



Policy Name: Reference Services

Department: King University Libraries

This policy applies to:

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The purpose of this policy is to define types of reference services offered and describe the guidelines for reference service adhered to by King University Libraries.

Types of Reference Services

King University Libraries offers reference assistance to students, faculty, staff, and other King University affiliates. Non-affiliated community members may seek reference assistance, but priority will be given to those associated with King University. Reference assistance includes but is not limited to:

- Help navigating the library's print and electronic resources,
- Help refining research topics and questions,
- Answers to directional and general information question,
- Basic technology troubleshooting, such as use of installed programs on library computers. In general, problems with hardware or the University Portal will be referred to the Information Technology Helpdesk.

King University Libraries provides face-to-face reference services at the Bristol, Kingsport, and Knoxville campuses and virtual reference services via telephone, email, and chat. King University Libraries offers reference services during all open hours.

- Face-to-face reference services are available on the Bristol, Kingsport, and Knoxville campuses. The E.W. King Library in Bristol is open 90.5 hours per week during the regular academic terms with extended hours during exams and modified hours during summer term, academic recess, and holidays. The Kingsport Campus Library and the Knoxville Campus Library are staffed approximately 40 hours per week, and the hours are listed on the front page of the [library website](#). As a general rule, service to patrons who come to the reference area takes priority over any other activity.
- Telephone questions are answered as soon as possible but do not take precedence over patrons waiting at the reference desk. Callers requiring extensive or time-consuming assistance are helped

if there are no in-person patrons waiting; otherwise reference personnel will offer to call the patron back or suggest that the patron come to the library in-person.

- E-mail questions usually have a 24-hour turnaround time.
- Chat service is provided from the Bristol campus service desk during hours staffed by librarians and paraprofessionals. Generally chat hours are Monday through Thursday, 9:00 AM to midnight, Friday 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM, Saturday 11:00 AM to 6:00 PM, and Sunday 4:00 PM to midnight. Chat is available on the King University Libraries website, within King University Libraries Subject Guides, and in Blackboard courses.
- Individual Reference Consultations to assist researchers with in-depth projects are offered by appointment on the Bristol, Kingsport, and Knoxville campuses.

Guidelines for Reference Services

King University Libraries follows the RUSA [Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers](http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral) (<http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral>) as defined by the Reference and User Services Association (a division of the American Library Association). These guidelines identify five areas of behavioral performance appropriate for reference services (See Appendix 1 of this policy).

See also Policy_CustomerServicePolicy.

Appendix 1:

RUSA [Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers](#)

Originally prepared by the RASD Ad Hoc Committee on Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services; approved by the RASD Board of Directors, January 1996.

Revised by MOUSS Management of Reference Committee; approved by the RUSA Board of Directors, June 2004.

Revised by the RSS Management of Reference Committee, 2011: William H. Weare, Jr. (chair), Roberta J. Astroff, Dr. Bryan Mark Carson, Sally Dockter, Holly L. McCullough, Alesia M. McManus, Emilie R. Smart, Eamon C. Tewell, Johannah Mills White, and Janice A. Wilson. Approved by RUSA Board, May 28, 2013.

Introduction

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 was charged with the creation of specific guidelines to aid librarians and information professionals during the reference process. Noting the complexity of librarian/patron interaction during the reference process, the authors of the original Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers observed “the positive or negative behavior of the librarian (as observed by the patron) becomes a significant factor in perceived success or failure.” The intent of the Guidelines 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 visibility/approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching, and follow-up activities. These guidelines have been widely used to assist in the training, development, and/or evaluation of librarians and staff who provide information services directly to library users.

The face of Reference Services has changed significantly since the original RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance were first published in 1996, and continues to evolve. Although the Ad Hoc Committee that designed the Guidelines recognized the need for future adaptations to deal with issues related to remote users, the original Guidelines dealt primarily with face-to-face interactions between reference staff and library users. When the Guidelines were revised in 2004, e-mail and online chat services were in various stages of development and implementation and have since become widely employed services in all types of libraries.

