. Frequently asked questions, brief informational questions, directional questions, and referrals can be answered quickly, allowing more time to devote to in-depth reference questions.

In Person

1.4   Establishes initial eye contact with patrons, and acknowledges the presence of patrons through smiling and attentive and welcoming body language.

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

1.6   Remains visible to patrons as much as possible.

1.7   Roves through the reference area offering assistance whenever possible. Librarians should make themselves available to patrons by offering assistance at their point-of-need rather than waiting for patrons to come to the reference desk. To rove successfully, the librarian should:

1.7.1   Be mobile. Get the patrons started on the initial steps of their search, then move on to other patrons.

1.7.2   Address the patrons before addressing their computer screen. Patrons are more likely to confide in librarians and discuss their needs if they do not perceive the librarians as "policing" the area.

1.7.3   Approach patrons and offer assistance with lines such as, "Are you finding what you need?" "Can I help you with anything?" or "How is your search going?"

1.7.4   Check back on the patron's progress after helping them start a search.

1.7.5   If the reference desk has been left unattended, check back periodically to see if there are patrons waiting for assistance there.

Remote
1.8   Should provide prominent, jargon-free links to all forms of reference services from the *home page* of the library's Web site, and throughout the site wherever research assistance may be sought out. The Web should be used to make reference services easy to find and convenient.

2.0   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 need 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:
General
2.1   Faces the patron when speaking and listening.

2.2   Focuses attention on the patrons.

In Person
2.3   Faces patrons when speaking and listening.
2.4   Maintains or re-establishes eye contact with patrons throughout the transaction.
2.5   Signals an understanding of patrons' needs through verbal or non-verbal confirmation, such as nodding of the head or brief comments or questions.

Remote
2.6   Maintains or re-establishes "word contact" with the patron in text-based environments by sending written or prepared prompts, etc., to convey interest in the patron's question.

2.7   Acknowledges user email questions in a timely manner.

2.8   States question-answering procedures and policies clearly in an accessible place on the Web. This should indicate question scope, types of answers provided, and expected turnaround time.

3.0   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 patrons at ease. Strong listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction. As a good communicator, the librarian:

General
3.1   Communicates in a receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner.

3.2   Uses a tone of voice and/or written language appropriate to the nature of the transaction.

3.3   Allows the patrons to state fully their information need in their own words before responding.

3.4   Identifies the goals or objectives of the user's research, when appropriate.

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

3.6   Seeks to clarify confusing terminology and avoids excessive jargon.

3.7   Uses open-ended questioning techniques to encourage patrons 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?

3.8   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?

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

Remote
3.10   Uses reference interviews or Web forms to gather as much information as possible without compromising user privacy.

4.0   SEARCHING

The search process is the portion of the transaction in which behavior and accuracy intersect. Without an effective search, not only is the desired information unlikely to be found, but patrons may become discouraged as well. 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:

General
4.1   Finds out what patrons have already tried, and encourages patrons to contribute ideas.

4.2   Constructs a competent and complete search strategy. This involves:

- Selecting search terms that are most related to the information desired.
- Verifying spelling and other possible factual errors in the original query.
- Identifying sources appropriate to the patron's need that have the highest probability of containing information relevant to the patron's query.

4.3 Explains the search strategy and sequence to the patrons, as well as the sources to be used.

4.4 Attempts to conduct the search within the patrons' allotted time frame.

4.5 Explains how to use sources when appropriate.

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

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

4.8 Recognizes when to refer patrons to a more appropriate guide, database, library, librarian, or other resource.

4.9 Offers pointers, detailed search paths (including complete URLs), and names of resources used to find the answer, so that patrons can learn to answer similar questions on their own.

In Person
4.10 Accompanies the patrons in the search (at least in the initial stages of the search process).

Remote
4.11 Uses appropriate technology (such as co-browsing, scanning, faxing, etc.) to help guide patrons through library resources, when possible.

5.0 FOLLOW-UP
The reference transaction does not end when the librarian leaves the patrons. The librarian is responsible for determining if the patrons are 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:

General

5.1 Asks patrons if their questions have been completely answered.

5.2 Encourages the patrons to return if they have further questions by making a statement such as "If you don't find what you are looking for, please come back and we'll try something else."

5.3 Roving (see 1.7) is an excellent technique for follow-up.

5.4 Consults other librarians or experts in the field when additional subject expertise is needed.

5.5 Makes patrons aware of other appropriate reference services (email, etc.).

5.6 Makes arrangements, when appropriate, with the patrons to research a question even after the reference transaction has been completed.

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

5.8 Facilitates the process of referring patrons to another library or information agency through activities such as calling ahead, providing direction and instructions, and providing the library and the patrons with as much information as possible about the amount of information required, and sources already consulted.

5.9 Takes care not to end the reference interview prematurely.

Remote

5.9 Suggests that the patrons visit or call the library when appropriate.