

Open-Ended Questions for Reference Interviews

Open-ended questions cannot be answered by yes or no. They begin with "who," "what," "where," "why" and "when."

Circle three or four of the questions below that you feel most comfortable with and make them part of every reference interview you conduct.

1. What kind of information on _____ are you looking for?
2. What is it you want to know about _____?
3. What would you like to know about this topic?
4. What do you mean by _____?
5. Would you tell me more about....
6. What else can you tell me that might help us locate materials?
7. Could you tell me what you're working on?
8. I'd be interested in knowing....
9. Would you explain...?
10. Is there something specific about _____ that you are looking for?
11. Would you explain that to me in more detail?
12. I'm not certain I understand.... Can you give me an example?
13. I'm not familiar with _____.
14. What examples can you give me?
15. What do you already know about _____?
16. Do you know some key concepts, terms or vocabulary for this topic?
17. Where have you checked for information so far?
18. What would you like to know about _____?
19. When you say _____, what do you mean?
20. Can you describe the kind of information you would like to find?
21. If I could find the perfect book to help you, what would that book have in it? Or, what would the title be?
22. Where did you hear or read about _____?
23. I'm not familiar with that person. What is he/she known for?
24. How will you use the information? That will help me with our search.
25. I'd like to help you find the best possible information. Can you tell me more about your subject?

Neutral Questions for Reference Interviews

To Assess the Situation

It would help me with our search if you could tell me:

1. what you are working on
2. how the need for this information came up
3. what you are trying to do in this situation
4. what happened that got you stopped

To Assess the Gap in Information

1. What would you like to know about X?
2. What do you need to know about X?
3. What are you trying to understand?

To Assess the Uses for the Information

1. If you could have exactly the help you wanted, what would it be?
2. How will this help you? What will it help you to do?
3. It would help if you told me how you are planning to use this information.
4. I think I can help you faster, and certainly better, if you could tell me...