In 2009, the RUSA Standards and Guidelines Committee requested that the Management of Reference Committee undertake this new revision. The previous revision of the Guidelines reflects the understanding that while in-person and remote reference interviews share some points in common, each also has its own unique characteristics that need to be addressed separately in the formation of standard guidelines. The goal of the Committee in undertaking this second revision has been to anticipate developments in reference services using a broad approach, and yet maintain enough specificity to be useful.

This revision retains the structure and categories of the 2004 revision of the Guidelines. The five main areas—Visibility/Approachability, Interest, Listening/Inquiring, Searching, and Follow Up—remain the same. When these Guidelines were revised in 2004, three distinct categories were added to each section of the document (where appropriate):

- 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. Video transactions can be considered “in-person” transactions.
- Remote--Additional guidelines that are specific to reference encounters where traditional visual and non-verbal cues do not exist. Phone, virtual, text-based (e-mail, chat, texting, IM) and internet-based voice-only transactions can be considered remote transactions.

These Guidelines are geared to serving adult patrons. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) has adopted “Guidelines for Library Services to Teens, Ages 12-18” (<http://yalsa.ala.org/guidelines/referenceguidelines.pdf>).

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

1.0 Visibility/Approachability

A successful reference transaction requires a high level of visibility. Reference assistance should be available through a variety of technologies at a patron's point of need.

In order to have a successful reference transaction, it is essential that the reference librarian be approachable. Whether acting in a traditional/in-person role or a remote/virtual role, the librarian's first step in initiating the reference transaction is to make the patron feel comfortable in a situation that can be perceived as intimidating, confusing, or overwhelming. The librarian’s initial response in any reference situation sets the tone for the entire communication process, and influences the depth and level of interaction.

To be approachable, the librarian:

1.1 General

- 1.1.1 Is to be found in a highly visible physical or virtual location (the library, outreach locations, or the library website). Proper signage or notification that indicates the location, hours, and availability of in-person and remote assistance is available.
- 1.1.2 Is poised and ready to engage patrons. The librarian is aware of the need to stop all other activities when a patron approaches and focus attention on the patron’s needs.
- 1.1.3 Acknowledges patrons by using a friendly greeting to initiate conversation.
- 1.1.4 Acknowledges others waiting for service.
- 1.1.5 Employs a system of question triage to identify questions and service priorities.

1.2 In Person

- 1.2.1 Establishes an approachable presence by being easily identifiable in compliance with institutional and professional norms and policies.
- 1.2.2 Acknowledges patrons by making initial eye contact, employing open body language, or using a friendly greeting to initiate conversation.
- 1.2.3 Remains visible to patrons as much as possible.
- 1.2.4 Identifies patrons needing or wanting help.

1.2.5 Occasionally roves through the reference or public areas offering assistance. To rove successfully, the librarian:

1.2.5.1 Uses cues, verbal or nonverbal, to determine which patrons need help, and approaches patrons and offers assistance with lines such as,

- "Are you finding what you need?"
- "Can I help you with anything?"
- "How is your search going?"

1.2.5.2 Gets the patron started on the initial steps of his/her search, then moves on to other patrons. Offers to provide more assistance if needed.

1.2.5.3 Checks back on the patron's progress.

1.2.5.4 Returns to the reference desk periodically to see if there are patrons waiting for assistance if the desk has been left unattended. Gets help from other staff members if demand is heavy.

1.3 Remote

1.3.1 Provides prominent, jargon-free pointers to all forms of reference services via the library's web or mobile site.

1.3.2 Responds in a timely fashion to remote queries.

2.0 Interest

A successful librarian demonstrates a high degree of objective, nonjudgmental interest in the reference transaction. While not every query will be of interest to the librarian, the librarian should embrace 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 patrons will generate a higher level of satisfaction among users.

