

ALA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals

*RASD Ad Hoc Committee on Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services.
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Introduction

Most of the literature on the evaluation of reference services has been concerned with the factual accuracy of librarian responses to user queries. Many studies have been conducted to determine if patrons are receiving "correct" information from librarians. As has been well-reported in the reference literature, we collectively succeed according to this measure of service quality only slightly more than one-half of the time. However, these studies do not take into account the complex librarian/patron interaction during the reference process.

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.

In an effort to provide librarians and information professionals with specific guidelines for this complex process, in 1992 the President of the Reference and Adult Services Division created an Ad Hoc Committee on Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services. The committee met several times at the ALA Annual and Midwinter conferences. Its goal was to identify and recommend observable behavioral attributes that could be correlated with positive patron perceptions of reference librarian performance. The committee identified several areas in which behavioral attributes could be directly observed, including approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching, and follow-up activities.

These guidelines are intended to be used to assist in the training, development, and/or evaluation of 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 other all reference transactions, some will need to be adapted for remote users and persons with special needs.

1.0 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. Approachability behaviors set the tone for the entire communication process between the librarian and the patron. The initial verbal and non-verbal responses of the librarian will influence the depth and level of the interaction between the librarian and the patron. At this stage in the process, the behaviors exhibited by the librarian should serve to welcome the patron and to place him/her at ease. The librarian's role in the communications process is to make the patron feel comfortable in a situation which may be perceived as intimidating, risky, confusing, and overwhelming. To be approachable, the librarian:

1.1 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

1.2 Establishes initial eye contact with the patron.

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

1.4 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.

1.5 Acknowledges others waiting for service.

1.6 Remains visible to patrons as much as possible.

1.7 Moves through the reference area offering assistance whenever possible.

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 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:

2.1 Faces the patron when speaking and listening.

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

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

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

2.5 Appears unhurried during the reference transaction.

2.6 Focuses his/her attention on the patron.

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

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

3.2 Communicates in a receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner.

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

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

3.5 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?

3.6 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?

3.7 Seeks to clarify confusing terminology and avoids excessive jargon.

3.8 Uses terminology that is understandable to the patron.

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

4.0 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:

- 4.1 Constructs a competent and complete search strategy.
- 4.2 Breaks the query into specific facets.
- 4.3 Identifies other qualifiers of the query that may limit results, such as date, language, comprehensiveness, etc.
- 4.4 Selects search terms that are most related to the information desired.
- 4.5 Searches under the most limiting aspects of the query first.
- 4.6 Verifies spelling and other possible factual errors in the original query.
- 4.7 Identifies sources appropriate to the patron's need that have the highest probability of containing information relevant to the patron's query.
- 4.8 Consults guides, databases, or other librarians for assistance when he/she cannot independently identify sources to answer the query.
- 4.9 Discusses the search strategy with the patron.
- 4.10 Encourages the patron to contribute ideas.
- 4.11 Explains the search sequence to the patron.
- 4.12 Attempts to conduct the search within the patron's allotted time frame.
- 4.13 Accompanies the patron (at least in the initial stages of the search process).
- 4.14 Explains how to use sources when the patron shows an interest.
- 4.15 Works with the patron to narrow or broaden the topic when too little or too much information is identified.
- 4.16 Asks the patron if additional information is needed after an initial result is found.
- 4.17 Recognizes when to refer a patron to a more appropriate library, librarian, or other resource person.

5.0 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:

- 5.1 Asks the patron if the question has been completely answered.
- 5.2 Encourages the patron to return to the reference service point.
- 5.3 Returns to the patron after the patron has had time to study the information source(s).
- 5.4 Consults other librarians when additional subject expertise is needed.
- 5.5 Makes arrangements, when appropriate, with the patron to research a question even after the patron has left the library.
- 5.6 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.
- 5.7 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.
- 5.8 Refers the patron to other sources or institutions when the query cannot be answered to the satisfaction of the patron.