To demonstrate interest, the librarian:

2.1 General

2.1.1 Focuses complete attention on the patron and his/her information need.

2.2 In Person

2.2.1 Faces the patron when speaking and listening.

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

2.2.3 Signals an understanding of the patron's needs through verbal and non-verbal confirmation, such as nodding of the head, offering brief explanations, or asking additional questions to better understand the patron's query.

2.3 Remote

2.3.1 Acknowledges user questions in a timely manner.

2.3.2 Maintains regular online or voice contact with the patron to convey interest and provide assurance that the query is still viable and a response is forthcoming.

2.3.3 Signals an understanding of the patron's need.

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 should effectively identify the patron's information needs in a manner that puts the patron at ease. Effective listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction.

As a good communicator, the librarian:

3.1 General

3.1.1 Communicates in a receptive, cordial, and supportive manner.

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

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

3.1.4 Identifies the goals or objectives of the patron's research, when appropriate.

3.1.5 Rephrases the question or request and asks for confirmation to ensure accurate understanding.

3.1.6 Seeks to clarify confusing terminology and avoids jargon.

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

- "Please tell me more about your topic."
- "What additional information can you give me?"
- "How much information do you need?"

3.1.8 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 source do you need?"
- "Do you need a book or an article?"
- "Do you need current or historical information?"

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

3.1.10 Respects patron privacy; maintains confidentiality after the transaction.

3.2 Remote

3.2.1 Uses current technology during the reference interview to gather as much information as needed to serve the patron's need without compromising patron 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. Many aspects of searching that lead to accurate results are dependent on the behavior of the librarian.

As an effective searcher, the librarian:

4.1 General

4.1.1 Finds out what the patron has already tried, and encourages the patron to contribute his/her ideas.

4.1.2 Constructs a competent and complete search strategy. The librarian:

- Selects search terms that are most relevant to the information desired.
- Verifies spelling and other possible factual errors in the original query.
- Identifies appropriate sources that are most likely to contain information relevant to the patron's query.

4.1.3 Explains the search strategy to the patron.

4.1.4 Works with the patron to evaluate results, revise search terms, and identify other sources to try if the search is unsuccessful.

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

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

4.1.7 Explains how to use sources when appropriate.

4.1.8 Offers pointers, detailed search paths, and names of resources used to find the answer, so that patron can learn to answer similar questions on his/her own, when appropriate.

4.1.9 Recognizes when to refer patrons for more help. This might mean a referral to a subject librarian, specialized library, or community resource.

4.1.10 Asks the patrons if additional information is needed after results are found.

4.2 In Person

4.2.1 Accompanies the patron in the search (at least in the initial stages of the search process) unless the patron prefers to conduct the search him/herself.

4.3 Remote

4.3.1 Uses appropriate technology to help guide the patron through information resources, when possible.

5.0 Follow-up

Supplying information is not the end of the reference transaction. The librarian is responsible for determining if the patron is satisfied with the results of the search, and referring the patron to other sources including those not available through the local library.

For successful follow-up, the librarian:

5.1 General

5.1.1 Asks the patron if his/her questions have been completely answered.

5.1.2 Encourages the patron to return if he/she has 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.”

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

5.1.4 Makes the patron aware of other available reference pathways (e-mail, chat, etc.).

5.1.5 Makes arrangements with the patron, when appropriate, to set up an individual research appointment to continue researching the question.

5.1.6 Refers the patron to other sources or institutions if the query has not been answered to the satisfaction of the patron.

5.1.7 Takes care not to end the reference interview prematurely.

5.2 In-Person

5.2.1 Occasionally roves through the reference or public areas offering (additional) assistance (see 1.8).

5.3 Remote

5.3.1 Encourages the patron to contact the library again if he/she has further questions by making a statement such as “If you need additional information, please contact us again and we’ll try something else.”

Further Reading

Since the original publication in 1996, these Guidelines have been favorably evaluated by the profession, and currently enjoy widespread acceptance as standards for the measurement of effective reference transactions. The Guidelines have been widely studied and widely cited.

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